International Service-Learning:
Key Issues, Case Studies and Program Providers

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Introduction: What is International Service-Learning (ISL)?

International service-learning (ISL) is a growing and diverse field. Third party providers dedicated to service learning trips are growing in popularity, and many universities are creating their own programs internally. According to the National Service-Learning Clearing House (2013), “Service-Learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities” (What is Service-Learning? Section, para. 1). International service-learning (ISL) is the combination of those values with study abroad experiences. An example is the Monterey Institute’s Development Project Management Institute (DPMI) course taught internationally in Chile, El Salvador, Rwanda, etc. The student participants are earning academic credit for engaging with communities in developing countries and promoting sustainable service projects that are important to the local community, like a basket weaving cooperative to empower women. In this paper I will present a brief history of service-learning, key issues in ISL projects, discuss two specific case studies of best practice ISL programs, and provide a summary of current ISL providers.

History of Service-Learning

The National Service-Learning Clearing House (2013) dates the start of service-learning in the United States to 1903 when the “Cooperative Education Movement” was founded at the University of Cincinnati (Historical Timeline Section, para. 1). Other notable service-learning milestones include:

- 1933-1942 – Millions of young people served terms of six to eighteen months to help restore the nation's parks, revitalize the economy, and support their families and themselves through the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) (Historical Timeline Section, para. 5).
- 1961 – President John F. Kennedy established the Peace Corps (Historical Timeline Section, para. 9).
- 1964 – President Lyndon B. Johnson created VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America), to provide opportunities for Americans to serve full-time to help thousands of low-income communities (Historical Timeline Section, para. 10).
- 1989-1990 – President George H.W Bush created the Office of National Service in the White House and the Points of Light Foundation to foster volunteering in the United States (Historical Timeline Section, para. 25).

In addition to national service-learning initiatives, grassroots projects and university-based initiatives have sprung up and flourished throughout the United States to improve communities and empower lives. While there is no date that officially marks the beginning of international service-learning projects, considering a global perspective became more common post-WWII because the United States enjoyed a rapid growth in international exchanges and needed to understand how to work with, learn from, and support people from other nations (Irby Cruz (2010), para. 2). It is undeniable that in today’s globalized world collaborative and global
learning is the way forward. In order to create sustainable change globally, citizens of all countries and nationalities must work and learn together. By engaging in service-learning projects internationally, students are developing academic knowledge, practical development skills, and compassion for diverse peoples and cultures.

Key Issues in International Service-Learning

Community Action Learning

An important element in ISL is community action learning. A common pitfall of ISL programs is approaching the project from a power-driven, philanthropic stance. This ideology can create a superior attitude of the altruistic student giving to the poor community without learning from the experience. Furthermore, an imbalance in power removes the individuals involved from taking on personal responsibility for the project and realizing its full impact. To avoid these problems, Sarah Bell, Mark Mattem and Mike Telin (2007) suggest using the term “community action learning” and “adopting a more critical pedagogy that goes beyond superficial understanding of problems and solutions to address institutional and structural barriers to change” (p. 61).

In the course the authors were designing, they decided to center the class on research for a community action organization. In this way, students were interacting with professionals serving an underrepresented community and the community itself. From this angle, the students were personally involved with the project, but distanced enough to avoid a feeling of ownership of the project rather than collaboration. Students need to understand that they are benefitting from the community even more than the community is benefitting from their service and that they can build on their experience to create sustainable change. Also, the students felt having a community space for sharing and reflecting together was important to embrace the project on a deeper and more personal level. ISL programs that do not emphasize community action learning fall prey to students not feeling invested in their projects and communities and enjoying their time abroad, but not holistically and mutually learning.

