



Pedagogy, possibility, and pipe dreams: opportunities and challenges for radicalizing international volunteering

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ABSTRACT

Many scholars studying international volunteering call for a pedagogy of social justice to accompany the experience. Very few outline any kind of comprehensive vision of how such a pedagogy might work. I take stock of the critiques, challenges, opportunities, and desired outcomes of a pedagogy of social justice in international volunteering in an effort to invigorate debate on how to radicalize volunteers and wield the neoliberal volunteering machine against itself. I call for an end to pedagogical calls and a beginning to pedagogical intervention and public pedagogies.

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Introduction

I argue the debate here is not around whether or not the gap year should engage with considerations of social justice, but rather how it intends to engage with these issues. A question I answer with the call for a pedagogy of social justice, through which the cultural, social, economic and political positioning of gap year projects can be made visible and engaged with. (Simpson, 2004, p. 690)

Kate Simpson's pedagogical call more than a decade ago set a precedent in the critical study of international volunteering. Many influential scholars have followed her lead, ending insightful articles with a demand for a better, more just volunteer tourism which might be brought about by 'pedagogy.' However, the debate Simpson called for – *how it intends to engage with these issues* – is still largely unrealized. There is little formal consensus – or even discussion – on how and to what ends a pedagogy of social justice (PSJ) might attempt to change international volunteering. This article aims to make explicit the critiques, challenges, opportunities, and desired outcomes of a PSJ as articulated by scholars over the years. I hope to demonstrate the need for a more serious engagement with pedagogy theory, practice, and praxis within international volunteering scholarship.

While I am not confident that a pedagogy of social justice in international volunteering can accomplish the aims outlined below, I am certain that 'pedagogy' can no longer act as a beacon of hope at the end of critique. To support a pedagogical solution is easy; it slides toward the politics of the 'anti-' (Ferguson, 2009), in this case anti-international volunteering as it currently exists. A more radical theoretical approach might call for a revolution in miniature in which we work tirelessly to delegitimize international volunteering in the

broader social milieu. As far as I am aware, no scholar has put forth a call toward this epistemological revolution (though it may yet come). For the moment, 'pedagogy' seems to be the most popular response to international volunteering's inadequacy. With this in mind, I follow Ferguson beyond anti-politics to 'the compromised and reformist terrain of the possible, rather than the seductive high ground of revolutionary ideals and utopian desires' (2009, p. 181). However, like Ferguson, I am interested in exploring how typically reformist 'moves' may lead to radical new politics (Ferguson, 2015).

A brief note on terminology: I use the term 'international volunteering' to encompass everything from one-week construction projects to Peace Corps or VSO positions lasting two years or more. While not all activities on this spectrum are conducive to pedagogical intervention (outlined below), the line between what is traditionally considered 'voluntourism' and 'development work' becoming quite blurry (Daldeniz & Hampton, 2011; Schech, 2017; Stainton, 2018). Additionally, as I show, a successful PSJ would not be bound by the absolute temporal frame which begins and ends as the volunteer boards an airplane (see Laurie & Baillie Smith, 2018 on considering the volunteer beyond the temporal moment of volunteerism).

In attempt to invigorate the debate Simpson asked for, this paper will progress as follows. I first review the disparate calls for pedagogy as well as the pedagogical methods and learning themes which have been recommended previously. I then review the state of the debate, first outlining the critiques and challenges which a PSJ in international volunteering would face. The third section outlines some of the implicit assumptions that underlie the pedagogical call and I identify pedagogical possibilities within international volunteering. Finally, in an effort to move beyond politics of the 'anti-' I present Larsen's (2014) model of the 'Critical Global Citizen' as a frame on which to build pedagogies of social justice.

