

# **Toward A Research Agenda for International Service-Learning: The International Partnership for Service-Learning and Leadership**

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Recently the International Partnership for Service-Learning and Leadership (IPSL) completed a three-year study of international service-learning, funded by the Ford Foundation. It looked at Partnership programs over the past ten or fifteen years: the Partnership operates fifteen undergraduate programs in a dozen countries, serving around 120 students a year, most of them American, and also runs additional special programs for students from around the world. It has been in operation since the early 1980s. This makes it the longest-running and probably most comprehensive international service-learning program based in the United States.

International service-learning intersects with two fairly well documented fields: (1) domestic or local service-learning, in which students work in their local communities, and (2) study abroad, in which students study in a different cultural context from the one that they are used to. International service-learning resembles local service-learning in many respects, but it tends to be more intensive; and it resembles study abroad, but it tends to involve a deeper immersion in the host culture. The Partnership study drew extensively on the considerable research literature in these two fields, but also moved in some new directions.

The research covered four topics:

1. A demographic study of IPSL students over a 10-15-year period.
2. A study of student response to IPSL programs, qualitative in nature.
3. A study of the effects of IPSL students on agencies and their clients – also qualitative in nature and covering two sites, Scotland and Jamaica.
4. A series of three site visits to institutions in England, Jamaica, and the Philippines to assess the impact of the Partnership on the development of service-learning programs at those institutions.

The research has now been published in book form (Tonkin and others 2004) and reported in article form (Tonkin and Quiroga 2004). The present article is intended to point to some of the limitations of the study and thereby suggest some fruitful directions for further research based on the work already done. It is one step in the development of a comprehensive research agenda for international service-learning, a topic broached in a workshop on service-learning research organized by Robert Bringle and the present author at the Partnership's conference in Chiang Mai, Thailand, earlier in 2004 (Tonkin & Bringle 2004).

As a piece of research, the Partnership's study will be useful to the field, but it is in no sense definitive. Indeed, we prefer to see it as simply a first step in a far more comprehensive research agenda. In Bringle's terminology, it is essentially a *program* evaluation. The following comments, then, are intended not only to present our principal findings (shorn of the supporting argument contained in our full report) but also to point to some of the substantive and methodological limitations of the study and to define research priorities going forward.

## **The Demographic Survey**

### *Conclusions*

The Partnership operates, or has operated, undergraduate programs at fifteen locations in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, and Europe, and at two locations in the United States (two of these programs are no longer operating, and several of the existing programs are quite new, including the latest, in the Galapagos Islands). Our study showed that over the past fifteen years, some 2000 students have participated in Partnership programs, almost all of them from the United States, with the largest numbers going to Ecuador, England, France, Jamaica, and Mexico. About half of these students are in their third year of college. They come from all parts of the United States and several foreign countries. In most cases they participated in semester-long programs, though some attended shorter winter-term or summer programs.

Female students account for 80.08% of the total – a higher proportion than in study-abroad programs generally and a particularly high proportion for destinations outside Europe. Their racial profile appears to match that of study-abroad students in general, and they come from a wide range of religious backgrounds. They are getting younger: the average age of undergraduates participating in Partnership programs has fallen from 21.83 in the early 1990s to 20.69 today. Language, area, and cultural studies constitutes the most popular group of majors, but there are significant numbers of majors in psychology and the cognitive sciences, and in biology and life sciences.

Most Partnership students come from small institutions. Although research universities account for 54.8% of undergraduates from the United States studying abroad, only 35.63% of Partnership students come from such institutions. Most (61.69%) come from small colleges and other largely undergraduate institutions (nationally, these account for only 40.8% of undergraduates studying abroad).<sup>1</sup> The average Partnership student, then, is female, approaching her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, and perhaps studying in Latin America. She probably comes from a liberal-arts college and is in her third year of study.

