Sofia Miah’s Service Learning Portfolio

Project: African Children’s Learning Centre

School Year 2011-2012

Block F

<http://www.messiah.edu/external_programs/agape/servicelearning/images/handsaroundglobecopy.jpg>

Table of Contents

1. Reflection essay 2-6
2. Updated action plan 6-7
3. SMART GOAL sheet 7-8
4. Four journal entries 8-12
5. Disability research 12-14
6. Photos or Visuals 15

# Reflective Essay:

Service is not just about volunteering to spend time for the good of other people who are less fortunate and privileged. Service involves the emotional connection, positive thinking for the community as a whole, and basic skills and values such as compassion, leadership and communication. Service changes not only the people receiving the service, but it also changes the person committing the service for a better good.

Throughout the year, especially the first quarter, I spent a lot of time on several different service projects such as the Cancer Iftar, a visit to a children’s cancer hospital and a lot of time at this German clinic sponsored by a German church in Maadi. Ellena Soule and I would go once a week, and we would help the sisters at this small clinic to take care of the patients that would come in, applying bandages, filling eye drop bottles and applying medicine to people’s wounds. In the later stages of the first quarter, I decided that I was more interested in working with children and teaching them, so I contacted Mrs. Lantz who worked with African Children’s Learning Centre (FACLC) and my project for the year had been decided. FACLC is a Sudanese refugee school in Maadi which educates children of various ages, from elementary to middle school, for children who were forced to leave their countries of origin due to severe instability or conflict in their nations. The majority of the children are FACLC are Sudanese, but some are from other African nations bordering Egypt. I began volunteering at the site in January and have been volunteering there since. I would usually go there on Tuesdays to teach a group of seventh graders Math, but sometimes I would go on Saturdays as well, and we would focus on different subjects such as Social Studies or English. The children at the centre all had something in common: they were all willing to learn and they were all happy despite their status as refugees.

Even though I was supposed to be teaching the children at FACLC multiplication and division, sometimes I would find that I myself had learned some new things as well. For example, by the end of the year, one of my favourite girls there called Mallet, who is very bright and quick, proved to have learned multiplication so well that she had memorized them and was able to recite them even faster than me! Also, I learned a lot about the subject of service as well. Before beginning my project, I was expecting that teaching other kids math would be easy and simple. However, I learned that there are many obstacles to service such as the language barrier, the issue of focus of the students and also just the obstacle of being confident enough to approach a total stranger. The subject of service is about meeting new people, being put outside of your comfort zone, taking leadership and making important decisions. One example of when I had to make an important decision was when I arrived to Mrs. Lantz’ house expecting to start cooking one day, but when I walked into the house no one was in the kitchen except this one girl from FACLC who had come early as well called Darla. Usually, our cooking sessions at Mrs. Lantz’ house would start out with Mrs. Lantz waiting in the kitchen for us ready with the recipes and ingredients. However, this time, she was at home but a little late to meet us. As Darla and I waited, I realized that the recipe was sitting on the kitchen table and that I could use this time wisely. I picked up the recipe and asked Darla to read it, to help improve her English and as she slowly read it, I listened and guided her through it. After she had finished reading, I asked her if she had understood all the instructions and when she quickly nodded her head to signal ‘no,’ I began explaining the steps to her. Soon, when Mrs. Lantz entered the kitchen and other Sudanese girls came, I noticed that Darla knew exactly how to follow the recipe and it made me happy.

At the end of my time working with this project, I had a sudden realization that I felt like I was a better person than I was before I had started service learning. Of course, there is no way of defining a ‘good person’ because there are several characteristics that make up a good person, but I feel like I have grown both academically and personally. My communication skills have definitely improved because now I am more open to meeting new people and have learned to look past the social boundaries that divide our every-day society. The way I communicate has also grown in the sense that I have learned how to think like a teacher, and be more patient with people in general. I have also learned to stop relying on language and words to convey a message, and instead use symbols, drawings and body language to get a certain idea or subject across, especially with people who I have little in common with. Being exposed to many different environments, from a public cancer hospital to a clinic to a Sudanese refugee school, they are all environments that I usually would not be exposed to if I had not taken service learning. I learned about the importance of service learning and how it promotes compassion, charity, goodwill and awareness of the community and world outside the privileged, upper class bubble that we all live in. The children at FACLC had obviously faced suffering beyond imagining, as a lot of the girls told me stories about leaving their siblings behind or not seeing their parents for long periods of time, and seeing their smiles and excitement when I taught them different subjects was literally heart-warming. If they could be so willing to share and open up and learn, why couldn’t I do the same? This became a motivation for me to be more grateful and hard working. Every single moment of service was rewarding and enjoyable because I knew I was giving these children an opportunity they never had the chance to experience. It may not have paid in pounds, but the experience and pleasure I gained was infinitely more valuable to me than any amount of money I could have earned.