A review of pedagogical calls

Since Simpson, the pedagogical call has made frequent appearances in the scholarly literature. Some early reiterations came from Keese who called for 'properly structured learning' (2011, p. 275), Darnell who wanted 'pedagogical guidance' (2011, p. 985), and Tiessen who suggested that volunteer experiences should be, 'framed in a broader educational experience.' (2007, p. 83). Diprose warned that if 'educative aspects' are neglected, international volunteering's claims to 'magical worldview transformations' would be meaningless (2012, p. 188). Vrasti (2013, p. 74) also called for a pedagogy of social justice, but openly wondered whether it could overcome the neoliberal underpinnings of international volunteering. More recently, Jakubiak has asked us to imagine the 'radical prospect' of re-positioning short-term voluntourism as a way to teach, 'the ways in which all of us, North and South, are linked through uneven development' (2016, p. 256). Freidus believes 'education, even in a very focused sense around poverty and inequality, can enlighten' volunteers (2017, p. 1318). Park adds that 'participants must be equipped with a critical understanding of the political and historical context of African poverty and global inequality prior to the trip' (2018, p. 159). Perhaps the most lucid and hopeful (recent) pedagogical call comes from Salazar & Rausenberger who write:

[Volunteer tourism] indubitably has the potential to influence and facilitate positive social change. I call for more pedagogically-informed gap year VT program suppliers,

and recommend stressing the educational and transformative aspects in these travel-based programs if this industry wants to become the ultimate sustainable form of tourism (2017, p. 29)

These direct calls entertain the possibility that volunteers' goodwill can be harnessed and redirected toward social justice.

While most pedagogical calls only restate Simpson's premise, a handful of scholars have advanced our understanding of the call. Crossley (2012, 2013) has written extensively about the need for the pedagogy to be responsive to both content knowledge (i.e. political economy) and also affective reaction (i.e. pedagogies of discomfort). She demands that the pedagogy should require volunteers 'to reflect on the economic, cultural and ideological relations between their society and that of the tourism destination' and also navigate the 'emotional reflection in order to bring under scrutiny processes of desire and defense that modulate encounters with poverty' (2013, p. 175). Hammersley (2014) has convincingly demonstrated the need for pedagogies of social justice to begin before volunteering commences and extend well beyond the volunteers' return home. Coghlan and associates have added theoretical weight to the 'pedagogy of social justice' by applying Jack Mezirow's transformative learning theory to international volunteering (Coghlan & Gooch, 2011; Coghlan & Weiler, 2018). Finally, Katie MacDonald (2014) has also advanced the research by attempting to implement a PSJ with volunteers she was supervising in Nicaragua; however she was generally disappointed with her volunteers' learning outcomes.

Themes of a PSJ

Though scholarship advocating pedagogies of social justice in international volunteering is dispersed across a range of journals and is generally not well-linked to the long lineage of pedagogical calls, a 'consensus' on what a PSJ would need to accomplish seems to have somewhat inadvertently formed. Scholars tend to recommend two broad learning themes: volunteer positionality and postcolonial structural violence. Methodological recommendations often invoke Paulo Freire (Freire, 1970/2005; but see also Giroux, 1992) and dialogic exchange (Jakubiak, 2016). In this subsection, I present this 'consensus' as to what a PSJ would need to include to claim the 'social justice label.' It is important to remember that a PSJ cannot be limited to the volunteers' time in-country; therefore, the methods and learning themes outlined below would be present in the volunteer's pre-departure training, in-service training, and especially, continued post-volunteering engagement.

Scholars most often call for analyses of colonialism and contemporary imperialism to be included in a PSJ (Crossley, 2013; Hammersley, 2014; Park, 2018). Specific areas of focus might be national debt and structural adjustment programs (Heron, 2011, p. 118); ethnocentrism and racism (Lough & Carter-Black, 2015); and an explicit dive into the production of knowledge (Martin & Griffiths, 2012, p. 919). Volunteers should be asked to investigate questions like: 'Why is this country so poor? What problems do the people face? What has our own country done to help or harm this country?' (Van Engan, 2000). Resident academics and activists may be invited to facilitate part of the discussion on the political economy of global dispossession. Volunteers would also be asked to consider the local political economy and how they 'cost both time and resources' in the host community (MacDonald, 2014, p. 211).

