

If We Send Them, They Will Grow ... Maybe

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You're making announcements at your youth group meeting, and you want to encourage students to sign up for your next short-term missions trip. Do you highlight...

- A. the great relationships students will build with each other?
- B. God's intention for Christians to serve the broken and brokenhearted?
- C. that those who go will grow closer to Jesus?
- D. all of the above?

If you're like most youth workers, you choose "D. all of the above." After all, short-term mission (STM) experiences *do* deepen kids' relationships with each other and with God, and they're logical ways to obey Scripture's commands to serve "the least of these."

Here's where it gets complicated: Recent research suggests STMs may not produce the spiritual and relational "bang" we expect.

At least not in the long term.

Consider these relatively new research findings...¹

- The explosive growth in the number of STMs taken, both by kids and adults, hasn't resulted in similarly explosive growth in the number of career missionaries.
- It's not clear whether or not participation in STMs influences participants—once life returns to "normal"—to donate more money to alleviate poverty.
- Participating in STMs doesn't seem to reduce participants' tendencies toward materialism.

To paraphrase the *Field of Dreams* mantra: If we send them, they will grow...maybe.

After Suitcases Are Unpacked

How do we increase the odds that STMs will make a long-term difference in our kids' lives, well after suitcases are unpacked and photo albums are buried in bedroom closets?

We convened a two-day "Short-Term Missions Effectiveness" Think Tank consisting of 20 exemplary youth pastors and STM agency leaders in November 2006. In the midst of heated discussions about cultural intelligence, team building, and whether or not STMs are even "missions" *per se*, one theme repeatedly emerged: We need to do a better job helping students interpret and apply their STM experiences to life back home.

Before, During, and After

Let's be honest. Normally we're too rushed to thoughtfully help students engage in interpreting and applying their experiences before, during, and after their STM trips. Our "preparation" usually consists of fundraising and medical release forms. Our "process" during the trip boils down to a few minutes of prayer requests before our team members tumble into their beds, exhausted. And our "debrief" is little more than organizing the slide show and the testimonies to share in "big church."

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¹ Robert J. Priest, Terry Dischinger, Steve Rasmussen, C.M. Brown, "Researching the Short-Term Mission Movement," *Missiology* Volume 34, number 4, October 2006, 431-450.

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If we want greater transformation, we need a completely different view of how to go about the *before*, *during*, and *after* aspects of the trip. And this may mean developing a radically different timeframe for our STMs.

Perhaps instead of viewing an inner-city trip as a three-day event, we should view it as a three-month process. Instead of looking at a week in the Dominican Republic as a seven-day trip, we need to think of it as a seven-month journey. In fact, the entire STM aspect of our ministries must become a year-round reality if we hope for long-term, sustainable change in our kids’ lives and in the lives of those we “go” to serve.

What Do We Do with All of That Time?

What do we do with all of those extra weeks before and after our STM excursions? And how do we make the most of our time with students during our trips?

Since much of students’ transformation and learning is dependent on their experiences, we recommend an experiential education framework originally proposed by Laura Joplin², and later modified and used by Terry Linhart³ on youth STMs, as a template for our time with students.

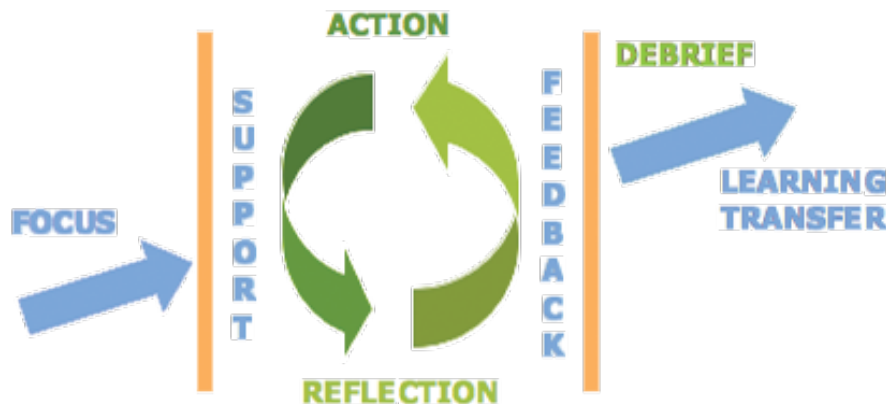


Fig. 1 – The Joplin (1995) model, modified by Linhart (2005).

Component One: FOCUS

A key start to a successful STM is to help students FOCUS on the experience and the challenges they’ll face. More than just helping them raise money, learn a drama, or know how to pack a suitcase, leaders can facilitate a series of gatherings and events that help students prepare emotionally, mentally, spiritually, and relationally for what lies ahead.

