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Teaching Accompaniment:
A Learning Journey Together

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ABSTRACT

Engaging in a complicated world to bring about positive change is challenging. Students often view themselves as either optimistic changemakers helping the "needy" or, conversely, recognize their own privilege and complicity in the world's problems as sophisticated pessimists. Both framings are problematic. Reflecting on his own fraught experiences trying to "help poor children" at a small orphanage in Chile in the early 1980s, the author explores the concept of "accompaniment"—walking together with others—as a constructive framing to move beyond this problematic duality. Drawing on the insights of Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez, Dr. Paul Farmer, and Ophelia Dahl, he explores how accompaniment informs their work. Reflecting on one's own experiences of being well-accompanied opens up new ways of understanding how one might engage in a complicated world. The paper proposes that teaching about accompaniment in the classroom might also model ways to engage in a complex world.

KEYWORDS

Change, Development, Experiential Learning, Gustavo Gutierrez, Paul Farmer, Pedagogy, Theory-to-Practice

INTRODUCTION

When I was 23 years old, I went to South America for the first time. I planned to volunteer at a small orphanage in Santiago, Chile. I studied philosophy at the University of Notre Dame, giving me a solid classical education and no preparation for my ambitious plans to change the world — or at least the lives of the children at the orphanage. It was 1982, and I knew little of Chile's military government and the upended political and economic situation I was about to enter. My Spanish was terrible.

Those limitations, though, in no way tempered my vision of the many plans I had to improve the lives of the 13 children I would soon meet at the *Domingo Savio* orphanage, located in a poor neighborhood on the outskirts of Santiago. Shortly after arriving there, I lined them up and, in my broken Spanish, explained how not only was I going to live with them but that we were also going to work together, joyously, to create a family farm. "*Ustedes estar feliz,*" I told them in my broken Spanish. "*You to be happy*." The kids looked on quizzically. Most were under eight years old.

I exuded an earnestness that was enormously well-intentioned; in retrospect, embarrassingly so. Truth be told, I did not have a clue about the challenges Chile was facing, the ordeals these kids had endured, or what I was doing.

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About three months after I arrived, toiling with a less-than-enthusiastic group of kids in the hot Santiago summer to launch my vision of a family farm to improve everyone's lives, I became ill, very ill. I landed in bed with a fever that climbed higher each day and learned I had para-typhus. I stayed in bed for more than three weeks except for going to the bathroom.

The people I had so earnestly come to serve (and whose lives I had imagined transforming) had to take care of me. I wept, partly from the illness, but mostly out of frustration at how little the vision of me sick in bed resembled the one in my head of an autonomous *me* helping the needy *them.* That equation had been flipped.

Though they had few material resources, everyone at *Domingo Savio* — adults and children — cared for me with incredible grace. A month or so later, having been tended by a doctor and generously provided with medicine (bought with money I still do not know the source of), chastened and humbled, I began re-evaluating many things. One was my assumptions about how we think about "helping the poor," one version of which is called "international development."

Many years later, I wrote a book called Santiago's Children: What I Learned about Life at an Orphanage in Chile about my two years living at *Domingo Savio* and based on journals I kept. In many ways, it was a cautionary tale of the many things that can go wrong from misguided good intentions. At the same time, I also learned that children can be incredibly resilient, especially when given structure and love; that repression, unemployment, and illness all undermine one's sense of inherent human dignity; that U.S. policies reverberate around the world and can dramatically impact national policies that impact people who have no interest in politics; and that maybe, just maybe, it was not so bad to have big dreams, even if they fell short, as clearly they did in my case.

Even when the book was published in 2008, more than 25 years after I landed at the orphanage, I still did not have the precise language to describe what I learned in Chile. Over the past years, I have realized that the word is *accompaniment — the working and walking with others, not bestowing charity on them*.

Haltingly, tentatively, at first, I realized that one of the central things I learned in Chile was how well I had been accompanied and, as such, transformed. When I most required it, the people of *Domingo Savio* were at my side: hailing a doctor, scrounging up the resources to buy the medicine I desperately needed, and nursing me through my illness. They did not see their caring for me as a grand gesture of generosity; they simply did, in the moment, what needed to be done. But it was not only when I was sick that they accompanied me. They accompanied me — especially the kids — as they taught me Spanish and helped me understand the complexities and nuances of their lives and the possibilities for finding some paths forward, which we began to work on together.

