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Finding the Host in the Pedagogic Experience in Volunteer Tourism

Solene Prince

Mid-Sweden University College

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Title: Finding the Host in the Pedagogic Experience in Volunteer Tourism

Author:

Solene Prince
Mid-Sweden University College

Abstract:

The pedagogical dimension of volunteer tourism is often used to position volunteering as an alternative form of tourism. Many researchers seeking to understand the expansion and benefits of volunteer tourism have approached the practice through the frameworks of transformative learning and global citizenship education. Under this light, volunteer tourism has the potential to transform the volunteer into a more critical and reflexive individual, hopefully contributing to a more tolerant global community and into the latter's participation in social movements. These forms of education have been criticized by pedagogy and tourism scholars alike as they reproduce an elitist neoliberal system which positions the needs and desires of volunteers before those of host-community members. This presentation outlines, in a first instance, the circumstances under which volunteer and education programs, with seemingly good intentions, can turn a community into a tool to foster global citizenship amongst international volunteers, interns and students. The case of Sólheimar eco-village, Iceland, is used to demonstrate this point. While it is observed that the needs of volunteers are often prioritized through the work of intermediaries, the community members of the eco-village are nonetheless significant actors in the transformative education process of these volunteers. The ability of community-members to provoke reflection amongst volunteers over their complex position as members (albeit transient) of an eco-village represents a form of learning based in critical thinking of significance to transformational learning and global citizenship. I ultimately argue that community issues related to hosting volunteers should be approached and resolved beyond management-based solutions in order to avoid fixing the meaning of transformative learning and global citizenship in ways that reproduce volunteer-centric discourses. When complex community matters are not perceived as material to foster a dialogue based in the stories, aspirations and worries of the host during volunteer tourism, but rather seen as inconveniences to solve with managerial practices, the guest's needs and desires remain the focal issues. Rather, these community issues should be the basis of the learning experiences of the guests.