### *Limitations and next steps*

The demographic survey was based on the tabulation of *available* data, of varying quality. More work is needed (a) to clean the data, (b) to collect new data on students who have already passed through the program, and (c) to improve and design data-collection methods in the future for coming cohorts of students. Ideally, such a design might be applicable to students in other international service-learning programs, so that a broader data-base could be constructed and analyzed. The survey was also limited to participants in the regular undergraduate programs: in addition to its programs for undergraduates, the Partnership also has a master's program and operates occasional special programs, for example for students from East, Southeast and South Asia. With this group it might be difficult to find a common base for constructing meaningful statistics.

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<sup>1</sup> Our numbers are based on the report of the Institute for International Education, *Open Doors*. The demographic study was completed in 2002. The study is available on the Partnership's website [www.ipsl.org](http://www.ipsl.org).

## **The Student Study**

### *Conclusions*

A four-member group of specialists in social and developmental psychology, ethnography, and cross-cultural communication worked closely with a group of seventeen former Partnership students in interviews and focus groups. The following conclusions are based largely on their reports.

1. International service-learning, while it shares some characteristics with study abroad, is generally a more radical educational experience likely to have a long-term impact on those who pass through it.
2. Partnership students experience culture shock as they move into the Partnership experience.
3. Partnership students display a high level of adaptability to a new culture.
4. Partnership students tend to be highly motivated, and eager to test theory against practice and practice against theory.
5. The pedagogy of reflection is particularly important to Partnership students.
6. Partnership students display optimism and a positive attitude: these are significant factors which help foster success in the international service-learning experience.
7. Partnership students are comfortable with ambiguity and necessarily adaptable to the environment and culture.
8. Partnership students undergo transformative intellectual and moral development.
9. Student views shift from a task orientation to a people orientation.
10. Partnership students develop a pluralistic world view.

11. The Partnership experience causes students to reconceptualize the nature of service.
12. Partnership students have a “civic-minded personality.”
13. For some students, the Partnership experience is so powerful that it shapes their subsequent careers.
14. Partnership students are deeply engaged with the host society.
15. Partnership students gain a sense of interconnectedness with the world.
16. Reentry, difficult for all students returning from abroad, is particularly difficult for Partnership students.
17. Partnership students develop a nuanced and complex view of America.
18. Partnership students display qualities of leadership.

#### *Limitations and next steps*

The student study was organized primarily around a one-day intensive program of interviews with a small group of seventeen alumni. It would be useful to repeat the process with a different group of former students. The student study was, as we have already noted, qualitative. Qualitative research works best, by definition, where results are not readily quantifiable. Conclusions drawn from qualitative research are accordingly tentative; indeed, reducing qualitative research to a list of neat conclusions tends to compromise its integrity. But these conclusions, indeed the entire process, help define what questions to address in a quantitative study. Quantitative follow-ups are needed to test our tentative conclusions, particularly regarding the current behavior of those who have passed through the Partnership program. While it can be interesting to explore their current thinking about themselves, it is perhaps more important to understand how they

are now engaged with their communities, or involved in volunteer work, or participating in the political process in productive ways.

## **The Agency Study**

### *Conclusions*

The study involved interviews and focus groups in service agencies in Glasgow, Scotland, and Kingston, Jamaica, and was conducted by Dr. Susan Deeley, of Glasgow University. Both employees and clients were involved.

1. Service-learning students tend to be particularly useful to agencies because of their high degree of commitment.
2. Service-learning students tend to be particularly useful to agencies because they bring special skills and experiences.
3. Service-learning students display self-assurance and optimism
4. Service-learning students build close relationships with service-users.
5. Time management and dependability is extremely important to agencies.
6. Regular attendance over an extended period is advantageous
7. Service-learning students bring a challenging cultural diversity to the agencies.
8. Service-learning students, because of their commitment and reliability, tend to overcome skepticism about the value of volunteers.
9. Agencies are interested in students' academic work and eager to help, but they need to know more about it.
10. Some agencies are particularly interested in having male students as volunteers.

11. International service-learning programs bring a valuable sense of reciprocity.
12. Such reciprocity benefits all parties.
13. Service-learning students have a long-term effect on agencies and create close ties that are hard to break.
14. Students are well looked-after and protected by their agencies.
15. Students must develop a good understanding of the needs of the agencies.
16. There should be a clear goals for all concerned, in a context in which communication is valued.
17. The voice of the agencies should be heard and they should be fully involved in planning as equal partners.