Even though I had landed on their doorstep with plans to be "their helper," they accompanied me, and during those first two years and the many intervening ones, I think I have learned – and am still learning– to accompany them as well. For all my mistakes, something worked well in our time together, and a little like the character in Moliere who discovered to his astonishment that he had been speaking prose all his life, I have realized that we have been on a journey accompanying one another for a long time.

Now, more than 40 years later, *Domingo Savio* and the people associated with it remain a central part of my life. I remain connected to the "kids," who now have their own families, and to *Domingo Savio,* which is still located in the same house (though it is no longer a residential orphanage but a neighborhood center working with — might I say *accompanying* — local kids and their families). My life has been enriched through those relationships, and the concept of accompaniment has given me a new lens to understand my teaching and global development work.

A THEORY OF ACCOMPANIMENT

I returned to Notre Dame a decade ago to teach global development, explicitly emphasizing international health and educational systems. Over time, I have found that the concept of accompaniment primarily influences my work and teaching.

Three people, in particular, have helped me understand the importance of accompaniment: Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez, Paul Farmer, and Ophelia Dahl. These three and many other wonderful friends and colleagues came together at the University of Notre Dame's Kellogg Institute for International Studies for a series of workshops beginning nearly a decade ago that explored how accompaniment relates to individual relations and the work of international organizations and global health. The workshops included many Notre Dame colleagues and professionals connected with Partners In Health (PIH), including co-founders Farmer and Dahl, who see accompaniment at the center of their global work. Sadly, Farmer, who did so much to promote the idea of accompaniment in his global health work, passed away unexpectedly in February 2022.

Several ideas from those conversations have stayed with me. On the theological side, I was struck by how every major religious tradition, including Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, and Christianity, has as a central concern of connecting our lives with those who are downtrodden, the victim, the widow, the orphan, and the poor. The admonition is consistent across all traditions: Look beyond your immediate concerns; show compassion and accompany one another.

Catholic social teaching, particularly liberation theology, has engaged deeply with the importance of accompaniment. Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez, often referred to as the "father of liberation theology" and at the time who was spending half his time in his native Peru and half his time at Notre Dame, placed great emphasis on accompaniment and linked it strongly with solidarity and compassion.

"Solidarity with the poor means not to try to be the voice of the voiceless," Gutiérrez (2016) said at the workshop. "This is NOT the goal. The goal should be that those who have no voice today will have a voice and will be heard."

Solidarity is about our relationship with the other, and through the practice of accompaniment, we make it real and move it forward. "To accompany is to help the person take their own destiny in their hands and allow that their voice is heard," Gutiérrez (2016) said. "Some people are happy only if they are helping," he added, with a note of caution in his voice. "This is a question of friendship - you must learn to be beside, walking *with* another person." It is a reciprocal relationship. One cannot accompany without being accompanied; in the same way, someone cannot be a good friend without being open to friendship. This requires a great deal of humility. Not only is it important to walk together with somebody, but one must also learn how to be accompanied – to participate in the reciprocity of accompaniment.

Gutiérrez also saw compassion as a critical part of accompaniment. "The word compassion is very beautiful," Gutiérrez (2016) said. "Compassion is not only to suffer for the other, but it is also to be in sympathy with another." It means to be close to the other, to accompany the other.

Gutiérrez's work has profoundly influenced PIH's Farmer, and together they produced an inspiring volume of conversations about life, liberation, and the call to accompany the poor, titled "In the Company of the Poor" (Griffin & Weiss, 2013). In their dialogues at Notre Dame, they agreed that theology and global health must be animated by "accompaniment in action." Accompaniment is a theological concept that has reverberations in the secular arena.

