CLIMB HIGH, SLEEP LOW: THE UNIQUE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS OF
INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEER PLACEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

International volunteer placements are increasingly being recognised for the opportunities they provide for professional growth and skill development. Many recent studies suggest that international volunteering can fast-track the development of a number of skills and capabilities highly valued in the 21st century workplace. To date no research has offered a systematic explanation for this. This paper presents a framework outlining how the unique characteristics of international volunteer placements may contribute to them being fertile environments for developing important skills. In doing so, it draws on extant literature as well as data from an (ongoing) longitudinal study of the learning experiences of one sample of international volunteers.

KEYWORDS: Volunteers, not-for-profits, NGOs, organizational learning, public-private partnerships.

‘Climb high, sleep low’ is a well-known mantra that mountain climbers use as a reminder for how to avoid altitude sickness during arduous climbs. It refers to the process of climbing to high altitudes for short periods during the day to acclimatise before returning to a lower altitude to sleep. By doing this, climbers can prevent the debilitating and potentially deadly effects of altitude sickness. This paper suggests that an international volunteer placement (IVP) may be a way for ambitious managers to ‘climb high’ before embarking on the rest of their career. The extreme conditions thrown up by an IVP are akin to the high altitudes that climbers experience and enable volunteers to learn critical skills that will serve them well in the lower altitudes of the domestic workplace or the global business arena. The paper attempts to identify and explain the unique mechanisms of an IVP that contribute to this learning. Firstly, it reviews extant literature on learning within the context of international work assignments and IVPs more specifically. Next it examines the unique characteristics of IVPs and presents a framework demonstrating why they can be so conducive to developing valuable skills. Finally, it examines the implications of this for organisations, individuals and management education.

I. LEARNING DURING INTERNATIONAL ASSIGNMENTS

Current research shows that not only does learning continue outside formal education structures, but that learning which occurs through day-to-day experiences, reflections and observations is an important - indeed, necessary - part of life (Lave & Wenger 1991). Workplaces are increasingly recognised as environments where valuable skills and knowledge can be enhanced through the activities, social interaction and problems they present (Bandura 1977; Billett 2001; Kolb 1984). It is no surprise then,
that workplace learning and knowledge creation are now high on the agenda for organisations, seeking to
develop and leverage their human capital (Dowling & Welch 2004), and for individual workers,
increasingly burdened with responsibility for managing their careers (Seibert, Kraimer & Crant 2001).

With businesses (and workers) becoming more globally focused, international work assignments
(IAs) are now recognised as a way to develop skills in employees (e.g. Edström & Galbraith 1977) and
managers (Caligiuri & Di Santo 2001). Among the capabilities that an IA can contribute to are cross-
cultural communication and sensitivity, supervisory and decision making skills, technical/functional
skills, and knowledge of the host culture and international business environment (e.g. Adler 2002; Black,
valuable, these skills are now seen as entry-level capabilities for managers, especially those operating in
global contexts. The capabilities that will distinguish successful future managers include highly
developed teamwork skills, including mentoring, coaching and facilitating skill transfer (Boston
Consulting Group 2006), managing information and uncertainty (Economist Intelligence Unit 2006),
being flexible and adaptable (Allen Consulting Group 2006), as well as being self-aware (Thomas &
Inkson 2003) and having strong ethical principles (Deresky 2006).