#### *Limitations and next steps*

What holds for the student study holds also for the agency study – with the additional consideration that the service goals of service-learning programs (what we want actually to achieve through the service) are often ill-defined. Our study has told us in no uncertain terms that there is need for greater clarity of objectives in this area. In recent years more attention has been paid to the ethics of service-learning as they relate to agencies. It is not enough to have service-learning contribute to the education of students: it must also be useful to those whom the students serve. Accordingly, assessing the outcomes of service in a service-learning context is essential.

#### **The Institution Study**



### *Conclusions*

The study examined the impact of the Partnership and its programs on three institutions on three continents: Trinity College of Quezon City, in the Philippines; the University of Technology Jamaica, in Kingston; and Roehampton University, in London. This part of the study was conducted by the present author. It confirmed much of what we already know about processes of innovation in institutions (Rogers 1995, Bennett 1997) and about the role of leadership (Chaffee & Tierney 1988, Green 1989, Bennis 1989).

1. The Partnership has had a profound effect on the adoption of service-learning at many of the institutions where it operates programs. The presence of these programs has served as a device for the introduction of service-learning into the regular curriculum of these institutions.

2. The adoption of service-learning by a given institution works best when certain key ingredients are in place:

- The institution has a longstanding interest in civic engagement.
- Service-learning is supported by well-established central coordinating mechanisms (and budgetary commitment) and also diffused among faculty and students.
- The idea of community service is supported by public policy at the national level and institutions are expected to engage with the community.
- Community service is part of the larger national culture.
- The institution has strong leadership.
- The philosophy of service-learning is presented coherently and well understood.

3. An institution desirous of adopting service-learning as a pedagogy must be able to cope with the notion that through this pedagogy student learning takes place not in the classroom alone but at the point of intersection of experience and theory – and that both experience and theory are part of the learning.
4. When faced with opposition to this belief, the supporters of service-learning are apt to compromise, downplaying the service component in service-learning when faced with investigative faculty committees, or displaying a reluctance to include service-providers as equal partners.
5. On the other hand, where support already exists, such support can lead to the inclusion in service-learning of simple acts of community service that should by rights not be included, or the desire to give community service greater dignity or prestige by mislabeling it service-learning.
6. In institutions under simultaneous pressure to deliver community service on the one hand, and generate academic credit on the other, service-learning may seem an inexpensive way of dealing with both pressures at the same time, but in reality it is expensive and time-consuming when done well.
7. Strong faculty development programs are essential to develop skills and also an understanding of how quality is established and maintained in service-learning.
8. The Partnership, if it can find the resources to put such a program into operation, could and should be a key player in the delivery of knowledge and expertise on service-learning for institutions across the world.
9. Only by internalizing and incentivizing service-learning can it become accepted: administrators can remove barriers, but they cannot easily inspire.

10. However, strong leadership has been a fundamental ingredient of success in maintaining and expanding service-learning at the institutions studied. The most effective leaders are those who lead through structural change – by putting the right administrative structures in place.

11. The Partnership has had a decisive influence when its perhaps deeper and more comprehensive philosophy has given shape and direction to activities already in place, giving them a sense of purpose and coherence.

12. Colleges and universities less responsive to the presence of the Partnership tend to be larger institutions in industrialized countries with a less firm tradition of community involvement by institutions or individuals but with a stronger received sense of traditional academic procedures and modes of pedagogy.

13. Educational customs vary from culture to culture, and strictly American approaches to service-learning, or even to the process of reflection at its heart, may be culturally biased. There is a need to be adaptable to local mores and customs.

14. The Partnership has been most successful where its philosophy and pedagogy have addressed a specific problem or institutional opportunity, and where institutional leaders have been seeking new approaches to old problems. Where the arrival of the Partnership has coincided with new leadership, the results have in some cases proved remarkably impressive.