The PSJ must also connect these ‘structural’ discussions to the volunteers’ positionality and complicity. This requires an introspective and emotional journey inward (Crossley, 2013) which interrogates volunteer identity and the historical and personal circumstances which lead to the volunteering moment. Volunteers should understand themselves as ‘implicated in, rather than an alternative to … criticisms [about poverty and development]’ (Heron, 2007, p. 135). They would also be forced to consider the political character of affect and sentimentality (Conran, 2011). Questions for the volunteers to reflect on might be deeply fundamental like: ‘How can I go on living my life as I used to? What are my values? And how should I choose to live my life?’ (Zahra, 2011, p. 99). The ultimate goal is to move volunteers from, ‘claims to innocence and instead acting more effectively to refuse their continued participation in, and hence the perpetuation of, interlocking systems of oppression’ (Heron, 2005, p. 350). Once they understand their participation in dispossession, they can begin to reconceptualize international volunteering. They will better understand that ‘we are never on a “time-out” from people we have only briefly met or places that we have never been’ (Roddick, 2014, p. 270), rather we are in constant, hierarchical, relation with humanity and the planet (Gruenewald, 2003).

Methods of a PSJ

A ‘consensus’ on the methods of the PSJ is admittedly less clear. Specific activities might include peer discussion, newspaper reviews (Diprose, 2012), and readings from ‘non-western’ authors (Tiessen, 2007). There *must* be sufficient time for reflection activities like ‘debriefing, journaling, group discussion, counseling’ (Breunig, 2005, p. 110). Semi-structured email-based writing prompts may be effective for the pre- and post-trip (Hammersley, 2014). Many authors are inspired by and recommend utilizing Freire’s (1970/2005) concepts of problem-posing education, conscientization, and praxis. However, greater engagement with critiques of using Freire for pedagogies of the privileged is needed (i.e. Giroux, 1992).

Another component of the ‘methodology’ are the logistics of international volunteering. A PSJ can probably only be successful in intermediate or long term volunteering. In addition to concerns about liminality (*I’m just on holiday*), it would be unreasonable to ask communities to repeatedly host a potentially more emotionally burdensome version of international volunteering. After interviewing hosts, Heron recommended that most placements be no less than six months (2011, p. 117). Nenga also found – in the domestic context – that, ‘lengthy volunteer commitments allowed volunteers to accumulate knowledge, reflect on their ideas, and change their minds about the causes of poverty’ (2011, p. 280). Volunteering programs that force individuals to arrive in a cohort might be better suited for pedagogical intervention since, as Vrasti (2013, ch. 4) has shown, when sending organizations allow volunteers to arrive and depart as they wish, basic logistics allow only minimal orientation training. Finally, the PSJ might be more successful when volunteers are placed at individual sites instead of in a volunteer-house. While more research is needed on this point, some scholarship suggests that volunteers placed together focus on intra-group bonds instead of trying to learn the social geographies of their site (Freidus, 2017; Park, 2018).

But what is a PSJ for?! There is not a “consensus” on the desired outcomes of a PSJ in international volunteering. Very few authors have attempted to answer the question of

what we are fighting toward (Ferguson, 2009). Some scholars have suggested we might be ‘for’ small changes to the ex-volunteer’s personal life: i.e. buying fair-trade, eating local foods, or recycling (McGehee, 2012, p. 101). However, these changes alone do not tip the moral calculus in favor of international volunteering (see the next section). Mostafanezhad has put forward more aggressive ambitions for the radicalization of international volunteering: ‘structural change in the form of debt forgiveness, the expansion of social services, and a more general redistribution of global wealth through trade policies and agreements’ (2014, p. 147). I would only add freedom of movement/ open borders (Nevins, 2017) to the list. With these guiding aims as a ‘new consensus,’ the rather nebulous ‘social justice’ becomes a much clearer political program. The PSJ is meant to radicalize volunteers away from the commonsenses of neoliberalism so that they may fight for these radical political ideals once they return home.