Recent studies suggest that a ‘standard’ expatriate assignment may just scratch at the surface of
the learning possibilities that arise from IAs. A steadily accumulating body of research has identified an
array of skills and capabilities that volunteers develop during an IVP. Among the capabilities that have
been reported by multiple studies and in different contexts are: (a) high level intrapersonal skills like
collaboration and teamwork, negotiating, influencing and persuading, (b) teaching skills to others both
formally and informally, as well as coaching and mentoring; (c) leadership skills such as managing
change, managing information, and strategic thinking; (d) problem solving and related skills, including
being resourceful and adaptable, overcoming adversity and managing uncertainty, and (e) strengthened
personal agency beliefs through improved self-awareness, resilience, self-confidence and stronger ethical
values (e.g. Brook, Missingham, Hocking & Fifer 2007; Cook & Jackson 2006; Hudson & Inkson 2006;
Thomas 2002). While these studies tend to rely on retrospective reports from returned volunteers rather
than longitudinal panel data, convergent validity is strong and the studies cut across various home and
host cultures, IVP professions and demographics. Many of the skills are those required by global
managers and sometimes referred to as ‘soft skills’ (Black, Morrison & Gregersen 1999), although as one
recent study highlights, such skills might be more appropriately called ‘tough’ skills because they are
‘hard to learn and develop, and often difficult to find in people’ (Brook et al. 2007: 23). These
capabilities are also likely to grow in importance as leadership becomes more team-focused and
workplaces even more heterogeneous (Boston Consulting Group 2006). In brief, such skills may well define successful global managers of the future.

Few studies offer a systematic rationale for why IVPs might be such hotbeds for learning and skill development (Polonijo-King 2004). In seeking to do this, the following section combines current literature with interim data from an ongoing longitudinal study looking at the learning opportunities of one group of Australian and New Zealand volunteers\(^1\) who commenced their IVPs in 2006. This study is measuring cognitive, behavioural and attitudinal changes in 86 volunteers over the first twelve months of their IVP. Volunteers are also providing written descriptions of their experiences, including critical incidents that trigger ‘learning episodes.’ To date, more than 500 such descriptions have been provided, each ranging in detail from just a few sentences to over 1600 words. Semi-structured interviews have also been conducted with 24 of the cohort who have completed their IVP. The following section draws on the major themes that have emerged from descriptions of the learning incidents, work roles, and work and social environments that these volunteers have experienced during the IVPs.

II. INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEERING – THE ACCIDENTAL SKILLS FACTORY?

IVPs involve skilled individuals undertaking a designated role within a poor or less developed country (Thomas 2002) normally with specific development objectives like ‘alleviating poverty and achieving positive sustainable development’ (Thomas 2002: 21), and for significantly lower remuneration than their expertise would demand in their host country. They share many of difficulties that pertain to all IAs, like having to achieve outcomes within the social, legal, and market traditions of the host culture, as well as challenges related to specific phases of the IA; for instance, adjusting to the host culture or difficulties re-entering the workforce following repatriation (Brook et al. 2007; Hudson & Inkson 2006). Indeed, the distinction between IVPs and other IAs may be narrower than ever, as volunteer agencies absorb business practices, tools and accountability measures (Myers 2004), and volunteers increasingly bring better expertise and specialist skills to their IVPs (Thomas 2002). However, a close examination suggests a number of features that differentiate IVPs from other IAs and provide the ‘value add’ in terms of learning. These are outlined on the left hand side of Figure 1, delineated at three levels: (a) the macro environment, or the wider social and physical surroundings that the volunteer experiences in the host country, (b) the organisational context within which the volunteer works, and (c) the specific work role that the IVP involves.

\(^1\) The volunteers, aged from 20 to 68 years old at pre-departure, have undertaken assignments ranging from 8 to 24 months in 18 different countries in Asia, the Pacific, the Middle East and Africa. They come from a range of professional fields that include business, finance, law, health and social services, IT, design, education and agriculture.
Each of these characteristics contributes toward the potent learning environments of IVPs, as indicated by the horizontal arrows in Figure 1 that lead to enhanced skills and capabilities (right hand side). The following discussion examines each component, and its impact on volunteer learning, in more detail.

