RECIPROCITY: A KEYSTONE OF ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

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Summary

Understanding and fostering reciprocity between stakeholders is a keystone of effective organizations. Learning to understand complex and complementary aspects of reciprocity can lead to more sustainable, responsive partnerships. This chapter presents principles from several service-learning programs that illustrate how academic, community, and NGO partners can work together effectively to become a community of practice. The first section highlights the indigenous Andean concept of *ayni* as a means to integrate core dimensions of reciprocity into a broader, holistic framework. It provides a means for pushing our understanding of interdependence along lines whose trajectories extend well beyond a traditional Western framework. In the second section, we tie reciprocity to the larger conceptual areas of care and justice. Then we look at how the synthesis of these capacities can build more democratic organizations and

societies. The learning organization is one that intelligently gives to as well as receives from its partners, hence a more complex understanding of reciprocity can be beneficial.

1. Introduction

Understanding and fostering reciprocity between stakeholders is a keystone of effective organizations. Working together to build mutually rewarding partnerships is the central starting point from which sustainable projects can proceed. Equitably giving and receiving shifts the relationship from one of donor and recipient or sponsor and debtor to being teammates striving for mutually beneficial goals. Indeed, keeping an eye on reciprocity, notes Jacoby, means "a concerted effort to move from charity to justice, from service to the elimination of need" (Jacoby 1996, p. 9). Thus understanding more about the nuances of fostering reciprocity should be a ongoing priority in organizational learning.

We see reciprocity as a metaphorical keystone that connects the constituents in a sustainable development initiative. When an organization is learning to intelligently respond to its partners, it needs to bend and adapt to meet the others where they are. Aiming to foster reciprocity is like building an arch with an eye to having both sides approach a mutual center. This node of engagement is reciprocity. This central tenet both supports and pushes each side to consider their position, their orientation, and their contribution. The keystone bridges the gap that would otherwise separate the parties and that would, ultimately, lead to their collapse.

We have hewn these key arguments from rough data derived from our own experiences in the field. In our own organizational development of the Global Service Center, we have gained from explicitly using reciprocity as a central concept. As directors and evaluators of service-learning programs, we have learned critical lessons about becoming learning organizations. One of the most important is the value of integrating western and non-western, academic and indigenous ways of knowing and relating. We offer the following syntheses about reciprocity as provocative starting points for collegial discussion. The dynamic case studies attest to the momentum that we can generate when a cycle of reciprocity is ethically established and continually renewed.

The chapter is divided into two main sections. The first section highlights the indigenous Andean concept of *ayni* (pronounced "eye-knee") as a means of integrating core dimensions of reciprocity into a broader, holistic framework. It provides a means for pushing our understanding of interdependence along lines whose trajectories extend well beyond a traditional Western framework. We offer eight applications of the concept of *ayni* as openings to further discussion about the challenges of fostering mutual, meaningful international partnerships. The goal is to support interdependent learning and engagement by all partners in a sustainable development project. In the second section, we link reciprocity to the larger conceptual areas of care and justice. Then we look at how the synthesis of these capacities can build more democratic organizations and societies.

The data for this chapter come from our participation in and analysis of several different service-learning programs. Data for the first section come primarily from the

International Service-Learning Experience (ISLE) sponsored by the University of Pittsburgh. Since the initial project in Bolivia in 1998, students have been involved in courses linked to international service-learning programs, now in many countries. Undergraduate and graduate students study an academic area, (e.g. sustainable development, education, or travel writing), and do an applied group service project in the field that is closely integrated with the course materials. Students generate a considerable volume of reflective writings and other evaluative materials; these along with participant observation, reviews of the literature, and ethnographic fieldwork form the basis for our research inquiries.

Data for the second section come from a case study of an international service-learning program in Ecuador. The sponsor is a non-profit organization that has over two decades of experience running community based experiential education programs in twelve different countries. This data derive from participant observation, interviews, and from reflective writings by students, program administrators and community members. Undergraduate students join the program for a period ranging from one month to a full year. The lessons they learn are much deeper than understanding service in new ways, they come to think critically about what it means to work for care and justice as part of building more democratic societies.