15. The study of these institutions suggests to US colleges and universities (a) the importance of leadership, (b) the need for careful planning, (c) the need for the creation of accommodating administrative structures, (d) the need for the engagement and buy-in

of administrators and faculty at many levels, and (e) the need for linkage of institutional mission and its implementation through service-learning.

#### *Limitations and next steps*

The institutional study is based on the best information we could gather on site. The next steps ought to include expanded efforts to gather opinion (by survey instruments and in other ways), and a more comprehensive examination of actual practice (to supplement and modify self-reporting).

#### **Four Issues**

In the course of our work, we identified a number of issues that merit further consideration in the research leading out of our study. Four of these issues merit consideration here.

#### *The ethics of service-learning*

As we have noted, after many years of relative complacency on such matters the service-learning community is becoming increasingly concerned about the ethical dimensions of the service connected to service-learning (Langseth 2000, Aquino 2001, Rich 2002, Schaffer, Paris & Williams 2003), and indeed the effects of service-learning on agencies in general are gaining greater attention from those who make policy in higher education and the researchers who work with them (Sigmon 1998, Cruz & Giles 2000, Clarke 2003).

All too often, service-learning is conceived as something designed to benefit students rather than agencies, as though the service itself has become commodified and is merely an ingredient in the economy of learning. But, while the relationship between institutions and agencies is largely mediated by students and their professors, at the end of the continuum are clients of the service agencies and real-life problems and policies. If service-learning is intended to inculcate in the student a certain kind of altruism and devotion to the community, it is surely incumbent upon the institutional actors who initiate the process to show a similar sense of altruism and community devotion regarding the recipients of the largesse supposedly provided by the students.

Furthermore, these ethical questions intersect with two other concerns raised in our research: the fact that the Partnership pedagogy stresses the asking of questions rather than the discovery of easy answers (a service assignment from which all the ambiguities have been somehow extracted is less educationally compelling than one where the student must confront such ambiguities) but the apparently contradictory fact that, if the Partnership is serious about the service portion of its work, it ought to be interested in practical outcomes – about doing something useful for the people among whom the service is conducted. We might add that the Partnership tends to emphasize impact on *people* rather than project-oriented activities: for the most part its students provide assistance to agencies that work with people, rather than engaging in such activities as building schools, immunizing children, and so on. Partnership leaders believe that this kind of service offers a stronger cross-cultural experience. Its effectiveness is, however, extremely difficult to measure, since it is concerned less with definitive outcomes than with process.

### *Academic achievement*

While it is understandable that a project investigating service-learning should choose to examine those characteristics of the pedagogy that are unique, there is an increasingly urgent need for assessment of the entirely conventional aspects of student learning in international service-learning. To what extent do students acquire academic knowledge (however that is defined) in service-learning situations? Do they do so at a speed or with a thoroughness comparable to the speed and thoroughness of conventional study abroad (again, however that is defined) and comparable to the process of knowledge acquisition if they were to remain on their home campuses engaged in conventional study? Do they, for example, learn languages faster or more effectively than students in conventional language-learning situations? The present study gives limited consideration to academic aspects of the international service-learning experience and clearly more is needed.

### *Triangulating the perceptions*

Our findings would benefit from being passed through the filter of parent perceptions, and the perceptions of advisors and professors. Students' own self-assessments may differ from the assessments of those who work with the students or who see them in other settings.

### *The limits of qualitative research*

It will be apparent to the reader that the study of student attitudes and of the effect of Partnership programs on students is only a beginning. While a qualitative study may be the place to begin, because it identifies issues and suggests lines of research, it obviously has significant drawbacks. As in all qualitative research, where the sample of individuals involved is typically small, generalizability of analyses and results to other populations is problematic. The study, then, could not establish whether the Partnership's programs have a profound effect on *all* its students: the seventeen alumni were selected mostly because they were deemed to be particularly articulate about their experiences and because they represented different programs and different age-cohorts. The notion of "transferability," however, does apply: some elements of commonality among the unique experiences of a small group of people can be identified and have relevance for other individuals. What we know less about are the unsuccessful experiences of Partnership alumni – the negative experiences and the reasons for these experiences.