a. The Macro Environment

Relocating to a new culture involves crossing a ‘physical and cultural threshold’ (Osland 2000: 230) that introduces environments and routines, both at work and outside of work, that are new and unfamiliar (Kohonen 2005). These differences trigger learning on several fronts. Firstly, unfamiliar cultural settings cause our cognitive schemas or the frames of reference through which we see the world (Rumelhart 1980) to be less effective; hence we misinterpret situations, make inaccurate predictions, and our regular behavioural scripts fail us (e.g. Osland & Bird 2000). This, in turn, ignites intrinsic motivation to learn so as to prevent future failure (Knox 1977) and prompts us to reshape existing schemas and construct new ones; in effect, integrating our experiences into a more complex, holistic perspective of the world (Mendenhall, Kuhlmann & Stahl 2001). Moreover, because ‘inability to cope with the situation unthinkingly, instinctively, is at the heart of all learning’ (Jarvis 1987: 37), the failure of our habitual responses can also hasten critical reflection, a decisive component of learning (e.g. Schön 1983).

However, the extent of learning that takes place hinges on the environment encountered in the host culture (Torbiörn 1982). Because our schemas reflect our personal experiences and cultural upbringing (Shaw 1990), vastly different cultures present a wider range of situations in which existing schemas are inadequate, thus promoting schema building and stronger motivation to learn (Shaw 1990). In business, MNCs often limit their operations to countries where cultural and linguistic barriers are low (Ghemawat 2001), or in technologically developed countries for strategic purposes (Almeida & Phene 2004) or to mitigate against perceived higher risks in less developed countries (Deresky 2006). In similar cultural contexts unfamiliar situations are rarer, thus fewer opportunities exist for schema creation. Behavioural scripts fail less frequently, and probably with less dramatic consequences. Hence learning and motivation to learn are constrained.

On the other hand, IVPs demand a more extreme cultural leap. Volunteers relocate from ‘first-world to third-world, usually from urban to rural, and always from paid to volunteer’ (Hudson & Inkson
2006: 306) and thus face acute cultural novelty\(^2\) (Torbiörn 1982). At a deeper level, volunteers also tend to experience great disparity between their own values, attitudes and beliefs and those of the host culture, or greater cultural distance (Hofstede 1997). Cultural distances between wealthy and poor countries are generally large (Hofstede 1997) and national wealth has been statistically correlated with cultural dimensions like power distance and uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede 1997). Moreover, the extent of cultural immersion of IVPs is exacerbated because volunteers live in basic accommodation within the community in which they work in order to develop a more meaningful understanding of local issues, and to build relationships that contribute toward the exchange of skills and knowledge (AusAID 2004b).

While presenting numerous challenges, the benefits of this radically different environment manifest in several ways. Because the cultural differences are striking and continually being reinforced, both at and outside work, volunteers construct richer and more nuanced understanding of the local culture, language and practices. In our study, many volunteers reported that they quickly became more culturally adept than other expatriates with whom they interacted. Such knowledge promotes cultural intelligence (Earley & Ang 2003) and facilitates cognitive flexibility; for example, several volunteers demonstrated an ability and willingness to ‘frame-switch’ (Hong, Morris, Chiu & Benet-Martínez 2000), or shift from one cultural perspectives to another to suit the situation at hand:

*Aspects of work are at a point where I’ve found that if there’s something that I want to achieve or something that I’m thinking about doing it’s better just to try and achieve it using the (host culture) approach rather than the (foreigner) way. Not all the time, but sometimes it’s just easier.* – Interview transcript, volunteer social worker in the Pacific.

Deep cultural immersion also leads to better awareness of one’s own values systems and oneself. One reason for this is the self-reflection and motivation to learn triggered when one’s scripts regularly fail (Schön 1983), or in some cases by observing inappropriate behaviour modelled by other expatriates (Bandura 1977). The volunteers’ proximal contact with host culture communities also means that they often become ‘explainers’ of their own culture; a process that involves not just recognising cultural patterns and inconsistencies, but also considering the bases for these. One striking feature of many of the volunteers we interviewed was how clearly they could articulate their own values and the principles underpinning them. Such self-awareness, as well and contributing to emotional (Goleman 1998) and cultural intelligence (Earley & Ang 2003), provides strong foundations upon which to address ethical conflicts that frequently arise in global business environments (Robertson & Crittenden 2003):

