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Exploring International Service-Learning Boundaries

Annie Wendel
Sacred Heart University

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Reviewed by Annie Wendel
Sacred Heart University

As a practitioner-scholar within the field of service-learning, I explored *Crossing Boundaries: Tension and Transformation in International Service-Learning* seeking guidance in developing international service-learning programs for students and faculty. Positioned in an office that straddles academic affairs and university mission, our priorities are often caught between student achievement and the institution's social responsibility to develop local and global programs. While research points to significant student benefit (Bringle, Hatcher, & Jones, 2011), there are also challenges within international service-learning (ISL) including language and communication, power inequalities, conflicting institutional priorities, and general logistics.

Crossing Boundaries addresses these concerns while highlighting the need to prioritize community voices in the development and assessment of ISL programs. Editors Patrick M. Green and Mathew Johnson have creatively assembled a collection of case studies in ISL programming to shift the conversation from student-centered program considerations, and instead focus on the impact of partnerships on host communities. Trust, reciprocity, and communication are common themes that run through each account, and *Crossing Boundaries* advances the integrity of the field by acknowledging these key commitments to international communities. Perhaps more importantly, *Crossing Boundaries* introduces new voices to the field of ISL—voices traditionally left out of the conversation. Green and Johnson recognize the dominance of Global North (U.S., Canada, and most European countries) narratives, and therefore include case studies co-authored by practitioners in Vietnam, Mexico, and Jamaica. Additionally, case studies from faith-based institutions, community colleges, and graduate student programs round out the collection, adding new perspectives. Reflecting on the institution vs. community tensions that led me to this book, I gained a deeper understanding of the complex and often controversial nature of ISL. This discomfort is explicitly stated in the editors' overarching question, "does tension in international service-learning lead to transformation?"

Crossing Boundaries commences with one of the most pressing critiques of ISL: power imbalance between student volunteers and communities served. Paula J. Mellom and Socorro Herrera highlight the troubling potential of ISL to perpetuate historical imperialism rather than promoting a reciprocal and collaborative process. Their study describes the student experience of interacting with the cultural "other," someone radically different from oneself, through the dynamic stages of honeymoon, hostility, humor, and home. However, students cannot effectively engage in critical reflection if the ISL programs are not intentionally designed to empower the community. Lori and Mark Halverson-Wente therefore showcase in Chapter 5 how to shift ISL relationships from patronage to more transparent and mutually beneficial partnerships. Their experiences in developing an ISL program with a Cambodian nonprofit partner were characterized by transitioning from a "do-good" charity model into building relationships based on empowerment and development of local leadership.

Moving beyond this traditional form of reciprocity, Chapter 2 advocates for a more enriched and culturally aware approach. Amanda L. Espenschied-Reilly and Susan V. Iverson begin by challenging American geocentrism within the ISL field. Through their study comparing service-learning in Ireland and the U.S., they examine the pitfalls of the cultural transfer of service-learning originating from U.S. practitioners. Cultural tensions are inevitable, they argue, but may be mediated when cultural relevancy is considered in the design and implementation of ISL programming in a new country. In the following chapter, practitioner partners at

Portland State University and the University of Science in Vietnam support the claim that culture and context matter when developing community engagement efforts in countries new to the field of service-learning. Chapter 3 offers a descriptive timeline, evaluation of the institutional partnership, and recommends the need to adapt projects to fit local contexts, leverage community assets, and navigate the bureaucracy of higher education. These same considerations lead to the successes shared by Marisol Morales and Arturo Caballero Barrón, who call on their shared culture, language, and institutional mission. In Chapter 4, these practitioners describe the two theories framing their partnership, Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), which recognizes and honors the knowledge of the community, and Integral Human Development (IHD), which is based on the principles of human dignity, solidarity, self-actualization, and prosperity. This blended framework facilitates a common understanding of the goals of community engagement based on Catholic social justice foundations.

Green and Johnson acknowledge that culture is not the lone source of tension in ISL programming. They provide case studies highlighting challenges arising from changing university partnerships and institutional priorities. In Chapter 7, Stephanie Stokamer, Jennifer Hall, and Thomas Winston Morgan offer an account of when organizational and curricular changes led to the dissolution and revision of an ISL academic program. They shed light on the dynamic nature of partnerships, and the many changing influences requiring practitioners to assess the shared goals and priorities of ISL programs. Additionally, the authors of Chapter 8 examine the conflicting priorities between study abroad and service-learning programs as ISL grows in prominence on U.S. college campuses. Through two case studies, Amye Day Ong and Patrick M. Green elaborate on the challenges faced in balancing best practices of programmatic design, marketing and recruitment efforts, and risk-management of international experiences. The answer, they suggest, lies in intentionally including in-country partners in the planning, recruitment, and implementation stages to ensure that the reason for the partnership—solidarity with the community—is not overlooked.