Active Citizenship

Active citizenship is another important term for promoting collaborative ISL programs. A citizen is more than just a member of a country; a citizen has a responsibility to improve his or her country. A global citizen understands that every person is a citizen of the world and has a responsibility to care for the earth and the people on it. The Millennium Development Goals are an example of global values that are difficult for one nation to achieve alone, but possible with the support and partnership of many nations with compatible resources. ISL is important in achieving this teamwork because it takes bright, future leaders, out of the classroom and applies their knowledge to real life with real people. After discussing water rights and international politics theories for a semester, spending two weeks in Bolivia with community leaders in rural communities discussing water rights, access, and actively working on a project (like digging a well) can have powerful results. Students will feel more connected to the research they have done on the topic as well as apply the concept to a real situation. Furthermore, students will discover empathy and understanding for people of other cultures that will help them relate to
more people globally and create an accepting, multicultural identity that will encourage them to contribute to their own nations and the world as a whole.

Additionally, active, global citizens have shared values and empower others. In our diverse world, the values of individual’s vary. However, the Millennium Development Goals are one example of shared values among nations. Active global citizens should promote and actively live by these values. A partnership teaching and learning at a school for girls in South Sudan during the summer directly demonstrates the goal of increasing access to education for women, and puts the goal in practice. Moreover, active citizenship and hands-on learning empowers students to creatively strategize sustainable solutions for their community. When students understand, act, and uphold global values they acquire through ISL, they are truly global citizens.

**Intercultural Sensitivity**

A globalized world has prompted many professors and whole institutions to make intercultural sensitivity a learning objective. This is especially important for ISL because most projects involve working with people of different cultures. One way to measure intercultural sensitivity is with Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI). IDI is measured on a scale starting at denial and moving along to defense reversal, minimization, acceptance, adaptation and finally, integration (Westrick, 2004, p. 279). Ideally, no matter where a student starts, by the end of the ISL project the student should move further along in the categories.

Jan Westrick, (2004) compared the IDI scores of students involved in 4 different ISL model programs post-service and found that longer programs (over a semester) tended to be more successful in increasing students’ IDI. However, individual students who had completed one or more ISL projects, tended to have lower IDI than a driven student who had never engaged in an ISL project. A possible explanation for this data is students typically do not have much time to reflect post ISL projects and therefore may be continually grappling with their first experiences while starting a new project. Initially, their IDI will be lower, but eventually the students will achieve a higher IDI because of the various complexities of the projects they have been involved in. While IDI is a useful measurement tool, it should be combined with written reflections and individual interviews to gain the whole picture of a student’s development.

**Children and Service-Learning**

Service-learning, particularly international service-learning, is often only discussed for middle school, high school and college aged students. When service-learning is carried out at the elementary school level, it is through once a year projects like a park cleanups or a can-food drive. However, a more interactive approach to service-learning can be appropriate for younger children if it is guided correctly. Kathy Fox (2010) believes that “young children need to be taught to work with their naturally caring heart and critical eye to develop a sense of social justice” (p. 1, para. 2). Active and guided teaching will allow children to question the world around them, find compassionate solutions, and become active, global citizens. While engaging children under twelve-years old in service-learning projects abroad is too ambitious, ISL can be incorporated in the classroom by discussing global social and political issues, working with
people from different countries in the children’s own community, and finding links to international organizations.

When beginning ISL lessons for children, teachers must understand, and impart, a multicultural attitude to their students. It is important for children to realize that not everyone in the world looks or lives like them, but all humans have the same basic needs. When discussing poverty, children must understand what poverty means, why people shouldn’t live in poverty (basic needs), and what is happening around the world to fight poverty. For ISL purposes, children can discuss what organizations (like CARE, UNICEF, Habitat for Humanity, and WorldVision) do to fight world poverty. Then, children can provide a service for one of these organizations to bring the lesson together. For example, the class could trick-or-treat for UNICEF together and discuss how giving up their candy and donating money to UNICEF will help other children eat a full meal. Through continuous learning, and incorporating global themes into service-learning, children in elementary school can begin their journey as responsible change-makers.

Case Studies: Ethical International Service-Learning and Short-term ISL Programs

Now that I’ve discussed some key issues in incorporating ISL into school projects at all levels, I’ll review two ISL case studies for universities.