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\(^2\) Several commonly-used indicators of cultural novelty like transport, living conditions and health care relate directly to economic development and infrastructure (e.g. Black & Stephens 1989; Torbiörn 1982).
(I noticed a) reluctance to admit mistakes, and for the tendency to lie – even in court - to cover mistakes … It made me more resolute about the importance of strict ethics. In my profession and generally I made a particular point of being I suppose an example of best practice, and I’d tell people exactly the reason that I did things like this even if perhaps I could have got by or even got a better outcome, a better overall outcome, if I’d lied. (In my previous career) I didn’t really have to consider where the boundaries were. – Interview transcript, volunteer lawyer in Asia.

Moreover, it led many volunteers to re-evaluate their personal and professional values, suggesting a double-loop process of learning had been triggered (Argyris 1977). In some cases this has been profound, as was the case with one volunteer interviewed shortly after his return to Australia:

It has certainly helped me grow and helped me think a whole lot more holistically about systems and ideas and concepts. So for instance, just the other day I was looking at a road train, and I didn’t just see a cattle truck anymore, I was looking at it in terms of resources. I saw fuel, and rubber and tyres and all the metal. It’s no longer a cattle truck - it’s a sink-hole for energy. Obviously that’s because I’d come from (a host country) where there’s … no resource use on the scale that there is here (in Australia). It’s made me think very much more obliquely. – Interview transcript, volunteer teacher in the Pacific.

b. The Organisational Context

Rats in air-conditioning, leaking office when it rained, one stapler, one photocopier, limited pens and one hole punch. Toilets that didn’t always flush. Very different to (my workplace in Australia,) a city skyscraper with the biggest private art collection in the southern hemisphere. BUT - no competition causing infighting, no jostling for partners’ favourite status to get the best work, no having a partner sign out every piece of work, colleagues who sought and respected your opinion, helpful staff who assisted my attempts to speak (the local language), answered my questions about culture and practices. – Survey response, volunteer lawyer in the Pacific.

This quote encapsulates much of what is unique about the organisational context that volunteers face. As well as being in countries that are, by definition, poor and lacking infrastructure, most volunteers work with grassroots organisations in the not-for-profit sector. While some of these are efficient and well funded3, many more are poorly resourced even by local standards, with staff that are overstretched and under-skilled, and structures and processes that disrupt rather than support work performance:

We have second hand desks, a toilet that does not have water after 10 am, no air conditioning, crowded and sometimes noisy and dusty. I have no support staff, such as IT officer, HR department, publications, media or policy interpretation. The power regularly goes off, the internet does not work, the phone get disconnected … the water stops, there is no rubbish collection. There is no bookstore, library, university library or reference centre. – Survey response, volunteer manager in the Pacific.

3 In our study, these tended to be those organisations that received the majority of their funding from major international non-government organisations.
In business contexts, where extrinsic motivations over-ride intrinsic ones, such environments would generally be viewed as impediments to motivation and learning (Katzell & Thompson 1990). However, the experiences of many volunteers suggest that these can have the reverse effect, instilling resilience, persistence, self-sufficiency and, when managed effectively, self-confidence in the volunteers. Volunteers appear to draw on their intrinsic motivation to the role and its objectives, even when task motivation has slumped. The inadequate resources also provide a critical focus for their energies. Volunteers regularly relied on creative problem solving to overcome resource constraints, like the occupational therapist working with physically immobile children in Timor Leste who cut ‘ergonomic chairs’ from plastic buckets, or the physiotherapist in the Solomon Islands who used a plastic drink bottle and some berries to make a remedial rattle for a disabled infant. Moreover, while much output of the volunteers’ work is intangible, many saw securing better resources for the organisation as a concrete contribution that became an outlet for entrepreneurial activities which expanded their repertoire of experiences at work (e.g. compiling formal funding proposals) and in their own time (e.g. coordinating funds and logistics to supply fresh water in one rural village, and second-hand books in a school library). As the following example illustrates, this often involved nurturing and harvesting external networks:

*Access to resources and information:* (1) minimal (2) need to use ingenuity (3) mind is continually switched on seeking creative solutions in unexpected places (4) lots of wheeling & dealing went on outside of working hours running into people while out & about. – Survey response, volunteer manager in the Pacific.