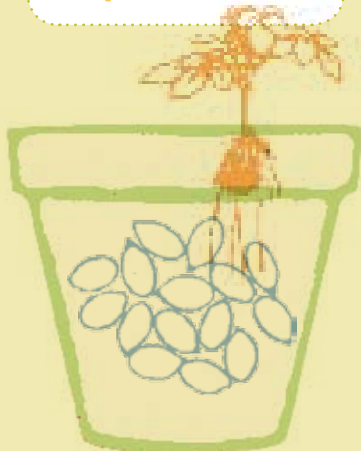
Some key topics that could be included in this FOCUS time are:

- Identifying our motivations for going on this STM (both the shared motivations we have as a ministry and our individual reasons).
- Leaning honestly into some of our fears about what lies ahead (e.g., safety, food, language, getting along, etc.).
- If we’re going into another ethnic culture, learning about cross-cultural issues (including understanding how our culture shapes us, learning about the culture we’re visiting, and learning some basics about how cultures as a whole differ).
- Developing an understanding of what God is already doing in our destination through Christians who live there. This is true whether we’re heading into a neighboring city or into a village multiple time zones away.
- Identify ways to ensure that while being intentional about our own growth, we don’t objectify or exploit those we’re planning to serve.

During this FOCUS time it can be helpful to encourage students to keep written journals of their thoughts and feelings as they prepare for what lies ahead. Or we may want our group to study specific Scriptures or even memorize passages that seem especially relevant to our mission.

The leaders gathered at our think tank said part of the FOCUS time should also include some rigorous team building. Many said they’ve become more selective about who they allow to participate in trips than in their earlier STM days. Some even include a team covenant that all members sign at the beginning of the pre-trip training process so that the entire group can hold

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² Joplin, L. (1995). “On defining experiential education.” In K. Warren & M. Sakofs & J. S. Hunt Jr. (Eds.), *The theory of experiential education* (pp. 15-22). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company.

³ Linhart, T. D. (2005). “Planting seeds: The curricular hope of short term mission experiences in youth ministry.” *Christian Education Journal*, Series 3, 256-272.

each other accountable. And since helping students interpret and apply their STM experiences to life back home was a driving theme at our think tank, some of the leaders believe the most important part of the selection process is choosing which adults to bring along.

Component Two: ACTION-REFLECTION

The main component in students’ learning during STM is the ACTION-REFLECTION process. This should be an ongoing cycle in which students are placed in situations or activities during the trip in which they’re purposefully stretched by using new sets of skills in cross-cultural settings or relying on a small amount of knowledge in unfamiliar environments.

While most STMs inevitably include these sorts of activities, many lack the reflection needed to help students maximize their growth. After all, students are constantly making meaning out of their actions. Though usually unconscious of it, they’re continually engaged in highly personal, ongoing mental “conversations” about who they are in relation to others, in relation to God, and in relation to their futures. Since this is generally an internal process, students may draw conclusions from their experiences that do not reflect reality.

The constant barrage of experiences on a typical STM comes fast and frequently at students; it’s often akin to digesting entire civilizations while walking through a single museum hallway. As a result, students have difficulty finding time to make sense of their experiences. As the adult youth workers walking alongside students in the midst of these provocative encounters, we need to ask questions that help them decipher the meanings behind what they’re experiencing.

One way to help students more accurately interpret their experiences is to ask three simple questions:

1. What?
2. So what?
3. Now what?⁴

By asking “What?” students have a chance to talk about what they actually saw, heard, smelled, and felt. By asking “So what?” students can think about the difference this experience can make in their lives. By reflecting upon “Now what?” students can discover how they want to live and behave when they return to their more comfortable “normal” lives.

If you’re serving with students who struggle to process their feelings or experiences (can anyone say “middle school boys?”), then at first you may get just a few bites of conversation. Answers may range from “I dunno” to “what she said.” That’s okay. Sometimes it takes months—or years—to get to the point where students are able to truly join in the reflection. In the meantime, we have the opportunity to model patiently listening and simply being there with them.

Component Three: SUPPORT-FEEDBACK

To facilitate the ACTION-REFLECTION cycle, Joplin recommends surrounding the discussions and experiences with walls of SUPPORT and FEEDBACK. The support usually comes from other members in the experience, such as other students, adult leaders, and locals from within the communities we’re visiting.

But support can also include the encouragement that comes from supportive relational networks at home. Research shows a strong correlation between individuals’ success in a cross-cultural experience and emotional and tangible support from friends and family. Support can also include financial and logistical assistance provided by a church, organization, and family members. It’s important to avoid overlooking this element as we think about leading STMs.

According to our think tank leaders, most youth workers overlook the importance of high-quality, ongoing FEEDBACK. As the ACTION-REFLECTION cycle continues throughout the learning process, the adult leaders must “jump in” with the students and help them talk about their reflections—the meanings students are creating from their experiences. Many groups share each night in a small “debriefing” time, but the size of the group and brief time windows often limit feedback to simply rehashing the day rather than effectively directing reflection that leads to transformation.