**Ethical International Service-Learning: Liverpool Hope University (LHU)**

At Liverpool Hope University (LHU), they are especially concerned with many ISL programs having an unintended “deficient model” (Bamber & Pike, 2013, p. 535) because of a lack of reflection. Too often ISL is treated as volunteer abroad and make the world a better place without mutually creating a project with the local community. Therefore, Bamber and Pike (2013) have changed the way they present ISL:

> We, however, contend that ISL can be better understood as a form of ecological engagement with aesthetic, moral, and spiritual dimensions that is enacted through participation with the lives and ‘worlds’ of those living in different countries, and which enables ethical reflection, enhances personal efficacy, and seeks to engender a more just and sustainable society (p. 536).

At Liverpool Hope University, over 500 staff and students have participated in ISL programs in developing countries in the last 20 years. The majority of students found the experience life-changing and now work for NGOs, VSO, have relocated overseas, act as lifelong advocates for causes and are ambassadors for charities such as SOS Children’s Villages (Bamber & Pike, 2013, p.544). One reason they are successful is how they frame ISL as a communal experience that is designed to be transformative. Therefore, while students may initially have a view of how they will help and develop a poor village, students are open to having their worldviews tested and are ready to adapt and grow. Most students immediately discovered that their initial attitude was inappropriate and hindered them from fully engaging with their community and project.

Liverpool Hope University creates best practice ISL programs in four significant ways:

1) Students live with hosts with much fewer material belongings than themselves. Living with gracious and generous people who have less teaches students humility and
challenges what they value. Post ISL, students are asked to reflect on this experience and find they now place more value on life instead of things and feel a sense of urgency and purpose (Bamber & Pike, 2013, p.545).

2) Students not only live with less, but they are also distanced from the complexities of their lives in the UK by being immersed in communities and service projects that achieve a lot with fewer resources. During reflection in the UK, students started to question what they value in their day-to-day lives and what informs those values (Bamber & Pike, 2013, p.545).

3) ISL projects challenge students to be fully present in their projects. Everyday distractions like checking email and using a smart phone are removed. Participants were surprised to discover that they could live without the distractions and learned new ways to communicate and interact with people (Bamber & Pike, 2013, p.548).

4) Because students were immersed in their host country, they developed habits like conserving water and electricity that stayed with them in the UK. LHU encourages students to impart conservation habits to others and be advocates for small and greater changes they themselves have made (Bamber & Pike, 2013, p.547).

These key elements along with changing the way ISL is presented are some of LHU’s recommendations for ISL program best practice.

Short Term International Service-Learning: Berry College Two-Week ISL Program in Jamaica

Most universities construct ISL programs to last at least a semester in order to realize the greatest impact for the community and the students’ development. Often, shorter experiences are looked down upon and criticized for perpetuating stereotypes of the rich student helping the poor villagers and then leaving without reflecting on the experience because there wasn’t enough time. However, this case study argues that ISL can be successful for two to three week programs and specifically references a two-week ISL program in Jamaica.

The primary concern when designing the ISL program in Jamaica was reinforcing ethnocentrism of the students, which is a risk in all international study programs, particularly those of short duration in developing countries (Gökê-Pariolá & Smith-Pariolá, 2006, p. 76). Because Berry College has a tradition of short-term study abroad programs for students who cannot afford to study abroad for a full semester, the challenge was creating a service-focused trip in contrast to an academic focused trip. To achieve this goal, Berry College instituted the following policies (Gökê-Pariolá & Smith-Pariolá, 2006, p. 79):

1) Pre-departure staff and student self-awareness to acknowledge and fight against preconceived notions about Jamaica.

2) Students were working on service projects and conducting research simultaneously to connect the research to real people and real issues, mostly in the field of Education.

3) Students were required to conduct documentary research at the local University’s (UWI) library to interact with local students.

4) Daily discussions were held to help guide students through the process of connecting what they were experiencing to larger historical, cultural, political, and economic contexts.
5) Students were encouraged to informally reflect with each other and UWI students about their service projects and research.
6) Students were required to compile detailed field notes every day to document their research and reflection process and see growth.
7) Students were required to write a final report and reflection tying together their service project, research and Jamaican society and culture.