This use of outside contacts was a particularly common way for volunteers in our research to access information. The absence of sufficient information – organisational, cultural, and technical - was widespread for a multitude of reasons, including language and cultural differences, or poor administration and record keeping related to inadequate skills, staffing or systems. In other cases it reflects a more basic absence; while the Internet is seen as a conduit for unlimited (and cheap) information, even this requires infrastructure and funding that are very often absent. As a result, volunteers must be proficient in managing information for themselves and for their organisations. Several volunteers in our study initiated culturally-relevant information systems for the organisation, normally outside the scope of their job description. Almost all employed some strategy to proactively source information related to their job, commonly by fostering relationships with other individuals and organisations. Indeed, they paint the picture of an ‘open source’ approach to information sharing, developing highly successful formal and informal learning communities that cut across culture, social status, professions, gender and age groups. Not only did this expose them to a wide range of perspectives and ideas that fed into their work, it also engaged them in effective ‘communities of practice’ (Lave & Wenger 1991) that enriched their understanding of the culture, the development community and their own profession.
What was particularly noticeable was how many volunteers perceived their organisations as ‘safe’ environments for the purposes of experimenting with new methods, approaches, and ideas, even when faced with inflexible hierarchies or risk averse managers, common to high power distance cultures (Hofstede 1997). There appears to be several reasons for this. Their position as volunteers created goodwill among colleagues, clients and the wider community, as did the (community-focused) objectives of the organisation, meaning that many were able to ‘push boundaries’, as exemplified by the following respondent, describing how she was able to access important information to support her work:

I used and abused my family and friends … Australian university online libraries, subscribed for every free magazine I could find for the office library. I became friends with (a local university) IT lecturer and convinced him to help improve our IT system for very little money. I even emailed an author (lecturer at Oxford University, UK) of one textbook and asked if he could help with the first three chapters … and he emailed them to me. I would never have tried that one in Australia.
– Survey response, volunteer team leader in the Pacific.

Almost all volunteers reported greater freedom than they had experienced in other jobs. Most IVPs are highly autonomous and non-competitive, conducive to both creativity (Amabile 1996) and learning through experience and experiment (Kolb 1984). Many volunteers also reported that the unreliable nature of the infrastructure and absence of resources made them more comfortable experimenting and failing. As one volunteer put it, “It couldn’t have been any worse, so there was always the sense, for me anyway, of ‘Let’s try it and see what happens’” (Interview, volunteer teacher in China).

c. The Work Role of International Volunteers

Like most expatriates (Martin & Bartol 2003; Oddou & Mendenhall 1991), volunteers reported that their work roles provided high levels of challenge, autonomy and variety that promote workplace learning (e.g. Davies & Easterby-Smith 1984). However, two features of IVPs make them particularly supportive of learning: the volunteers’ reliance on expert, rather than legitimate, power, and the capacity building function that they perform. Each of these is considered further below.

In general, most expatriate managers undertake IAs in order to perform a control and coordination function where local staff lack the requisite skills (Harzing 2001), and hence hold both legitimate and expert power (French & Raven 1959). On the other hand, volunteers generally lack legitimate power, coming to the organisations as outsiders and operating within a ‘negotiated space’ between a (normally host-culture) superior⁴, host-culture staff and volunteer agency. As many volunteers