2. Applications of *Ayni*

The term *ayni* comes from the high terraces and craggy valleys of the majestic Andes Mountains region. Simply, *ayni* is the exchange of comparable work or goods as part of an ongoing cycle of reciprocity. People enter into an *ayni* relationship with another person, family, or community in order to accomplish more than one group alone could manage. It may include such traditional exchanges as planting potato fields or more modern applications such as coming together to install a new aquifer. It is a serious, if semi-formal, agreement that entails benefits, obligations, and fun for all involved. In this chapter we use the underlying sense of *ayni,* i.e. an exchanges of equivalent value embedded in potentially long-lasting relationships. While some elements of *ayni* do apply literally in understanding the case studies, many more can be best understood as a metaphorical extension of the principles of *ayni*.

In this section we synthesize eight aspects of *ayni* that were originally published in greater detail in the Michigan Journal of Community Service. They raise questions about the challenges of fostering reciprocity among diversely situated members of partner organizations. In addition, they inspire us to design programs (whether on service-learning or sanitation lines) that bring people together across culture and borders in order to build more equitable, potentially transformative relationships of reciprocity.

First, service-programs must be built upon a foundation of genuine need as expressed by the recipients. Second, ownership and responsibility for the project must be clear and shared. Third, real people perform hands-on services; participants cannot buy their way out of personal obligations. Fourth, communal labor means strenuous, physical engagement with one's whole body. Fifth, workers must come with an open heart and a generous spirit as *ayni* exchanges cannot be performed begrudgingly or with a sour

disposition. Sixth, *ayni* cycles involve a different conception of time, and place participants in an ongoing relationship that extends across both generation and geography. Seventh, the *ayni* exchange is equitable, with each side feeling that they received at least as much as they gave. Eighth, the "value" of reciprocal work cannot - and should not - be calculated in simple monetary terms.

2.1. The Request for Relationship Springs from a Genuine Need and entails Risks for both Partners

The cycle of reciprocity begins with the expressed needs of the host community. It is essential, that the venture be built upon the genuine needs of all those who will live long-term with the project. The service-learning project in this first section, ISLE, encompassed working together with students, educators and community members to construct the first building in a new teacher training center on the Bolivian *altiplano*. Our major contribution was not in coming in to do a project for them. Rather, it was serving as a catalyst of energy, materials and organizational skills in order for local people to see their own plans come to fruition in a timely and substantial manner. By assisting indigenously-defined and run programs, we are reinforcing, rather than undermining, their capacity for sustainable development.

What one asks for is part of the equation. How that request is framed is equally significant. Exploration of the politics of asking for help reveals useful features of using an *ayni* framework. Expressing one's need is not always an easy task. Requesting assistance, if it is done in a position of subordination, entails subservience and acquiescence to the demands of the patron or giver. When a family initiates *mink'a* (an asymmetrical state when one party has requested or received help from another), they need to be clear about what would motivate others to respond to them. Are they expecting to "pay" the workers for their trouble, with food, smiles, or money? If so, they are only reinforcing their position as subordinates who bargain from a position of disadvantage. Even though they have rewards to offer, they have to continually negotiate with their benefactors. Contracts have to quantify and regulate the services expected, thus cheapening both their request and what is given. Further, their "plea" for assistance reinforces the inherent inequities between their position and their benefactors, leaving them continually in a position of debt.

In contrast, requests for *ayni* spring from a different source and can be approached in a different manner. During the often highly formalized *ayni* requests, invitees and sponsors sit down over food and *chicha* (fermented corn beer) and propose starting an equitable exchange. Requests must be subtle and open-ended, so that the giver is free to respond in a way he or she deems appropriate and generous. The negotiations have to be implicit and tactful, not demanding or brusque. It is about opening a conversation and becoming personally connected. Because it entails a potentially long-lasting bond, it is important to set the stage in a warm and sincere manner. Each partner is free to accept, reject, or redefine the relationship. Because both sides invoke the *ayni* code, which is greater than either partner, such a request must be offered, and accepted, with thoughtfulness.

This mode of initiating contact accomplishes two important goals. First, they are establishing a relationship, not negotiating a short-term contract. Both parties expect that they will be establishing a potentially long-lasting cycle, one in which both share responsibility for its success. Each iteration of exchange, or gift-giving, takes prior generosity or stinginess into account. A dynamic series of encounters is set into motion, one in which each iteration can strengthen (or weaken) the bond connects partners. The result is that future requests for repayment are straightforward (or suspect), for the relationship preexists the request.