Nothing but pipe dreams! critiques and challenges of a PSJ

Can a pedagogy of social justice really radicalize a generation of privileged white volunteers from the North to advocate for IMF debt forgiveness and open borders? There are many who would argue that this is nothing but a pipe dream, and perhaps a dangerously colonizing one at that (i.e. Ahmed, 2004). In this section, I take stock of some critiques and challenges of/for a PSJ. I first outline objections to the very principle of attempting to radicalize via international volunteering and then turn to some more practical barriers to implementation.

The most prominent critique must be the lack of benefit for the hosts, especially given the extended emotional energy needed to accommodate volunteers in existential crisis. International volunteering already benefits the volunteer more than the host community (Vrasti, 2013) – a PSJ may just give an oppressive and colonizing practice a radical veneer. A PSJ in international volunteering has the potential to devolve into what Waldorf labels ‘educational and cultural diversity camps in other people’s countries’ (2001, p. 82). Additionally, white students beginning their inquiry into social justice tend to believe that ‘the oppressed’ have a ‘special formula’ or ‘to-do list in becoming an ally’ (Evans-Winters & Twyman Hoff, 2011; Matias, 2016). We should think long and hard before sending volunteers into the field asking for ‘the cliff notes of what a person of color [in the Global South] goes through’ (Lapayese, Aldana, & Lara, 2014, p. 17). A critic of the PSJ might well argue that if our goal is to lessen inequality, we would do better to just give the volunteers’ money to the would-be hosts (Waldorf, 2001). A PSJ also has the potential to inadvertently erase the agency of everyone except the young, white volunteer (Freire, 1970/2005, p. 60).

Whyte, Selinger, and Otterson argue that, ‘people who believe that they must travel far and wide to rid themselves of harmful stereotypes are being indulgent ... taking great expense and undertaking significant moral risk to obtain personal observations that will counteract beliefs that traditional forms of education might remedy’ (2011, p. 345). The carbon cost alone is a reason to consider discarding international volunteering altogether (Lovelock, 2014). Additionally, by outsourcing poverty lessons via international travel, many volunteers may become resistant to acknowledging the deleterious effects of capitalism ‘at home’ (Diprose, 2012).

A third set of critiques shifts the focus from international travel to the limits of volunteering (Butcher, 2017; Palacios, 2010). It is well-established that the act of volunteering

inherently constructs a capable volunteer and less capable volunteered; volunteering is about helping those who are perceived to be unable to help themselves (Mostafanezhad, 2014; Palacios, 2010). Scholars have long talked of reframing volunteering narratives from 'helping into self-reflexive learning' (Cook, 2008) but this has proven an elusive hope. The 'helping imperative' still holds sway in popular discourses, even if it is widely rejected in the scholarly community (Heron, 2007). Even volunteers who are aware of helping critiques and colonial relations still are partly motivated by 'giving back' (Schwarz, 2018).

Perhaps the most immediate practical problem in implementing a PSJ is the question of who is actually going to lead it? It seems unlikely that sending/hosting organizations are currently staffed with radical anarcho-socialists lying in wait. A PSJ would require a partnership between public intellectuals and 'cultural workers' like field staff (Giroux, 2004) and these kinds of relationships are generally more easily imagined than enacted.

Another set of challenges are temporal. Jakubiak suggests that, 'Given that many participants view volunteer tourism as a liminal time ... it may be unreasonable to expect ... long-term or far-reaching outcomes' (Jakubiak, 2017, p. 212). Partly because international volunteering can so easily be compartmentalized as external to one's 'regular' life, lessons learned are commonly disregarded after returning home (Hammersley, 2014; Tiessen, 2007). This may occur regardless of time-in-country as Cook (2011) found a similar effect among development workers who spent many years overseas.