"Accompaniment is an elastic term. It has a basic, everyday meaning," Farmer (2011) wrote in an article on accompaniment published in Foreign Affairs. "To accompany someone is to go somewhere with him or her, to break bread together, to be present on a journey with a beginning and an end. There is an element of mystery, of openness, of trust, in accompaniment. The companion, the accompagnateur, says: "I'll go with you and support you on your journey wherever it leads; I'll share your fate for a while. And by 'a while,' I don't mean a little while." Accompaniment is about

sticking with a task until it is deemed completed, not by the accompagnateur but by the person being accompanied.

Accompaniment reframes the idea that we are working to help people "over there," in recognition of the fact that "over there" and "here" are intertwined. The beauty of using accompaniment is in blurring the lines between us and them, doctor and patient, donor and recipient, expert and novice. Instead, we are partners, walking together toward a better future.

"One of the joys of having accompaniment as a central part of PIH's mission," said Dahl, a leader at PIH since its earliest days, "is being forced to explain accompaniment. It is not easy work explaining that community health workers are more than just community health workers… not just people with technical roles in the health system, but *accompagnateurs* … they are part of a new social movement that is profoundly transformational."

"I think the work you are doing at PIH is great, but is your model sustainable?" a student asked Dahl during a visit to my class at Notre Dame. It is an important question — one that anyone working in development should be asking, right?

Dahl wondered aloud whether we sometimes use concepts like "sustainable" or "cost-effectiveness" as cop-outs for not doing the hard work of accompanying one another.

"If a single mother were sitting here," Dahl said, "you could easily ask her the same question. Is the path she is on sustainable? I imagine she'd give you an answer something like, 'I don't know how it will be *sustainable*, but I'll take care of my child. I don't have all the answers, but I'll do whatever it takes.'"

So maybe accompaniment is partly to do *whatever it takes* (PIH's informal motto) and walking together, working together, and discovering the path — a path that will be sustained over time — together.

ACCOMPANIMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The concept of accompaniment serves as a kind of North Star in terms of the substance of *what* I teach and *how* I teach. It also points toward purpose, the *why*. Accompaniment can facilitate a return to the core purpose of the educational endeavor, aligning with the joy and pursuit of lifelong learning as part of a learning journey together.

Many college students are passionate about the topic of development. Most of my undergraduate students have had many more opportunities to engage in the world than before I went to Chile at age 23. Whether through family, school, service, or religious organizations, many have traveled internationally — often to Africa, Asia, and Latin America — even before they arrive in college, and they have even more opportunities during their college years. Their wide-ranging experiences have significantly impacted them, and they bring various perspectives to their classes. At one end of the spectrum are the *earnest world changers*. These students have often already created their non-profit organizations and written about their service organizations in college application essays. Their earnestness is sometimes associated with an ambition for self-realization: I am creating something that helps others and recognizes me.

On the other end of the spectrum are *sophisticated pessimists*. They have read anthropologists and economists who explore the perils of development, engaging literature like Dambisa Moyo's *Dead Aid* and William Easterly's *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good*. These students can mobilize data to demonstrate that much of international development, especially in Africa, has not only been ineffectual but often has made things worse by creating perverse incentives and unintended consequences, including corruption, all under the name of humanitarianism. These students consider themselves rigorous and critical thinkers. Dismantling the "white savior complex," along with their own complicity and privilege, they are skeptical about development being able to make significant positive contributions to the world.

These are stereotypes, caricatures to be sure, but there is still something to them. Notre Dame is a Catholic University with a strong service and social justice ethos. However, over the last decade teaching here, I find more students moving from the first category (earnest world changers) into the second (focusing on their privilege and complicity).

In both cases, I sometimes struggle with how best to engage them in a learning process, acknowledging that any attempt to bring about meaningful, positive societal change needs to be made thoughtfully, respectfully, and collaboratively, reflecting how Johnson et al. (2007) show the benefits of social interdependence and cooperative learning on students and faculty. In addressing critical issues of poverty and poor health, systemic racism and inequality, lack of education, and environmental degradation, one risk is becoming arrogant and self-important in our efforts to help the unfortunate poor. The other risk is believing that things can never change for the better, an attitude nearly certain to be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

"To not be optimistic is just about the most privileged thing you can be," Dahl shared with my development class on another occasion. "If you can be pessimistic, you are basically deciding that there's no hope for a whole group of people who can't afford to think that way."