While I feel like I improved as a person, I also think that the CAC volunteers and I who worked at FACLC had a true impact on the students. Despite the fact that they might have been unfocused or confused sometimes, at the end of the day, the children we left at the centre always went home with something new they had learned that day. As every Tuesday went by, the math grew more and more advanced and the resources that Mrs. Lantz brought for the kids made a large effect as well. The centre itself is not equipped with much equipment and most of the seventh graders had thin textbooks and notebooks they carried around in their bags, but we would always bring colorful math cubes, textbooks, worksheets, pencils and erasers that would make teaching and learning for them a lot more interactive and enjoyable. The fact that each visit would get more and more difficult always seemed to excite the girl I would always teach called Mallet, and she was always eager for us to come because our activities made them want to challenge themselves and push them to learn. We were not the only ones who realized they were improving, because in the late second quarter we started ‘testing’ them at the end of every visit, to evaluate how much they had learned in the little time we spent with them every week. The cooking in the fourth quarter with the Sudanese girls also made an impact on them because it not only made them happier, but it also exposed them to food from different cultures and taught them new and simple recipes they could cook at home. The friendships I developed with some of the girls including Diana and Mallet were definitely rewarding as well and it made me glad that I met them, because by the end of my work with the project, we were laughing at jokes or hugging goodbye with genuine friendship.

It is difficult to finish a half year’s experience and say “I really did make a difference” without doubts being made because the time and resources we had made it difficult to make an impact on a large and obvious scale. Even though I did not fund a school or build homes for anyone, I feel like making a difference does not have to be something visible or tangible. Making a difference is about changing the lifestyle or quality of life a group of individuals receives, and I definitely feel like every one of the FACLC volunteers improved the lacking education each of the seventh graders had. Simple math and English skills are vital to function in modern society, and I can talk to most of the girls at FACLC with them giving me confident replies in English which shows the progress we have made in their language and communication skills. The larger issue influencing the problem was that most of these seventh graders were lacking the education that they are supposed to have at their age, and this was caused by their status as refugees and also by their social and economic status. Ultimately, this lack of education was caused by poverty and corruption on a large scale in their countries of origin, and it would be very difficult for us to tackle that directly. However, I still feel like my project tackled this lack of education on a smaller, but influential scale because I provided direct access to education. Next year, as new or further applications to improve this project, I think that I could start working on this project earlier in the year, and perhaps commit more time for fundraising to buy them new resources for their learning and to improve the FACLC centre itself.

In conclusion, this past school year of service has definitely made an impact in my education, and I am glad that I took this class because it educated me in ways that other classes could never teach me. Every time I would come back from two hours of service, I would feel happy because I had made a difference even if it were a small one. This sense of happiness always came from the fact that I knew that I had made people smile because of what I had done for them. And this sense of happiness is never lost. Even if service is optional, I believe that service should be mandatory in schools because it is rewarding and educating in a way that money or basic classroom education could never bring.

# Updated Action Plan:

**Target Problem:** The Sudanese 7th graders lack the necessary education in math and do not know their multiplication tables.

**Target Group:** Sudanese 7th graders, especially my student Mallet

**Project Title:** Teaching the children at the Sudanese African Children Learning Centre (FACLC)

**Goals**

**Goal 1:** Improve their English and communication skills, especially my student Mallet

**Goal 2:** Teach my student, Mallet her multiplication tables from 1 to 12 over a period of 5 months, specifically from January to May. My goal is specific, measurable (over five months), Achievable, Realistic and Timely.

**Obstacles**

* My student has a short attention span and is not always 100% committed to learning.
* Language barrier between my student and I
* Only spend two hours of teaching her Math, every week

**Tasks**

* Visit the FACLC more often or consistently, every Tuesday of the week
* Rely less on symbols, resources and body language and more on English speaking to communicate with them
* Keep them on task on learning the subject by making the learning experience more interesting or trying to isolate her from her friends

# SMART GOAL Sheet:

**To teach one 7th grader at the Found African Children’s Learning Center, Math specifically multiplication tables and improve their English speaking skills over a period of 5 months.**

Specific

It is specific because my goal was clear, simple and has a single focus. My goal was to teach **one** **7th grader the multiplication table and improve their English speaking skills for 5 months.**

Measurable

I know that I have achieved my goal, because my student can now say her multiplication factors forwards up to 144. I have also seen an improvement in her English speaking skills because her conversations with me are more fluent and understandable.