Given these challenges and critiques, some may argue that pedagogical reformist efforts are a waste of energy. Pedagogical supplements will only allow 'mild agendas which do little to contribute to the vital transformations we need as we enter a time of grave crises' (Higgins-Desbiolles & Whyte, 2013, p. 430). As the debate around PSJ grows, some may advocate setting aside pedagogical calls entirely. Rather than submit to the neoliberal practices – they may argue – we must acknowledge that nothing can be done to 'fix' international volunteering and we must seek to eliminate it from the humanitarian's repertoire.

With these critiques and challenges in mind, I now turn to another side of the debate and explore the pedagogical possibilities inherent in international volunteering.

Pedagogical possibilities

Mostafanezhad has previously suggested that, 'while volunteer tourism certainly will not solve structural inequality, climate change, or chronic poverty, it is worth considering its social movement recruitment potential.' Such recruitment would be central to a PSJ's aims. Ironically, much of this potential may lie in international volunteering's utter inadequacy. Many volunteers become disenchanted and critical of humanitarianism and development after volunteering (Heron, 2007; Jakubiak, 2016; Li, 2017). A personal experience with 'development' may be required to dislodge hegemonic neoliberal narratives. Currently, ambivalent ex-volunteers seem to either float into graduate studies and NGOs or simply compartmentalize their realizations. A pedagogy of social justice would tear down the hegemony, but more importantly, proactively provide volunteers with productive political outlets for their frustration. In the following sections, I identify five (often unstated) components of international volunteering which make radical recruitment conceivable. I also describe some of the moves a PSJ might make in order to take advantage of each component.

Existing politics & desires

Radical recruitment is conceivable because many international volunteers are already politically liberal. They adopt 'rights-based perspectives' that do not necessarily problematize capitalism or the state, but they are nonetheless disturbed by economic and social inequality. Volunteers also identify with anti-neoliberalism and anti-imperialism narratives even as they tread in the footsteps of colonists (Conran, 2011, p. 1456). Volunteers already 'talk the talk,' the PSJ would push them to 'walk the walk.'

This may not be as far-fetched as it sounds. Schwarz's (2018) recent research has shown that would-be volunteers were tuned in to critiques of international volunteering and worried about how others would perceive their trip. If they were not critical enough, they could face negative social sanctions from their peer and kin groups. This evidence suggests that some volunteers might already want more critical training. Those who are ambivalent can be lured to the PSJ like any other tourism commodity: with the promise of cultural capital and backstage knowledge. This subverts neoliberalism – the 'consumer' is 'sold' an anti-capitalist education (and more ambitiously, anti-capitalist contestation) since travel without the pedagogical and, later, activist work might be scrutinized as worthless and doing 'more harm than good.'

Spatial disorientation

Radical recruitment is conceivable because the extreme nature of poverty and overt lack of opportunity for 'self-improvement' through 'traditional employment' in the South (Ferguson, 2015) can disorient the volunteers' hegemonic understandings of poverty. Heron explicitly states what many allude to – that after being disoriented by spaces of poverty, volunteers cannot go on as if nothing happened:

it would seem that a global citizen from the North, even one who is in another country for a very short period of time, would be incapable of indifference to poverty witnessed in Southern countries and the lack of freedom that accompanies extreme poverty; and once back home, the global citizen would continue to work to change conditions impacting poor people in Southern countries (Heron, 2011, p. 111).

However, research shows that indifference is exactly what occurs in most – but, importantly, *not all* – cases. Scholarship on why some volunteers change and others do not would inform a PSJ. The curriculum would then utilize spatial disorientation to affect the volunteers. While spatial disorientation may be achievable 'at home' (i.e. Cook, 2011), domestic service learning often struggles to disrupt *national* hegemonic stories about individual failure and deficiency (i.e. Becker & Paul, 2015). Additionally, while volunteers 'at home' can easily 'drop the course,' international volunteers are a captive audience once they arrive in-country, meaning we can better guide their disorientation.

