



Working Side by Side: Creating Alternative Breaks as Catalysts for Global Learning, Student Leadership, and Social Change

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Book Review

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Sumka, Porter, and Piacitelli offer both the history and strategy of an emerging educational model that crosses borders between disciplines to develop competencies and leadership characteristics for social change. The authors document “short-term, student-run immersion service trips” designed to sharpen critical thinking and deepen commitment to future action for social justice (8). In this study their primary example of the alternative break movement is an organization called Break Away that grew out of Vanderbilt University. This and other new programs like the Alternative Break Citizenship school (ABCs) are rooted in efforts from the 1960s that experimented in transformational learning experiences combining travel, intercultural dialogue, collective action, and critical theorizing. A common denominator of these programs is the goal of social justice education.

One theoretical framework undergirding these programs is an “active citizen continuum” pointing the way toward authentic relationships for life-long reflection, action, and community enrichment (10). The integration of critical theory and practice moves participants beyond charity and critical theorizing to active citizenship and intercultural competence. A key component of these programs is student leadership. By practicing the actual implementation of the model from the planning and training stages, students gain confidence and facility with each step of the work. In addition to providing the history and theory behind the programs, this book offers practical details contributing to the success of the learning. Readers find pointers on working relationships between staff and students as organizers and leaders of the trips, the alcohol and drug free policy, clarification of the roles of staff versus student leaders, as well as ideas about training, assessing, and fund-raising.

The study would be strengthened by further development of the concept of justice. Despite the significance of social justice to this work, little attention is given to making explicit what is meant by justice. Similarly, the concept of global learning could be explored in relationship to literature on intercultural dialogue, collective action, and transcending political borders. Although this book provides an introductory discussion of what community means, contrasting communities of affinity versus communities of geography, the extensive body of work in philosophical and critical theory developing that distinction is not acknowledged (351). In other words, the academic and intellectual strands contributing to this model are not noted with as much care as the recent history of the particular program.

This is a compelling read for anyone interested in learning that fosters authentic relationships rooted in “values of social justice, dignity, empowerment, and capacity building” (33). Although religious and theological frameworks are not discussed directly, schools or educators who offer immersion or intercultural learning experiences will benefit from reading this research. The authors’ caution about the tendency to slip toward do-gooder tourism, poverty tourism, and forms of educational travel where privileged students unwittingly perpetuate legacies of colonialism is timely and relevant. The conclusion of this book includes observations about the “need for inspiration and collective action” (359). If faith communities hope to be known as sources of inspiration and collective action in the future, this book offers potential for fertile common ground.

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