Achievable

It was something that I wanted to do. It was challenging for me because the language barrier made it difficult to teach her the multiplications table. Towards the end of the project, different languages was no longer a problem because her English speaking skills had improved and she knew her multiplication table really well.

Realistic

This goal was within my capability, and I had the resources that I needed to teach my student her multiplication table. The sacrifices that I had to make were 2 hours once a week to teach the multiplication tables to my student and engage in English conversation.

Timely

I had set a specific time limit as a deadline, as well as a specific number of hours I was willing to commit to achieve my goal. I had set my deadline to 5 months. I wanted my student to learn her multiplication tables and improve her English in 5 months; which she did.

# Journal Entry #1: Before Starting My Project

Soon I would be beginning my project at the African Children’s Learning Centre (FACLC) with Mrs. Lantz as the sponsor, and I was excited to begin volunteering there. I heard about it in service learning class, and contacted Mrs. Lantz who told me that we would be teaching Sudanese 7th graders, most of who were refugees, math on every Tuesday. During an earlier tour of many possible places in need of service with Ms. Mazhar, we were taken to the African Children’s Learning Centre and we were taken inside briefly, and I remember that it was an apartment-sized space in a residential building, with a couple rooms which were used as classrooms, and in the back, there was an open cement backyard with a tin roof over head. We had seen a couple of the children at the centre, but we didn’t have time to officially meet them, and they all stared at us foreigners and probably wondered as much about us as we did about them.

I didn’t know what to expect about volunteering at the centre and teaching the children. I knew that they would be a lot more behind in math then we were because they never received the education that we did, and I knew that a lot of them would speak a different language than English and that could cause problems. However, this was not the first time I was faced with these problems. In my old school, Mont Kiara International School in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, I was the president of a group called Helping Hands in middle school. We would basically visit this Burmese refugee school and teach them different subjects every week. They were a lot younger, from ages six to eight, compared to the seventh graders some of whom were older than me, but the obstacles were the same: there was a language barrier, not enough time every week to completely cover everything, and also the issue of focus. Even now, I admit that sometimes I lose focus in class, so I could imagine that this would be a problem for the children at FACLC as well. Despite all of this, I was ready for all of these obstacles because I wanted to help these children and I actually loved teaching or tutoring other children. I hope that next week when I volunteer at FACLC for the first time, it’ll be a fun experience and a rewarding one too.

# Journal Entry #2: First Day at FACLC

The car pulled up to a modest apartment building and Mrs. Lantz told all of us volunteers to grab something from the back of the car and carry it inside. I eagerly awaited the inside of the African Children’s Learning Centre and soon the dark wood door of an apartment opened to a smiling tall man called Peter Ramadan who managed the learning centre. The atmosphere of the learning centre was friendly but still a bit run-down and poor. The walls had scratches and picked off paint and the hallway of the centre connected to three other small classrooms. There was Peter Ramadan’s office in one corner and a small bathroom and ‘media’ room with one outdated computer but apart from those rooms, all the other rooms didn’t have doors so there was noise coming from all directions. The classroom for the seventh graders, the group of children we were going to teach, was cramped and filled with run-down wooden benches, a white board and dimming lights. The benches were crammed with the knobby knees of about thirty Sudanese seventh graders who were all staring up at us, the more privileged children who were going to teach them math. That first day of volunteering at the centre was an eye-opening experience because I kept comparing everything they had to everything I had which showed me how lucky and privileged I was to go to such a nice school and receive such high education compared to these children, most of them older than me but in a lower grade because they were so behind.