Participant observation

Radical recruitment is conceivable because international volunteering drops volunteers into situations atypical to their life to that point: they become participant observers. Participant observation – even rudimentary participant observation – does give volunteers a taste of a different kind of life. They are, after all, waking up to rooster cries, sleeping in

earthen homes, living with the realities of water shortages and solar electricity, perhaps even cooking outdoors, learning some key phrases of a new language, and experiencing the frustrations of informal transportation systems. Anthropologists would correctly note that to *really* be doing participant observation one must intellectualize what is being observed (Bernard, 2006, p. 343). The volunteers may not have the background knowledge or training to do this on their own, but the PSJ would train them. With a well-designed and executed curriculum of reflection and information, many volunteers would be able to raise questions about inequality and realize social interconnection while participating/volunteering at their 'field site.'

Participant observation also addresses the 'volunteering question' which is one of the biggest logistical problems facing the PSJ. A PSJ might re-conceptualize volunteering as an opportunity for the volunteer to participate a practicum or work shadowing experience with a Southern professional. This volunteering-as-practicum model shifts the focus from development outcomes for the voluntoured to outcomes around flexibility and authenticity for the volunteer. The volunteer is not in-country to explain, but rather to dialogue with the people about their actions (Freire, 1970/2005, p. 53). Volunteers no longer need to pretend to be skilled or qualified, since they are the ones learning from Southern professionals. The focus on authenticity still allows for informal encounters which the volunteers ultimately value most (Palacios, 2010) and frees them up to concentrate on observing and reflecting on life in at their site.

Affect

Radical recruitment is conceivable because volunteers are emotionally affected by their site. Much has been written about the affective potential of international volunteering (i.e. Everingham, 2016; Griffiths, 2015) at an interpersonal level (cf. Conran, 2011). A PSJ would wield this affect for political ends. Many volunteers return home with a seemingly irrational dedication – an almost love-like attachment – for the host country or region. Acknowledging that Southern states are often adversely affected Northern politics beyond their control (Ferguson, 2006), a dedicated group of Northern citizens who would raise hell about predatory lending agreements and exclusionary border policies could carry disproportionate weight in global policy decisions. Ex-volunteers can be 'empowered' to effect change in their own state's policies to better advantage the places that affected them. This is also a way to redirect the 'helping imperative' which led them to seek international volunteer opportunities.

Life-stage

Radical recruitment is conceivable because many volunteers are in the life stage most conducive to massive change. International volunteering is often understood as a ritual before one enters 'adult life' (Simpson, 2004). Thus changes, albeit mundane, are already expected to occur once they return. The PSJ could push ex-volunteers toward graduate studies in the social sciences and humanities and toward activism and lobbying. The PSJ would emphasize the importance of continuing one's studies on inequality – domestic and global – after returning to the North. University students or recent graduates may be in the best cultural-economic position to take up these activities.



Framing a pedagogy of social justice

The PSJ must rise from the ashes of critique and be re-outfitted to move beyond volunteering-as-helping. Instead it will focus on participation, learning, and will actively facilitate justice – not through development – but through engagement. The volunteers will return to the North having learned of some struggles in the South, of their complicity in structural violence, and how to wield their citizenship to sway policy and public opinion in powerful countries.

One framework which may help us build the PSJ is Larsen's (2014) 'Critical Global Citizenship' (CGC). While idea of 'global citizenship' has been roundly rebuked by Butcher (2017), Larsen, I believe, anticipated many of his critiques. Nevertheless, one must acknowledge that 'citizenship' is a poor moniker given its ties to states and exclusion. Ferguson (2015) suggests we might do better to think in terms of 'global dwelling' or 'global presence.' Both of these reconceptualizations are easily overlaid onto Larsen's framework.