But we need baseline data. It is crucially important that the Partnership design and put in place a long-term and systematic mechanism for gathering longitudinal data, that it begin to apply some of the instruments available for testing attitudes and beliefs (both before and after the experience) and for measuring such factors as language-learning, and that it mine existing records for usable historical data. As we have already remarked, the meetings in New York with the seventeen alumni, valuable as they were, suffered also from the fact that they were based on self-reporting – and self-reporting under conditions that must inevitably produce distortions.

Perhaps the term "distortion" is the wrong term, since it implies the possibility of an "undistorted" record of the past. All memories are shaped by our desire to make sense

of the past: over time, the very framework into which we put them may cause them to take on new forms.<sup>2</sup> Our own unsystematic observations suggest that Americans are particularly given to seeing their lives in terms of conversion experiences – experiences in which the impulse for change comes exclusively from outside, in spite of their own will or desire. Extended stays abroad, because they challenge us to question ourselves and our beliefs, are ideal candidates for such treatment. And so master narratives emerge, in which momentary impulses or temporary realignments of spirit are turned into life-changing events, as though such changes in direction would never have occurred, or been so complete, without the immediate external impulse that generated them.

This is not to say that our students or our researchers spoke untruths or half-truths on that day in New York. Indeed, much of what the students told us, thanks to skilled questioning, was of a kind that did not lend itself to fictionalization or recontextualizing. But the most valuable truths may have come incidentally, and in some instances may still need to be teased out of the transcripts and recordings that remained when the day was over.

So the mere request that a group of Partnership alumni come to New York to talk about their Partnership experience was likely to elevate the experience to new levels, and the mere fact that four researchers were willing to spend the day asking carefully framed questions was likely to produce equally carefully framed responses. So we must look beyond the answers to the questions as we interpret the information before us, reminding

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<sup>2</sup> The problem of truth-telling and narrative is well-known to specialists in many fields – anthropology, psychoanalysis, jurisprudence, medicine, to mention just a few. Freud’s essay “Constructions in Analysis” (1937) suggested, in the words of Theodore Shapiro (Shapiro 2004:341), “that the uncovered past was *about* the past, but not *from* the past, permitting the idea that conviction can be a product of analytic suggestion or transference love, rather than a demonstration of the reality of remembered past events.” This process of reconstruction “within the dyad” is, inevitably, culturally and situationally determined and also generically based. See also the essays in Holland & Quinn 1987.



ourselves that what alumni *think* happened in India or Ecuador or France years before may be as important as, and merely different from, what actually happened – and that what actually happened can really only be established (if at all) by the careful triangulation of information and by the skilled questioning practiced by our seasoned researchers.

## **Conclusion**

Our concerns about master narratives aside, the gathering in New York created an opportunity for alumni to reflect upon the different ways the Partnership experience affected them, to rethink their experiences, narrate their life history, and process their memories in the company of other alumni who shared similar histories. For many, the event presented an opportunity to generate new meanings for events in their past and to discuss an experience that they all agreed was an important turning-point in their lives. For the Partnership itself, certain conclusions emerged from the study that can serve both as starting-points for further research and important findings in themselves.

What holds true for the student study holds true for the project in general. The research will be of great value in increasing the planning capability, visibility, and status of the Partnership. As a result of this research, the Partnership knows more about its students – their external characteristics as well as their thinking – and can plan its programs accordingly. At the same time it has been stimulated to improve its data-collection still further, and to build individual and programmatic evaluation into its ongoing activities. Program evaluation (newly in place) will help enhance and maintain quality, and individual evaluation (still to come) will show students and sending

institutions what they can expect of the Partnership. The research has also highlighted the importance of the agencies in the service-learning matrix and will encourage the Partnership and its programs to give them more sustained attention and to ask questions about the efficacy of its service placements. Furthermore, this research delivers a clear message that the Partnership is interested in maintaining and enhancing the quality of its programs in terms of both academics and service.

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