

International Service-Learning for Social Justice at a University with a Christian Foundation in the UK

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Background

'First you came to us as missionaries, then you came to us as colonisers, now you come to us as volunteers.'

Tselha Thackchoe, Principal, Tibetan Homes Foundation School Rajpur, India

A multitude of organisations offer young people from the developed world volunteering opportunities in the developing world (Bamber, 2007, 2008, 2009). Yet ISL 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. LHU has a Christian foundation and as many 'Christian' educational institutions (Glanzer, 2008) value ISL and are committed to moral as well as academic learning (Pike, 2006, 2010), the relation between LHU's motivation for engaging in ISL and its ethos, or aims as an HEI, warrant analysis.

Research Questions

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. This research asks: Whose lives are being changed? What 'difference' is sort? What process will bring this about? What values underpin the project? Are these values religious in origin? What are the moral implications? What are the implications for moral education? What is the relation, in this case, between Christian faith or commitments and social justice? What impact has ISL, in this case had on students' values?

Methods

This paper will present findings from an ethnographic study that aims to explore 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. 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. This paper will describe 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. This will 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. An explicit critical ethnographic stance has been taken to examine the culture and patterns of behaviour of students. 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, cultural, moral and religious values.

Research findings

A framework to explore transformative learning in this context emerged comprising the following themes: personal, professional, moral, religious, political and intellectual. All students in this study experienced perspective transformation in at least one of these areas. 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, moral, religious, biographic and programmatic factors. The moral and religious 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 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.

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