Establishing institutional priority for ISL is accomplished by promoting its multidisciplinary nature. The overall collection of case studies demonstrates the flexibility of how ISL can be utilized across multiple academic fields. Chapter 9 illustrates a three-week interdisciplinary program in Jamaica that incorporates a variety of faculty perspectives and intentionally diverse texts. Additionally, required community-based and cultural experiences connect students with the community in a more authentic and comprehensive way, providing multiple avenues for cultural dialogue and exploration of social justice themes. Projects that can be implemented in a variety of international contexts are also shared, including a sample project-based service-learning assignment in Chapter 6. This project was applied in communities in Africa, Asia, and Central America and is designed to teach ISL program assessment and implementation skills while supporting nonprofit organizations. Lori Gardinier provides strategies to manage short-term student programs that can be modified to meet learning objectives in a variety of disciplines.

For readers seeking examples of ISL programming for specific fields and institutions, the editors offer case studies in healthcare education and faith-based institutions. For instance, Chapter 10 focuses on examples in the Dominican Republic and China, and how American students gained firsthand understanding of the cultural roles healthcare providers performed in underserved communities, thus promoting a more appropriate design. The authors advocate for a pedagogy of critical consciousness, a more critical self-reflection and action-based response from students. Chapter 11 summarizes a faith-based institutional perspective. Paul Kollman and Rachel Thomas Morgan discuss an ISL program offered through their faith-based institution and share assessment results measuring student learning outcomes, including recognizing root causes of social justice issues, understanding Catholic social teaching themes, and increased cultural competency. Tensions surrounding this faith-based model within higher education are brought to light. The authors conclude by calling upon faith-based institutions to use their mission of Catholic social teaching and ISL to elevate student awareness of their own global responsibility.

Despite (or perhaps because of) tensions surrounding ISL raised in the previous chapters, a transformative ISL approach emerges. The final case study by Eric Hartman and Richard Kiely starts with a detailed literature review comparing traditional study abroad goals to a

new "global service-learning" approach. Through a comparative case study of ISL programs, the authors demonstrate that students struggle to fully comprehend their role as global citizens. As a result, they propose a new model for critical global citizenship focusing on intellectual, political, moral, social, cultural, and personal learning outcomes. Their model goes further than assessing traditional cultural competency skills, measuring with greater detail how students combine their understanding, intentions, and actions, while considering how global partnerships are supported.

In the concluding chapter, Green condenses the lessons gathered from these various case studies and leaves readers with the 10 key principles of ISL. These takeaways respond to the obvious challenges within ISL that were raised throughout the book, while recognizing the need for tension within ISL, which is an inherently disruptive practice. When performed with a focus on community and culture, a genuine transformation takes place—of student cultural lens; of program development and modification in conjunction with community partners; and of the ISL field as a whole.

A challenge the editors faced was the lack of a universal vernacular in the field of ISL. In particular, the term international service-learning was used throughout the first 11 chapters until first Eric Hartman and Richard Kiely introduced "global" service-learning in the final case study. The use of *global* rather than *international* reflects different values and priorities. These differences call for more unified language across the field. Only after researchers and practitioners arrive at a more common understanding of terminology can conversations effectively occur across collegiate study abroad, service-learning, and international education programs.

The biggest strength of *Crossing Boundaries: Tension and Transformation in International Service-Learning* is it acknowledges the two complex themes of tension and transformation. The collection pushes for an ideal ISL practice that incorporates a social change orientation, redistributes power dynamics, and develops alternative relationships for a transformative pedagogy. Yet, the chapter authors also acknowledge the developmental nature of ISL work and are honest in addressing their mistakes, necessary program changes, and current challenges as they work to navigate complex internal and external forces. *Crossing Boundaries* provides reassurance to practitioners they are not alone in the struggle.

Overall, this book serves as a valuable guide for any practitioner seeking to design or improve an ISL program. While this collection offers strategies and examples of challenges and successes of international partnership work, readers are challenged to put these recommendations and lessons into practice—namely making community impact a priority in future practice and research.

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About the Reviewer

Annie Wendel is the assistant director of the Office of Volunteer Programs and Service Learning at Sacred Heart University.