As we filled the room and squished onto the cramped benches with them, they all smiled and whispered and laughed in Arabic. Mrs. Lantz assigned us to groups of three or four people and we had to test them and find out how much math they knew. I was assigned to three Sudanese girls called Diana, Martha and Marca. I was a bit shy at first because I knew these girls didn’t speak very good English, and this would make it more difficult to teach them. They led me outside to a small cement backyard, which we walked to the back of to find scraps of wooden chairs and tables. Most of the furniture was broken, missing a leg or two. After we were all settled down, I brought out paper worksheets that had simple multiplication problems written on them like ‘1 x 2,’ ‘2 x 3,’ ‘4 x 5,’ and so on, each problem with larger and more difficult numbers up to twelve. I told them to try and finish them in English, and one of them, Marca looked confused and I realized she didn’t understand English very well. I took out a scrap piece of paper, copied one of the easiest problems and wrote the answer on my sheet, trying to explain how multiplication works to her with symbols and pictures. She seemed more confident and began solving the worksheet. I realized that this language barrier would prove to be a problem sometimes in teaching them, because they were fluent in a Sudanese dialect of Arabic, while I was fluent in English. Soon, the one and a half hours of being there was over, and all three girls had finished their worksheets correctly. We exchanged goodbyes, and I promised myself that I would return here next week because the children needed it so much more than I needed those hours to spend at home doing homework.

# Journal Entry #3: Meeting Mallet

Today was my third time volunteering at FACLC, and I met this Ethiopian girl who I had an automatic bond with. It is a Tuesday, so we were teaching Math and Mrs. Lantz had just instructed us to find one person to teach math to one-on-on because today there were a lot of other volunteers from CAC. As all of us visitors walked to the cement backyard, I saw this girl who looked around my age who was talking to all these other children and laughing really loudly. Diana from my first visit, waved to me and I walked over to her, but she already had a partner so I began talking to the girl next to her who I saw earlier. Her name was Mallet and she told me she was Ethiopian and she spoke good English. Even though she was not Sudanese she was still at the centre because she was an Ethiopian refugee. Mallet is very happy, kind of cheeky but very cute and friendly, and from that point on, we became friends. We sat down to complete these new worksheets which involved filling in a table of times tables, with rows labeled one to twelve, and columns labeled one to twelve. After a few minutes of explaining this to Mallet, she began working hard at the table, and soon she was finishing the table faster than me! I was pleasantly shocked at her intelligence and it was amazing but sad to realize that here this girl was, working so hard and with so much intelligence, but she wasn’t receiving the education that she deserved. She loved learning and she was hungry to learn new things, but she wasn’t lucky enough to receive the learning and the resources that I was getting, but she deserved it as much as any other child in the world. It made me sad and more motivated to continue visiting Mallet at the centre to teach her new things, and it made me personally motivated to be more grateful and as diligent as Mallet is.

Later on, Mrs. Lantz walked by as I was teaching Mallet and told me that Mallet’s older brother had advanced on to another African refugee school in Cairo and had actually received a scholarship to study at a university in the United States! Mallet looked up, smiled with her mouth and her eyes, and told me that she was going to follow her brother’s footsteps. She also told me that she was going to make sure that her younger siblings went to FACLC next year so they could learn the same things she would be learning. Those words she said were so inspiring that I realized that the hours and commitment I was putting into this service was really worth it all. At the end of the visit, I gave Mallet a hug, and she made me promise I would visit her next Tuesday.

# Journal Entry #4: Last Few Days

The fourth quarter is half way through, and now I feel like I have dedicated a lot of time and effort teaching the Sudanese seventh graders at FACLC not only regular math and multiplication, but also improving their English. Upon returning to school after spring break, I had a few hours left to complete as long as I continued visiting the centre every Tuesday. However, FACLC had decided to close for summer one month early due to the elections in Cairo.

To make more time for the other CAC students who had been volunteering at FACLC, Mrs. Lantz decided to invite the Sudanese girls to her house for cooking while the Sudanese boys played football in CAC. I loved cooking so I was happy to hear about this, and I went to Mrs. Lantz’ house about three times in a week, and after a while I felt like my friendship or acquaintance with the Sudanese girls had grown. We would cook different recipes every time we met, and on one of the days, Mrs. Lantz asked me to bring a recipe for this Malaysian fried rice recipe. The next day, I brought the recipe, and all the girls gathered in the kitchen and cooked together, all of us gathering around the stoves and the tables, hip to hip, chopping up vegetables, frying eggs and seasoning the food. Afterwards, we all shared the hot food and copied down the recipe in English to help the Sudanese girls improve their writing and understanding. It was a lot of fun and we helped them learn new cultures through cooking, and helped them understand English better, creating a fun learning experience.