Second, rather than reinforcing dependence, *ayni* exchanges highlight the power that both givers and receivers hold relative to one another. Rather than being pitiable, the initiators are being generous, as they must inevitably return the favors requested. They are also gaining power, as they accept the burden and responsibility of reciprocating, thereby showing their own faith and good intentions to maintain the relationship. The NGO staff and local educators who welcomed our assistance in building the school accepted the responsibility make sure that it was used. In like manner, the local teacher candidates who would gain certification there would use the resource to train others and to spread the wealth. The goal was to instill not only solid pedagogical skills, but also to help teachers see themselves as people who now could, and should, give back to the communities that sponsored their education and offered them a current position. In this way they would be part of keeping the cycle of expanding interdependence going. They became empowered by receiving, as it meant that they then had both the skills and the legitimate charge to give to others.

In summary, initiating the service-learning partnership is the first critical act that sets the tone for the subsequent exchanges. In our own work, we need to make sure that the original reason for the partnership springs from a genuine need as defined by the receiver. We need to be aware of the risks and responsibilities that each partner faces when they reach out to one another. Each needs to retain dignity and a sense of competence. *Ayni* exchanges are a serious business, ones that keep participants mindful of the ongoing debts of obligation that they will incur if they offer - or accept - assistance. We would do well to likewise consider which project requests we wish to accept, and which community groups we would like to partner with when we design projects. We need to be mindful of the ways that we depend on and cultivate each others' unique skills and resources. Sustainable partnerships cannot begin and end with simplistic contractual payoffs. We need to build in trust and flexibility, so that personalized acts of generosity can come into play. We need to approach one another with hope and clear expectations. For our acts have lasting implications, not only for our own credibility, but for the viability of potential partnerships that come after us.

2.2. Growing Networks of Stakeholders share Ownership of the Project

Ayni creates networks of ties between collaborating agencies and individuals. As the relationship grows, so does the number and kinds of stakeholders who are brought into meaningful relationship with the core groups. One of the major issues that can grow out of the initial request is who legitimate stakeholders are and what they can expect from involvement in the exchange. In this section we explore varying forms of ownership and participation.

Most *ayni* is performed by a particular group on behalf of another particular group. *Ayni* assumes that the beneficiary and the benefactors are both well delineated; in this way, participants can more easily determine who "owes" what to whom. Most immediately, the formal partners in ISLE seemed clear. First there were the students; the adults coming to gain a high school education, teacher candidates earning fully certification, and local *campesino/as* who could attend agricultural and health short courses. There were also regional activists and educators who would see their goals for expanding the courses realized; the educational leaders of the Baha'i Radio Station who broadcast the training modules, and activists and planners from CETHA (Centro Educativo, Technico, Humanistico y Agropecuario) and FUNDESIB (Foundation for Integral Development in Bolivia) . In addition, Dan Weiss, the director of Amizade and students and leaders from the University of Pittsburgh would benefit by successfully facilitating a quality international service-learning opportunity.

There were also larger contextual issues of ownership and legitimate interest. The geopolitical location of the construction site also made our labors particularly visible to members of the community who were interested in what we were doing. The school was built out on the open lands at the edge of the town just off the two-lane Pan American Highway, in an area seen as the commons. The unfenced, grassy plain was used as grazing land for sheep and goats. We found that numerous curious spectators observed us from the periphery of our worksite. Since *ayni* labor can be used to build communal goods such as a road or civic structure, they wondered: Who would benefit from the new school? Who could go there to learn? Over the course of the project, the young sheepherders and older neighbors ventured closer and closer to our odd, mixed labor crew and we welcomed their questions and curiosity. We, along with our more fluent coworkers, conveyed that the goal of the complex was to provide a resource for diverse students from the surrounding region. Although the sponsors would have primary responsibility for upkeep and staffing, it was to become a public resource, and not the exclusive property of particular institutions.

At home, too, we had our sponsors and curious spectators to please. As ISLE gained recognition, the University wanted to know who would "own" the initiative. They asked: Who would benefit from this new kind of international travel and study? Who could participate? What would they learn? We needed to secure the approval and also the institutional support to enhance the infrastructure that would sustain ISLE and related programs over time. Through explicit attention to this need, the network of stakeholders grew tremendously within the first year of this experimental program.