This is where the framework of accompaniment is so constructive. It helps provide a path forward, usefully informing both ends of the spectrum, from the earnest world chargers to the sophisticated pessimists. In the accompaniment model, we are in this together; we are implicated as partners in the mix, sharing in the complexity and chaos of each other's lives.

As a result, when challenges occur, as they always do, walking together makes you less likely to be arrogant and think you have all the solutions. You are also more likely to be connected with the real lives of real people, and motivated to figure out together something that moves the relationship forward. Accompaniment inverts the impulse of "how do we help them?" into an assertion of "we're in this together." We are connected, tied, and bound together. We need to walk together and learn together; and maybe, together, envision and create something better.

ACCOMPANIMENT IN THE CLASSROOM

In recent years, I have realized that accompaniment provides a bridge to link theory and practice of what is effective – what "works" -- in development. You are closer to the people and genuine problems, grounded in relationships with others, putting the educational experience in a new perspective (Lederach, 1995).

Considering accompaniment in the classroom context raises questions about tensions brought to the accompaniment relationship by inequalities of background, luck, resources, expertise, and privilege. What happens when one is rich and another poor? Doesn't that bring an uneven quality to this partnership of walking together? How does one bridge the gap in the unequal relationship between the "giver" and "receiver"? What if one is an expert, for example, and the other not? Where does one even start?

Instances of accompaniment in practice give insight into some of these questions. A good physical therapist, for example, brings resources and expertise to the relationship working with you, but cannot get very far without your engagement. A good physical therapist needs to help you get to a different place, encouraging you to do as much as you can at the time you can do it. Experience suggests how fast or slow that process might be. There needs to be listening as well as advice, addressing and strategizing how to overcome obstacles, confronting setbacks, and sometimes even prods and cajoles, with the hope and the expectation that the relationship will not be static. The physical therapist hopes you will learn to do as much as you can, accommodating at times a reality that everything might not be the same as it was in the past –a hip or knee or back may no longer work the same way it once did. A physical therapist uses all the skills, talents, and experience she has to engage and allow the highest realization of your potential. It is also the recognition that sometimes, the spine or limb may be so

severely damaged that you will not walk unaided again, and part of the accompaniment is adapting to the new reality in whatever ways are necessary, for as long as necessary.

In the global development context, accompaniment pushes us to ask questions on institutional and policy levels that are often not raised, as Gardner and Sedky (2014) suggested: Does foreign aid favor institutions that the poor identify as representing their interest? Fund and help strengthen public institutions to do their jobs? Focus on the aid actually reaching people in the field? Give the maximum decision making capacity to local leaders? Apply evidence-based solutions that provide the best outcomes? Engaging in serious dialogue on these questions, and questioning existing assumptions, is the first step to changing the dynamic. Accompaniment provides a rich framework to teach and to realize these substantive dimensions of international development.

BUILDING A THEORY OF ACCOMPANIMENT

Accompaniment also informs the model of *how* one teaches. Exploring experiences of accompaniment is a powerful tool to inform thinking about big questions in global development, as well as personal experiences in our lives. Most everyone has had a positive experience of accompaniment. Even though it may be challenging to put in words, we know what it feels like to be accompanied well; when we were ill, when things were difficult in our lives, when we wondered how we were going to get out of this mess, and someone was present and walked with us, and helped us arrive at a different place.

I ask my students: "Think of a specific example when you felt you were accompanied well. It might have been by a family member, teacher, friend, coach, or mentor. Write down that specific experience. What were the circumstances? What did the other person do? What did that experience feel like?"

I have found that people are often enthusiastic about sharing such experiences — their personal experience of an illness and someone who stayed at their bedside; their struggles with a decision and a friend patiently listened; or when a loved one died, and a friend checked in every day for as long as it was needed.

Once they have shared their accompaniment experience, I ask that they go a step further: "What were the *qualities* of your experience of being well accompanied?"