⁴ In the present study, this superior was a CEO or manager based within the organisation or, in cases where volunteers took on a senior management role, Directors and Board members.
work in strict hierarchical cultures (Hofstede 1997), the lack of formal power presents challenges, especially as their function is fundamentally to facilitate change. The volunteers in our study found themselves interacting, negotiating with and persuading a range of stakeholders at different organisational levels on an almost daily basis in an attempt to garner the ‘buy-in’ they needed. Through this, not only did volunteers report giving greater attention to their communication methods, and therefore being more effective communicators as a result, their responses suggest that they were more strategic about their communication, often as a way to facilitate change. They planned, tested and used different approaches to suit the context and recipient; for example, adjusting emphases, using multiple communication channels, delaying suggestions until the timing was culturally appropriate, and even exploiting cultural differences by pretending to be culturally naïve. Some reported using social situations strategically, both at work and outside of work. Such strategies are common in people with high levels of ‘cognitive complexity’ who can retain and use highly sophisticated cognitive constructs (Burleson & Caplan 1998), an ability linked to cultural intelligence (Thomas & Inkson 2003), creativity (Amabile 1996) and improved career outcomes (Sypher & Zorn 1986).

A second feature of IVPs is the central role of capacity building (CB), defined as a process of ‘developing competencies and capabilities in individuals, groups, organisations, sectors or countries which will lead to sustained and self-generating improvement’ (AusAID 2004a). Approaches to CB arise from organisational development theory and stress change by leveraging strengths rather than correcting deficiencies (e.g. Mathie & Cunningham 2003). It is a highly collaborative process requiring the identification and use of local expertise and models that work at the grassroots level. Through CB, volunteers become adept at mentoring, coaching, and formal and informal skill transfer - abilities critical to executives, for example, who now play an important role nurturing and developing staff skills (Boston Consulting Group 2006). Because CB occurs on an equal basis underpinned by ‘the purposeful sharing of mindsets’ (Thomas 2002: 23), volunteers remain open and observant and thus receptive to ideas and approaches from their counterparts (Shim & Paprock 2002), as the following example illustrates:

I'm learning a lot from my colleagues. I think most of it has really been learning about religion and the value of faith-based responses to HIV. Previously all the approaches I had had been secular and very mainstream, and this has been great in looking at an alternative approach to the same problem. – Interview transcript, volunteer HIV/AIDS program officer in Asia.

Importantly, the CB role that volunteers play may also change their mindset. The perception of cultural differences as challenges ‘to be overcome’ or sources of conflict saturates much research into business expatriates (Friedman & Antal 2005). In contrast, rather than seeing difference, difficulty and deficiency, volunteers tend to see opportunities to learn or to build capacity (Argyris & Schön 1978):
I feel much invigorated by my work here. Everywhere I turn I can see opportunities to use the many years of knowledge, experience and skills I have acquired. – Survey response, volunteer occupational therapist in the Pacific.

Finally, perhaps the most counter-intuitive learning outcome reported by volunteers is that of domain-specific and technical knowledge, especially as volunteers are frequently the most highly qualified and experienced person in their organisation. However, through their CB role, volunteers are able to both broaden and deepen their domain expertise. Success in transferring skills requires first that the volunteers reinforce their own knowledge; the best way to really understand a concept is to have to teach it (Dale 1969). Moreover, CB often extends well beyond the volunteers’ professional expertise – in the current study, volunteers from many different professions reported that their primary CB focus related to management skills or systems. The impact of this is exemplified by a (different) physiotherapist whose CB work was directed at both the hand-on treatment of patients and the management and administration of the hospital:

I didn’t expect it, I saw myself only as a Senior Physio and not as more a ‘Senior Manager’. I really liked the hands on physio and I have to actually step away from that and say I need to spend time pursuing the (other role) and to see those as valuable activities because it’s so much easier to do hands-on stuff and see that as valuable. It sends you back immediate feedback, whereas the other stuff is much more long-term. I still want to be hands-on, but I see much more clearly the value of doing the bigger stuff, it will have much more long-term benefit. – Interview transcript, physiotherapist in the Pacific.