Just as the formal partners were not the only beneficiaries, the public actors were not the only ones essential in making the project successful. Each team needs numerous support personnel and colleagues to create a full, satisfying experience that is deemed worth the effort. The Andean case provides a good illustration of how this has been traditionally orchestrated. Although *ayni* is often thought of in terms of the final labor power brought together on the appointed days, it requires a considerable amount or preparation. One of the most important prerequisites in most participants' eyes is having appropriate refreshments available. Nurturing a relationship is about creating a fun atmosphere, throwing a good party, mobilizing a network of collaborators. This is particularly apparent when resources are scarce and the rewards of doing more work are

tentative. Zesty, thirst-quenching *chicha* (corn beer) is the result of long weeks of harvesting, fermenting, and brewing. Thus, having it ready for workers demonstrates anticipation of success and appreciation for energies and time expended. We all enjoyed the *fiesta* that marked our last night. It was a joyous, musical celebration where we met more of the wives and children of our mostly male Bolivian coworkers, sampled *chicha*, tasted food obviously prepared with care and generosity, and made plans for The University of Pittsburgh and Amizade's continued commitments to working in the area.

The result of creating interconnected webs of stakeholders is that they understand the project and feel that they each have a legitimate, shared stake in its success. They share the benefits of creating a public resource, and celebrate when a particular constituency does well. Some members of the larger network play formal and public roles, others play equally important informal and personal roles. Thus over the long term, when it is one party's turn to act, they know that there is a ready cadre of support personnel there ready to make their continued participation possible.

2.3. Service means Lending a Hand, not just Writing a Check

Third, reciprocity based in *ayni* keeps cycles of interdependence to a human scale. Individual service and personalized gifts are what have currency. In the strictest sense, when it is your turn to serve, you cannot pay off someone else to do your part. The obligation must be returned through personalized giving. Keeping things to a humanly manageable scale is what keeps *ayni* exchanges (or service-learning exchanges) from spiraling out of control. Indeed, maintaining a vital system of *ayni* parallel to the wage economy has been one of the foundations for Quechuan cultural survival. As Allen notes, "[Quechuan] rejection of money is a refusal to bypass human reciprocity" (1988, p.219).

Indigenous Andeans strongly prefer to engage in *ayni* labor versus wage labor when possible, for it strengthens the quality and quantity of their household's resource base in ways that cash cannot. First, work in *ayni* is often preferred because those with a shared stake in the outcome are more likely to provide better quality work. Local workers reported that sponsors usually prefer to engage ayni workers because they will treat the labor or the outcome as a shared resource, which in a sense, it has become. When service-learning programs offer participants the opportunity to see that they are gaining something rather than just charitably giving away, they see the work as part of their own lives, rather than a task to be endured solely for someone else's benefit. They know that the tone that they set will echo back to their side of the global village. And, working together recreates a kind of shared wealth, of being *apu*, that is, rich in both material wealth and a large network of kin who can be relied up on to perform *ayni* for those in his network. Becoming enmeshed in the ties that connect members of a neighborhood or community is a central tenet of belonging to the community, of having a shared stake in success. By contributing to these ties in even a marginal way, the members of ISLE become connected. Working together helped create those kinds of meaningful, reciprocal relationships that could make them feel like needed members of a global family.

Many of the students wrote that the most important thing that they gained was a sense of having been truly appreciated for even their small contribution. They felt like they actually could make a difference, something that they otherwise seldom sensed during their college years. This underlying motivation to create relationships came to the fore when ISLE participants were challenged by their peers and parents to justify why they were spending the money to go down in person. The sum of the per-person costs for travel, room, and board could indeed have been used to hire local workers. Kristi summarized the dilemma, "People have teased me about this trip, saying that we could have just given our fund-raised money to the Bolivians and not have gone at all." After the trip she had a response, "Yes, this may have provided them with more funds, but I think us going there had an even bigger impact."

Personally serving helped to create sustainable wealth in the Bolivian community in another way. Our commitment to work with Amizade provided the catalytic elements of funds, labor, and focus that made the education center a possibility then and there. Certainly, there is no dearth of skilled labor in the region, but our material, physical, and moral support made the project actually come together. Those who came to work with us during our compressed Alternative Spring Break learned to mobilize community members, organize building materials, and coordinate regional non-governmental organizations. Those skills will be useful in all of the subsequent projects that they (and we) now have increased confidence to take on. As individuals and as organizations they and we have built up important capacities.

In summary, following through on commitments to come in person is essential to maintaining *ayni* as a human scale system. Forging personal connections provides the means of pooling external and internal resources, linking cultural groups, and strengthening institutions. A community can only prosper if each person feels that their contributions are both necessary and significant, that they together are working toward shared goals. In *ayni* -based service-learning, partners put their reputations, emotions, and themselves on the line. Whether they are working for social justice, creating a more caring environment to nurture children, or actively legislating for a more democratic society, each person is important.

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Biographical Sketches

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