People often invoke qualities of compassion, respect, dignity, and justice. They often say things like: I felt supported; I had someone with whom I could process all I was going through; she gave me hope; I realized I could fight back; I felt listened to and understood; I realized there were things I might do to change my situation; I felt loved; I came to see that some of those trite clichés — *every cloud has a silver lining* — might be true; and, simply, I knew I was not alone.

Some people usefully focus more on what it is *not*: accompaniment does not involve being patronized, having one's autonomy taken away, or diminishing one's sense of dignity. It does not mean another person takes over your life. A common theme is: "The person accompanying me did not make me feel less in the relationship." Like the concepts of dignity or justice, accompaniment can be complex to define, but it is not difficult to see where it is absent just like dignity and justice.

It is a natural step to then take some of those principles of being well accompanied in a personal relationship and explore how those same ideas play out in institutional and policy arenas.

EXPERIENCES OF ACCOMPANIMENT

Just as we have all been accompanied, we have all had the experience of trying to accompany another, whether a friend in need, a colleague, a sick child, or a dying parent. Accompaniment does not necessarily mean solving the other person's problem and, in fact, in some cases, as in accompanying someone who is terminally ill, there is no "solution." Some spiritual traditions, such as Tibetan Buddhism, hold that the highest art and highest blessing, arguably the most important thing a human being can do, is to accompany another person who is dying and to do it well.

Sogyal Rinpoche (1992, p. 183) writes in *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, "Sometimes I think there could be no more effective way of speeding up our growth as human beings than working with the dying. Caring for the dying is itself a deep contemplation and reflection on your own death. It is a way to face and work with it. When you work with the dying, you can come to a kind of resolution, a clear understanding of what is the most important focus of life."

In the summer of 2011, as my father was dying of cancer, my three brothers, my sister, and I were all trying to be present for him and for my mother who was caring for him, and to accompany him as best we could.

With great clarity, I remember sitting in our family's living room with him on a hot June afternoon, and he asked me if there was anything unresolved that we should talk about before he died.

He told me that some important things had been left unsaid for him with his father and he did not want that to be the case with any of his kids. So, he invited each of us into a conversation at different times. I could honestly say to him that there was not anything unresolved that we needed to discuss. So just as we were all trying to do our best to accompany him as he lay dying, I had to be in awe of how much of a better job he was doing of accompanying us.

Perhaps accompanying the dying helps you understand what is most important about living.

Accompaniment is a path to deeper understanding, the implications of which could not be foreseen at the outset of the journey together. Our task is to walk with someone, supporting a dignified life and, when it is time, accompanying someone in a dignified death. Taking seriously the opportunity to accompany people at the end of their lives does not mean we should be willing to accept deaths worldwide that are preventable.

"The majority of premature deaths are, as the Haitians would say, 'stupid deaths,'" wrote Farmer (2005, p. 144) in Pathologies of Power. "They are completely preventable with the tools already available to the fortunate few. [T]hese deaths are a great injustice and a stain on the conscience of modern medicine and science. Why, then, are these premature deaths not the primary object of discussion and debate within our professional circles?"

A PEDAGOGY OF ACCOMPANIMENT

It is a surprise to me that I find myself as a teacher at all. My very first attempt at teaching was pretty much a disaster. Just out of college in 1981, I had never stood in front of a classroom when I started as a full-time teacher at the Abbey School, an all-boys Benedictine high school in Canon City, Colorado. At the end of one period of my first day of classes, I asked if there were questions about my (extremely detailed) syllabus. The single question was from a sophomore: "Steve, are you old enough to buy us beer?" I soon realized not only that students were not interested in what I was planning to teach (religion, literature, and social studies), but I was woefully unprepared to teach them. Maintaining order was my first order of business and consumed most of my energy. I would literally make mean faces in the mirror each morning before I went to school. Whenever I let down my guard, chaos ensued.

I imagined that a good teacher would be in control and should be the expert. I tried to rigidly control and be in control, and I felt myself incredibly inadequate, expert in nothing. I tried even harder to be that expert and have the answer to every question that arose. I came to class daily with lots of information I pushed out on them. I mainly managed the class by keeping them extraordinarily busy, with daily reading quizzes, lots of assignments, and always lots of structured things to do. I finished my first year of teaching in May, exhausted, and figured there was at least one benefit for this incredibly tough year; now, I knew I would never be a teacher. At least I could cross that idea off the what-to-do-with-my-life list.