CB also extends into culture- or context-specific ‘corners’ of a domain or adjoining areas of specialisation that are new for the volunteer. This was the case for one volunteer psychologist who found himself in a CB partnership alongside a (host culture) psychiatric nurse treating street kids. According to the volunteer, such a partnership is unheard of in Australian treatment (“you don’t cross over into next door because they’ve got their patch so to speak and they guard it jealously”) but necessary in the host culture where funding and expertise are limited:

I know an enormous amount now, far more than a psychologist should, about psychotropic medication and all sorts of things of that nature. I think it will be hugely useful. I have a respect now for medication which I didn’t have before and psychologists as a rule don’t have. They believe in their discipline, that they can do it with words and action and things and not medication, but I saw some remarkable transformations with medication and a combination of medication and psychological intervention. We really had some quite remarkable results. So I now have a new-found respect for the use of medication, psychotropic medication. – Interview, volunteer psychologist in the Pacific.
Articulating and explaining the learning processes available through IVPs, as this paper has attempted to do, may be of interest to workers, organisations, and educators alike. Firstly, it may make IVPs an attractive career advancement option for ambitious workers, most pertinently early-career managers who frequently combine a desire to self-manage their careers, a strong social conscience, and a willingness to relocate off-shore (Boston Consulting Group 2006). This, in turn, may attract a better quality of volunteer that benefits host organisations and communities. Organisations too may consider the merits of IVPs as a way to develop employees’ skills while simultaneously promoting their own corporate values and ethical credentials. The increasing number of highly specialised, short-term IVPs offered by agencies like Australian Volunteers International, Australian Business Volunteers, and (New Zealand’s) Volunteer Service Abroad may be attractive staff development options for organisations. Indeed, while the opportunity costs of allowing workers to accept short-term IVPs may seem high, viewed strictly from a HR perspective they may be as effective and as cost-effective as many formal training programs targeting these skills. Similarly, there is also scope for the creative use of IVPs within formal education. ‘Service learning’ pedagogies that involve experiential learning through active participation with community organisations (Stanton, Giles & Cruz 1999) are increasingly common tools in management education (Fornaciari & Kenworthy-U'Ren 2007). Underpinning the approach is the aim to bridge disciplinary ‘silos’ and provide real-world complexity that benefits both learner and organisation (Kenworthy-U'Ren 2003). Combined with online support, IVPs present a range of possibilities for cross-discipline experiences rich in learning, particularly for post-graduate students who are well positioned to make strong contributions to the host community.

A word of caution however. While IVPs might provide both the stimulus and opportunity for volunteers to enhance critical skills, their focus must not shift from building the capacity of the host community to that of the volunteer. Such a shift is unlikely, given the professional approach of most volunteer agencies toward their IVPs; for instance, the volunteers in our study were subject to a structured performance review cycle that includes the ‘most significant change’ technique (Davies and Dart, 2005). Besides, rather than having competing interests, volunteers who are learning valuable skills are likely to contribute more, not less, effectively to their important role as capacity builders. In this regard, IVPs may represent one of the best possible options for building one’s capabilities while making a valuable – and valued – contribution in an international context.
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Figure 1: The Learning Environment of an International Volunteer Placement (IVP)

The Unique Characteristics of an IVP

a. Macro Environment
   - Extreme cultural distance & novelty
   - Poor infrastructure

b. Organisational Context
   - Inadequate resources & structures
   - Under-skilled staff
   - ‘Safe’ & supportive environment

c. Work Role
   - Capacity building function
   - Reliance on ‘expert’ power

The Learning Outcomes of an IVP

Enhanced self-awareness
Stronger ethical values
More global, holistic worldview

Entrepreneurial skills
Social networks & networking skills
Managing information & uncertainty

Communicative flexibility & the ability to persuade, negotiate
Cognitive complexity
Teaching, coaching, mentoring
Managing change
Domain-specific knowledge & approaches

'Standard' Expatriate Assignment
Cross cultural communication & sensitivity
Supervisory & decision making skills
Knowledge or international business
Knowledge of local culture
Technical/functional skills