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## **Towards a critical pedagogy for International Service-Learning**

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### **Background**

A multitude of organisations offer young people from the North (developed world) volunteering opportunities in the South (developing world). A cursory review reveals complex overlapping agendas, providing an indication of the broad range of outcomes anticipated from this activity. Substantial anecdotal evidence of the transformative nature of an overseas experience belies a paucity of research into the exact nature of any learning that takes place. Such learning is uncritically believed to cover a range of forms, from inter cultural competence, language skills, personal development and skills of self reliance to a deeper understanding of global problems related to their academic study.

An appreciation that the anticipated outcomes for young people do not automatically result from time spent overseas has driven calls for regulation of the international volunteering sector in the UK. Furthermore, organisations have been accused of operating without reflection on their impact and the experience they offer young people and more explicitly of exploiting the communities they seek to serve. In 1990, a Charity at Liverpool Hope University (LHU) was formed out of a desire to support resource poor communities overseas. Over the last 20 years, more than 200 students have participated in these International Service-Learning (ISL) projects (Bamber et al, 2008) and are the focus of this study.

### **Research Questions**

This paper presents findings from an ethnographic study which reveals two related aspects of the phenomenon of ISL: how students in Higher Education describe and make sense of their experience of ISL, and how the students who choose to participate in ISL describe themselves.

The paper describes the experience of ISL from the student's perspective at LHU: their motivations for undertaking ISL, the experiences overseas they identify as being significant and the ongoing impact of their short term international volunteering placement. These data illuminate the potential for learning through ISL: both 'what' it is possible for students to learn and 'how' the students investigated here experience learning within this particular context.

The implications of this research for providers of ISL and other international volunteering opportunities is then explored; the paper asks, for example, how ISL relates to associated, and more established, pedagogical approaches such as education for global citizenship. Recommendations for the development of a critical pedagogy of ISL are provided.

### **Methods**

This study aims to gain a 'grasp of the very nature' (Van Manen, 1990: 177) of an ISL experience for students. This will support educators to identify potential learning outcomes from ISL and features of the learning process in this context. The paper draws on two phases of data collection. The first phase aimed to capture a description of the ongoing nature of this experience, through semi structured interviews conducted with seven students who completed ISL up to 18 years ago. The second phase comprised structured interviews with all sixteen students who undertook projects in a range of locations in 2008. This study also draws upon the authors own personal experience on short term ISL projects in Africa and Indian sub continent and his work with Voluntary Service Overseas in Papua New Guinea.

An explicit critical ethnographic stance has been taken to examine the culture and patterns of behaviour of students. This includes a discussion of the social, cultural and political context in which ISL operates in this context. For example, through an exploration of the ways in which participants make sense of their overseas experience exposes the power relationships underpinning this approach to ISL. Critical discourse analysis was used to connect the data collected with social events, practices and structures. This paper considers not only 'what is' but also 'what could be' (Madison, 2005: 5) leading to suggested developments for ISL providers and future research into ISL.

## **Frame**

An emergent body of literature differentiates traditional notions of service-learning that emphasise voluntarism and charity, from critical service-learning that adopts an explicit social justice aim. The latter reflects a radical approach to education reminiscent of Freire's theory of conscientization (1970) and notion of critical consciousness whereby learners take reflective action to transform power imbalances. This study draws on transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991) to construct a conceptual framework for understanding how ISL raises fundamental questions and empowers students to do something about them. Perspective transformation in the context of an ISL experience may emerge as the 'unfamiliar' helps participants to question the 'familiar'. Critical pedagogy theory will also be drawn upon to examine how ISL sustains and transforms dominant social and cultural values.

## **Research findings**

A framework to explore transformative learning in this context emerged comprising the following themes: personal, professional, moral, political and intellectual. All students in this study experienced perspective transformation in at least one of these areas. The development of authentic relationships with both partners' overseas and accompanying staff and students from the UK were critical to this learning process. Similarly, immersion in the local context and opportunities to critically reflect both individually and in groups were identified as significant.

While complex learning such as perspective transformation is possible through ISL initiatives, this study also presents evidence of a propensity for individuals to ignore such dissonance. It will be argued that transformative learning through ISL is dependent on, amongst others, personal, biographic and programmatic factors. The implications of failing to adopt a critical ISL approach are particularly acute: for example through reinforcing previously held presuppositions, stereotypes and exacerbating power imbalances.

This study also exposes the tensions students experience on return to the UK, such as conflict between their ongoing local and global identities as well disruptions to their sense of personal efficacy. This paper concludes that for ISL to reach its transformative potential it must include ongoing opportunities for critical reflection and be underpinned by a pedagogy of social justice.

## **References**

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