Fast forward 40 years. I have now worked for the last 30 years within educational institutions on international topics; and, in the past decade, without a doubt, my greatest professional satisfaction and joy has been that I am a teacher. What happened?

I think I let go of the idea that an excellent teacher stands up in front of the class as the expert with all the answers. I have grown increasingly convinced that the best teachers have important and interesting questions and engage students in a journey together, accompanying students to help formulate their questions and expand students' capacities to tackle challenging questions themselves. In scaffolding, the learning is shared rather than top-down, enabling the performance of a task more complex than the learner could handle alone (Reiser & Tabak, 2014). They bring their experience and backgrounds to the classroom, helping build community, connection, and purpose.

There is a lot of evidence that students learn best when addressing questions they care about, and I have begun to build my courses around that insight. I have taken it as far as co-creating new classes with groups of undergraduates and then co-teaching together with them. As management expert Peter Drucker wrote, "[n]o one learns as much about a subject as one who is forced to teach it."

I invite students who have had a class with me before to apply to participate in a new class by describing why they want to take a co-created development course. Second, I ask them to describe one question they are interested in exploring in-depth and are willing to teach a class on it.

While these applications frame areas of interest, I have to admit it can be a little terrifying, especially for the instructor, to have a syllabus that is about 75% blank on the first day of class. For the first three weeks, we worked together to define learning goals, explore models for effective teaching, and organize the course syllabus for the semester. Students commit to lead one class, and related ideas are grouped in modules of three or four students who work to develop learning goals for the modules that link the individual classes. We negotiate the sequence of courses, and students select readings and assignments. These co-created classes are among the most energized I have ever seen in my experience (Patall et al., 2010).

Today I can describe this pedagogy with a language – *co-creation and accompaniment* – that was not part of my vocabulary a few years ago. While I might have more experience than the students and serve as an essential facilitator, the learning process is truly a joint one, with us accompanying one another.

This language of accompaniment has transformed how I approach teaching. Almost all of my classes now have teams of students working with real-world partners on challenges their organizations have identified. We also explore how the teams of students might best work together — accompanying one another. The concept of accompaniment provides a foundational lens for how students might work together, co-creating opportunities with their partners to reimagine what is possible and how they might best accompany the people and communities their partner organizations aspire to serve.

A PATH FORWARD FOR LEARNING AND TEACHING

Good teachers are usually good learners. They are curious, open to new ways of thinking, and enthusiastic about sharing those insights with others. Good teachers are good *accompagnateurs*. The walking together of teacher and student, the interconnected loops of teaching and learning, are paths to help get somewhere new and exciting. What good teacher has not had the amazing experience of being taught and transformed by their students?

Accompaniment is, in some ways, like teaching. It is a practice. By being aware of what you are trying to do, engaging in it, and reflecting on experiences of it — both accompanying and being accompanied — you get better. Like teaching, swimming, and learning a new language, with accompaniment, you improve by striving to be more aware and practicing.

Furthermore, the qualities of accompaniment can constantly inform one's educational and professional efforts. These include *committing to reciprocity* by focusing on the "two-wayness" of learning, *creating agency* by seeing teaching as a platform for students to gain traction in their learning journeys, and *catalyzing curiosity* through co-creating the learning agenda with students (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018).

Just as there are many different ways to teach well, there are many different ways to accompany well. One of the first is greater awareness of one's experiences of being well accompanied. In my case, the two experiences that draw immediately into focus for me are when I was tended to during my illness at *Domingo Savio* in Santiago and when I spent precious time with my father, as he was sick and dying.

Real inspiration comes from the individual experiences of accompaniment that link to ways of engagement on broader educational, organizational, and policy levels. Drawing from personal experiences gives new meaning to the possibility of engaging in a complicated world — to help someone else discover and tell their own story; to walk together with others in the search of new, better paths forward; and to broaden an awareness of the multiplicity of ways to accompany others well.

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