It’s a delicate—but necessary—skill to assist students in their learning as it’s taking place. Because everything’s new and happening so fast, both students and adult leaders often feel pressure to label or make sense of each moment too quickly. In doing so, they limit their vision and can often miss some of the broader realities. Good feedback from adults who come alongside students in conversation helps them see as broadly as possible and, more often than not, encourage them to suspend judgment.

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⁴This three-question reflection exercise has been popularized by the Campus Outreach Opportunity League.

The point is to serve without quickly jumping to judgment in our attempts to create meaning.

For example, students may serve in an under-resourced community where poverty abounds. While there, they may notice a lot of people smiling at them. The “fast” conclusion can be, “Even without much money or stuff, these people are happy.” Are they? Maybe not. Maybe they’re simply being polite, or maybe we’re assuming their nonverbal behavior means the same thing it means at home. The point isn’t to become experts at reading all these cues. Rather, the point is to serve without quickly jumping to judgment in our attempts to create meaning.

Midway through your STM, you may want to have students complete partial statements such as:

- The dominant sound here is...
- It smells like...
- The most obvious objects I see are...
- The things I don’t see here include...
- The primary purpose of this place is...
- The categories of diversity I see here are...
- Young people here are...

At the end of the week, have them complete the partial statements again to see how, if at all, their responses have changed. And be sure to discuss these with some local friends to test your observations and interpretations.

Component Four: DEBRIEF

When the ACTION-REFLECTION stage is complete, students begin the process of leaving the STM—and it’s time to DEBRIEF. While many of us may equate debriefing with the reflection component of the ACTION-REFLECTION stage, debrief (as used in the Joplin model) is an organized process of identifying whatever learning has happened, discussing it with others, and evaluating it. This process can happen individually but occurs most effectively in community. The most helpful debriefs often include a rereading of pre- and during-trip journals in which each day’s reflections have been recorded.

A very basic way to facilitate this process is to gather the group before returning home, either on-site or in a “neutral” place away from the home community. Many STM agencies have curriculum-styled material that can facilitate this process, but helpful questions could include:

- As you read over your journals, what 5-7 themes or subjects appear most often?
- What 3-5 encounters or experiences were the most significant for you during this trip and why?
- What did you feel like God was trying to say to you during this experience?
- What thoughts about “back home” did you have during the trip?
- What did you observe about what God was already doing before you arrived there?
- If you were to spend a whole year there, what 3-5 new things might you learn that you weren’t able to fully understand during this trip?

Several of our think tank leaders suggested developing a debrief framework that includes strategies for daily debriefing (what we’re calling “reflection” and “support-feedback” above), end-of-trip debriefing, reentry debriefing (e.g., on the airport layover half-way home), and post-trip debriefing to maximize the potential for transformation and encourage the ongoing interpretation of the STM experience in kids’ expanding worldviews.

Component Five: LEARNING TRANSFER

While most STMs don’t have effective pre-trip time to focus on the upcoming experience, even more have difficulty with facilitating proper LEARNING TRANSFER—making what students learned on the STM a long-term part of their daily lives. Two realities fight against effective learning transfer. First, most of the significant learning on a short-term trip takes place in an environment very different from students’ home communities. Second, students themselves don’t know how to transfer learning to their own lives. Most student ministries don’t have programmatic structures that assist in this transfer process, either.

One of the think tank leaders recommended that students identify a mentor to help them with the LEARNING TRANSFER *before* the trip even starts. That caring adult can help the

student make sure the STM experience isn't just a distant memory, but a present reality. The think tank group overall emphasized the importance of weaving the STM into the year-round life of the church and youth ministry in ways that also help facilitate this transfer. One way this might play out is requiring students who participate in the "far away" trip to also take part in the next couple of "in our neighborhood" service opportunities as a post-trip learning transfer catalyst.

Once or Ongoing?

By now you may be wondering if this Joplin paradigm is something you progress through *once* during the many months involved in your STM experience, or if it's something you progress through *many times*? The answer is BOTH. The benefit of this model versus others that have a series of "stages" is that it can help leaders facilitate each STM task (i.e., running a program for children or a building project)—both each overall day during a trip and also during a year-long emphasis on service or mission. By thinking through these components for your micro experiences and macro emphases, you can work toward maximizing the long-term effect in students' lives.

If We Thoughtfully Send Them, They Will Grow... More Likely

One of the most common words associated with STMs is *adventure*. Most leaders understand that these experiences stretch and push students beyond their comfort zones. The research suggests, and the think tank leaders concur, that we can better facilitate these enlightening experiences.

There's no simple STM formula guaranteeing that integrating these five components will produce long-term transformation for students. But intentional planning for how to make the most of our STM experiences provides great promise for using these trips to empower students to change the world around them not merely when they're on a short-term mission high, but *every day*, for the rest of their lives. 🌱

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