While Berry College recognizes there is room for improvement, they found their students achieved higher intercultural competence after the trip, grew personally and academically, and are en-route to becoming global citizens.

International Service Learning Providers

There are several opportunities for ISL Projects. Students can participate in ISL through their university or go on a program with a third party provider that specializes in ISL. I’ve identified four providers that present opportunities for individuals and institutions to be involved in ISL.

**Amizade: Global Service Learning**
Amizade is partnered with West Virginia University’s Office of International Programs and Center for Civic Engagement to provide credit bearing, semester long, ISL courses for university students. Additionally, they facilitate faculty-led ISL trips, group trips, or individual placements. Amizade’s (2013) emphasis is “Fair Trade Learning” (Fair Trade Learning Section, para. 4). They believe that Fair trade learning requires mutual benefit that transforms the classroom into an engine of change for program hosts and students. Amizade has regular internship opportunities available for students seeking careers in promoting ISL programs in the United States and abroad.

**International Service Learning Alliance (ISLA)**
ISLA is dedicated to sustainable development and service. They have a broad range of NGO partnerships in Uganda, and they focus on connecting community groups and individuals with these organizations. Individual internships in Uganda with NGO partners range from nine to seventeen weeks in a variety of fields. Their emphasis is longer-term involvement and immersion to enhance personal and professional development. ISLA does provide some employment and internship opportunities for young professionals. All internships are unpaid and located at ISLA’ headquarters in Sun Valley, Idaho with possibilities for future employment.

**International Service Learning®: Travel. Serve. Learn.**
International Service Learning® puts together teams of qualified individuals and groups to volunteer with one of their 16 programs worldwide (many in health). The programs are short term (two-three weeks) and designed for individuals who do not have time or cannot afford longer-term service trips abroad. All participants must have previous training in the project they will collaborate with, as the program is short-term and designed to broaden minds and encourage global citizenship, but not actively teach new skills. For example, nursing students may know how to properly give injections, but they will learn the dynamics of field hospitals in rural communities. Participants will be building on their own skill set and leaning new skills while volunteering in their field.
International Partnership for Service-Learning and Leadership (IPSL)

IPSL is similar to Amizade in their mission and values, but they mostly work with institutions (high school and college level) to provide short-term and semester long ISL trips. Additionally, individuals with a high school diploma can participate in an IPSL trip and earn college credit through IPSL university partners. All IPSL programs are run through a host institution. IPSL works with thirteen host institutions, providing an academic and service space. Hosts are in developed and developing countries, but all projects work with underserved populations. As well as providing trips for individuals and university groups, IPSL offers a Master of Arts in International Development and Service in partnership with the College of Theology, Arts and Sciences and the Department of International Studies at Concordia University-Portland.

Fund for International Service Learning (FISL)

FISL is an NGO dedicated to helping students finance international service-learning programs. They believe everyone with the desire and motivation should have the opportunity to work with and learn from communities in need all over the world and then share their knowledge and become change makers. FISL provides scholarships and works with IPSL and GoAbroad.com to ensure students find a program that fits their needs.

Conclusion

In this paper I have discussed how framing international service learning projects as community action programs that promote active citizenship can create sustainable change in our globalized world. Furthermore, I presented a possibility for measuring the success of ISL programs by measuring intercultural sensitivity and how ISL can be incorporated into every classroom even with young children. The two case studies illustrated successful ISL projects (long-term and short-term) at the university level to provide examples of best practice when designing and seeking ISL opportunities. Finally, I summarized four ISL service providers and their diverse offerings for community members, students and groups. While all of these groups have a different focus, they share values of community engagement, hands-on learning, active citizenship, and sustainable development. The last organization is focused primarily on providing funding specifically for ISL programs, demonstrating the need and desire for these programs. The international service-learning movement is growing and bringing people together. ISL uses globalization as a positive force for global change and for building understanding and community among global citizens.
Bibliography