Larsen suggests that the Critical Global Citizen must partake in both 'Awareness/Analysis' and 'Engagement/Action' and constantly negotiate the dialectical relationship therein (2014, p. 5). Awareness/Analysis is subdivided into four dimensions: difference awareness, critical self-awareness, global awareness, and responsibility awareness. Each of these dimensions bring the volunteer closer – through historical and reflexive analysis – to understanding that, 'we are all a part of the problem, as well as a part of the solution(s)' (p. 6). For the most part, these themes are well-trodden in existing pedagogies of the privileged and consciousness raising efforts (i.e. Nurenberg, 2011).

However, CGC is helpful in that it differentiates the Engagement/Action that must arise out of a successful pedagogy of social justice. Engagement/Action is sub-divided into three dimensions: self-action, civic action, and social justice action. Self-action is mostly consistent with Butcher's 'lifestyle politics' (Butcher, 2003). While Larsen does not put much stake in these acts (calling them 'mundane and ordinary'), she is less critical than Butcher. She sees self-action as part of a larger CGC action apparatus and gives scholars of international volunteering a clearer way to describe decidedly positive but hardly revolutionary post-volunteering acts like conserving water. The second dimension – civic action – is reformist action: 'actively participat[ing] in established systems and community structures in order to solve social problems and improve society' (p. 7). This type of action is a public engagement based on one's new awarenesses and analyses; it is not limited to the global; it also calls of the CG citizen to engage at local and regional levels. Social justice action is the most radical of the three: it 'refers to broader social, structural transformations of power relations ... changing belief systems, core and tightly held values and assumptions with the aim to transforming institutions and other power structures' (p. 7). Getting most ex-volunteers to social justice action would, obviously, be the aim of a PSJ. Anything less would be considered a failure.

While Larsen does not tell us how each of these dimensions might be accomplished – that is too contextually-dependent – she does provide a useful framework for better pegging the learning and action outcomes a PSJ would need to accomplish. The CGC framework is more a checklist than a roadmap. The exact directions are still very much up for debate.

Conclusion

'Giving back.' It is one of the most persistent motifs of international volunteering. Typically, it is invoked because the volunteer believes they *will* take something (tangible or not) from

the places they travel to (*I want to give back*). It is firmly rooted in the neoliberal ‘helping imperative.’ Yet, Ferguson is instructive:

we may be surprised to find that some of [neoliberal mechanisms] can be repurposed, and put to work in the service of political projects very different from those usually associated with [‘neoliberalism’]. If so, we may find that the cabinet of governmental arts available to us is a bit less bare than first appeared, and that some rather useful little mechanisms may be nearer to hand than we thought. (2009, p. 183)

A more radical discourse can be embedded within ‘giving back’ narratives. In this version, we are not obligated to give back because of what we *will take*, but because of what we *have already taken*. Wealth has accumulated in the Global North and we need to ‘give it back!’ With this slight-of-hand, neoliberal-eese becomes a ‘rather useful little mechanism.’ The pedagogical call has endured so long partly because international volunteering is full of these ‘useful little mechanisms’ – some of which I have made explicit in this paper, many of which remain to be identified.

But let us not get distracted by hope. Volunteering-as-pedagogy – even in best case scenarios – includes no inherent guarantees of radical attitudinal and behavioral reformation (Nenga, 2011). Even advocates recognize that many aspects of international volunteering limit its potential as a platform for a PSJ (Coghlan & Gooch, 2011, p. 715).

This paper has set the grounds for debate by bringing critiques, challenges, opportunities, and desired outcomes from a diverse range of authors and journals into one place. While I have surely left ideas out, especially in the critiques section, I hope to have demonstrated that we can no longer simply call for pedagogy – it can no longer lurk like a specter of hope in the conclusions of critique essays. Conceptual work will not be able to answer questions about whether a PSJ will work none, some, or most of the time – only empirical scholarship can do that. We should be inspired by MacDonald’s (2014) example [we might also reach further back to Bruner’s (2004) many pedagogical projects] to become public intellectuals. We must partner with ‘cultural workers’ to create radical public pedagogies within international volunteering (Giroux, 2004) – only then will we be decidedly beyond anti-politics and entering fertile new theoretical ground.

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Notes on contributor

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