Since this is my last journal entry, I would say that this year of service learning was definitely rewarding, but it also provided difficulties as it required me to adapt my hectic schedule and dedicate hours every week. I started my project in the second quarter so it took me some time to adjust myself with service learning and understand it, but the months of service learning that went by after the first quarter were a great, self-satisfying experience that I will never regret and hope to continue next year. I not only learned about the lives and the education of other more unfortunate children than myself, but I have also learned about myself and about being a teacher. The children I was lucky enough to meet at FACLC all brought bright smiles to the school every time I came to teach them, but they never complained or spoke of anything else they were going through and this was what struck me the most. While I taught children like Mallet math, they taught me important values like hard work, gratefulness and kindness which are values that cannot always be taught in a classroom. Next year I hope to continue working with Mrs. Lantz who is a very respectable and dedicated woman, and I hope that next year I am able to see the same bright smiles I saw at my first day at FACLC. Service learning this year has also inspired to work as a doctor or as some job in the United Nations, because I want to see people smile because of what I have done to help them.  
Disability Research: Autism

## History and Research

* Up until 60 years ago, scientists referred to those with autism as “idiots,” “imbeciles” and “cretins,” and some thought they were insane and threw them into mental asylums
* Then, in the 1940s, two scientists who worked with these children recognized that a group of children shared certain behaviors that set them apart from the rest. These children showed an inability to form relationships with others.
* Today, scientists have found no cure for this medical disorder, but there are some treatments that help reduce symptoms.
* Only in the last decade has real progress been made to understand autism, now some receive special services:
* education through public or private schools
* additional services exist in the community to assist those who want to go to college, a job and independent living.
* Today, no physical symptoms have been found, look the same as non-autistic people, not a disease.

## What is Autism?

* Autism is the third most common developmental disorder after mental retardation and cerebral palsy, and is more common than childhood cancer, diabetes or Down syndrome.
* “Pervasive developmental disorder” (PDD): “a general category of disorders which are characterized by severe and pervasive impairment in several areas of development.” (APA)
* Formal Definition: “a brain disorder that affects a person’s ability to communicate, form relationships with others, and respond appropriately to the environment. Some people with autism are relatively high functioning, with speech and intelligence intact. Others are mentally retarded, mute or have serious language delays. For some autism makes them seem closed off/shut down, others seem locked off into repetitive behaviors (self-stimulation) and rigid patterns of thinking.”
* Most autistic people will never marry, learn to speak, have a job or live without their parents.
* Some autistics with less severe forms of autism, called Asperger’s syndrome, have a better future.
* Two of every thousand children born today will be diagnosed with autism.
* Four to five times more likely to affect boys than girls.
* Half a million children and adults in the U.S. are affected by it.
* About one-third of autistic children experience seizures, ranging from blackouts to full-blown body convulsions.
* Autism is a complex disorder and one that is sometimes accompanied by other nervous system disorders.
* Most autistic children (70%) are considered mentally retarded, scoring below average on IQ tests, about 20% have normal IQ, and 10% score higher than average.
* In rare cases, autistic individuals have amazing abilities in areas such as math, music or drawing, they’re called “idiot savants.”
* The chance of autism occurring in a family is not related to race, income, ethnicity, lifestyle or educational background. Autistic children don’t come from a family history of mental illness.

## Symptoms

* 3 features that distinguish autistic children from schizophrenic children:

1. social isolation (withdrawal)
2. insistence on sameness
3. abnormal language

* “Autism” is a word that means a kind of loneliness because from early childhood, there is an extreme aloneness that, whenever possible, ignores, shuts out anything that come to the child from outside.
* A diagnosis is made within first 3-4 years of a child’s life, when their development is abnormal
* Early Symptoms:
* Avoid eye contact, responding to their names
* Do not understand sympathy, facial expressions, social cues, tones of voice
* When angry, frustrated, faced with stranger or overwhelming places, use aggressive physical behavior
* Shrink away from touch instead of wanting it, dislike human contact
* May not even be able to distinguish between parents and strangers
* Unable to make friends
* Cannot begin/keep conversations with others
* Repetitive, unusual, sudden use of language
* Repetitive behaviors and obsessions
* Interested in a few activities, interest in that subject will be unusually intense
* Inflexible of daily routines, must be done same way/time every time
* Preoccupied with parts of an object, rather than the whole

# Photos:



Above: Cooking with the girls at Mrs. Lantz’ house

Above: One of the classrooms of FACLC



Above: the cement backyard where we taught out students different subjects

Above: Me (right) teaching a 7th grade with colorful math cubes

Diana and Mallet being their happy selves as usual.

Above, from left to right: Diana, and my student Mallet!