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## Where's the learning in International Service-Learning?

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### Background

'I think we all went thinking we were doing something fantastic, and we probably did do something fantastic, but not as much as what... the effect it had on us.'

Angela , ISL student participant 2004

Over the last 20 years more than 200 students have participated in International Service-Learning (ISL) projects at Liverpool Hope University (LHU) that have aimed to support resource poor communities overseas (Bamber et al, 2008). The strap line adopted by LHU for this work, 'Making a Difference, Changing Lives', implicitly acknowledges the importance of reciprocity to this endeavour. This reveals the problematic aspects of investigating such initiatives beyond isolating who the project is actually for: whose lives are being changed? what 'difference' is sort?, what process will bring this about?, what values underpin the project? 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. 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.

### Research Questions

The critical ethnographer seeks to contribute to discourses of social justice congruent with the approach to service-learning explored here (Madison, 2005: 5). This paper reports on how critical ethnography has been used to explore various components of the phenomena of ISL as experienced by students in Higher Education.

The study began by describing the experience of ISL from the perspective of students 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 descriptions have illuminated 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. This demanded a detailed exploration of my own background and analysis of the socio-economic, historical, cultural context of LHU and the multiple sites in which it conducts ISL. Finally, student descriptions of what motivated them to undertake ISL alongside biographical accounts of selected students who apply to participate in ISL have been used to investigate further the values, attitudes, skills and world view they share.

### Methods

By seeing through the eyes of student participants, this enquiry aims to gain a 'grasp of the very nature' (Van Manen, 1990: 177) of an ISL experience. This ethnographic study investigates the potential for learning in ISL through participants own descriptions of significant incidents, contributing to a better understanding of what this particular learning experience is like for students.

This paper draws on three phases of data collection. Each phase of data collection informed the method deployed in the subsequent phase. 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. The third phase involved

semi-structured biographical interviews with six students conducted in May 2009, a month before departure overseas. Critical discourse analysis was used to enable this study to understand more fully the relationship between the data collected and wider social events, practices and structures.

## **Frame**

A number of studies have highlighted the importance of service-learning in enhancing the experiences of students in Higher Education (Eyler & Giles, 1999). 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'.

The researchers personal experience on short term ISL projects in Africa and India and work with Voluntary Service Overseas in Papua New Guinea has provided a vantage point which has been drawn upon explicitly to analyse and interpret data. In particular, writing a detailed autobiographical account enabled the researcher to bracket preconceptions and enter more effectively into the lives of the research participants. While exploring how the unfamiliar can help students to question the familiar, it has been of critical importance for the researcher in this study to make the familiar strange in order to understand it.

## **Research findings**

This paper reports on the dialectic relationship between data collection, analysis and interpretation. For example, it emerged from phases 1 and 2 that the nature of an ISL experience and associated student learning was related to the biographies of participating students. Factors such as previous work and travel experience overseas, distance from home to place of study and open-ness to difference impacted upon the student experience.

An ethnographic study that seeks to understand the culture and behaviour of those who have experienced ISL requires a consideration of both local and global settings. Illuminating this interaction, Agar claims that 'local discourse has to link to global analysis' (2005: 18) and furthermore that 'once you do get some of the global, the local suddenly makes a lot more sense' (ibid : 19). This study explores how both young people and researchers recognise that global changes affect local conditions and vice versa, adding to an under researched area (Lauder et al, 2006: 61).

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