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"Progress and Promise for International Service Learning", Review Essay: International Service Learning: Conceptual Frameworks and Research

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Review Essay

Progress and Promise for International Service-Learning

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International Service Learning: Conceptual Frameworks and Research

Robert G. Bringle, Julie A. Hatcher, and Steven G. Jones, Editors
Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2011

When I began practicing International Service Learning (ISL) as a junior faculty member, there was no academic literature about this transformational pedagogy. Indeed, at that time, the domestic service-learning literature had just begun to emerge following proliferating calls for community-engaged pedagogies that would enhance the civic education of America's college students (e.g., Boyer & Hechinger, 1981; Barber, 1992). Two decades later, I am happy to report that ISL has become the subject of serious scholarship, certainly informed by decades of research on international education and the more recent growth in service-learning literature, but now elaborated in its own right with empirical support for why and how this pedagogy can produce "high impact" (Kuh, 2008) learning and other outcomes for participating students and communities. *International Service Learning: Conceptual Frameworks and Research* is a clear sign that ISL has matured as a compelling applied pedagogical approach and also as a field characterized by multiple and inter-disciplinary conceptual frameworks and rigorous academic inquiry. This volume signals the consolidation of several concurrent and intersecting trends in higher education, reveals the progress to date in ISL practice and research, and points the way forward for the field's further progression.

The editors divide *International Service Learning: Conceptual Frameworks and Research* into four parts. The first section focuses on the conceptual work of defining ISL and situating it in relation to other familiar educational trends: service-learning, study abroad, and international education. The second part explores the relationship between ISL courses and research, providing several specific examples of ISL engagements and the study of their learning outcomes. The third section outlines a research agenda for ISL and provides multi-methodological approaches for realizing it. Finally, a single essay in the concluding section offers reflections on

ISL from the vantage point of contexts and host communities outside of North America. A quick perusal of the table of contents affirms that the contributing authors are experienced and well-regarded service-learning scholars, the chapters are complementary and together comprise a thorough exploration of the topic, and issues such as context variables and ethical dilemmas are covered. The chapters reference each other throughout, and this contributes to the way the book coheres as a whole, even though most of the chapters succeed well on their own. Some repetition in the introductory material of each chapter is a common occurrence in volumes of this type. The book includes author biographies and is well indexed; the reference section of each chapter supplies an invaluable multi-disciplinary bibliography inclusive of the philosophical foundations for service-learning as well as educational and learning theory, cross-cultural psychology and communication, and many other disciplines whose empirical traditions inform ISL practice and research.

In their introductory chapter, Bringle and Hatcher do a fine job of laying out the terrain, pointing out the intersections between service-learning, study abroad, and international education, and identifying ISL at "the triple intersection" (p. 14). The authors provide a useful definition of ISL (achieved through a strategic revision of their earlier definition of service-learning):

A structured academic experience in another country in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that addresses identified community needs; (b) learn from direct interaction and cross-cultural dialogue with others; and (c) reflect on the experience in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a deeper understanding of global and intercultural issues, a broader appreciation of the host country and the discipline, and an enhanced sense of their own responsibilities as citizens, locally and globally. (p. 19)

Exploring the various known and imagined benefits of service-learning, study abroad, and international education, Bringle and Hatcher argue compellingly that "ISL is the most powerful pedagogy available to higher education" today (p. 23), predicting that research will demonstrate that it intensifies the documented outcomes and benefits from service-learning, study abroad, or international education practiced alone. This claim is variously supported in the subsequent chapters of the book with exploration of myriad contexts and necessary conditions for achieving desired outcomes. Bringle and Hatcher note that the contributors to this volume chose to focus predominantly on students in ISL, a fact that replicates mainstream I/SL literature (e.g., Cruz & Giles, 2000), and a caveat that I found disappointing. Despite its difficulties, we in the field simply must begin to prioritize (or partner with development scholars and others to study) the impact of ISL on community partners—organizations, leaders, client populations, and publics. Nevertheless, I was pleased to see that many of the chapters in fact broadened their focus beyond students in their choice of theoretical frameworks, in their reviews of previous studies, within research design ideas, or through discussion of challenges to effective practice and research.

The remainder of the first section elaborates on this setup. Of particular note is William M. Plater's chapter on the context for ISL. The author weaves together John Dewey's educational philosophy with Thomas Friedman's (and others') contemporary and historical descriptions and analyses of globalization, thereby contextualizing ISL very broadly. He argues that ISL plays a crucial role in the "urgency of internationalization" faced by higher education (p. 34), not only for the production of graduates with deep global awareness and job-readiness, but for our institutions to remain competitive in the increasingly global higher education marketplace. As well, he explores competing notions of citizenship, a set of crucial learning outcomes, and suggests ways that ISL can be applied in domestic contexts, all of which advance the conceptual value of the introductory section of the book. Chapter 4, by Nicholas V. Longo and John Saltmarsh, is similarly noteworthy for its exploration of approaches to operationalizing citizenship as a variable in ISL research. They provide a number of useful conceptualizations to guide research questions and hypotheses, including specific competencies under the rubric of citizenship. I appreciated their mindfulness of cultural variations in defining and understanding citizenship, and emphasis on integrating reciprocity, mutuality, and community impact into our research agendas and designs.

Longo and Saltmarsh propose we adopt the term "Global Service Learning" to denote the true merg-

ing of international education and service-learning, thereby taking the emphasis off of the location of the service and putting it on the type of learning. Indeed, we are beginning to see a proliferation of this term, not only within this text and the SL literature, but as well in program names, definitions, and descriptions (e.g., Gonzalez, 2009; Amizade *Global Service-Learning and Volunteer Programs*; R. Hunter Simpson *Global Service Learning Fellowship* at the University of Washington). Plater concurs that, in addition to a traditional understanding of ISL as service-learning experiences that unfold in nations foreign to the students, global service learning includes "ISL at home" and "service learning in the U.S. by students from abroad" (p. 46; Bringle and Hatcher also touch on this broader conceptualization). The argument is persuasive that our local communities are rich with compelling global learning opportunities and I see an explosion of examples at my own institution. These chapters can assist us with better articulating the goals, designing the engagements, and understanding the outcomes for work at the nexus of the global and the local in ISL.

The second section of the 400-page volume ostensibly focuses on program and course design as each informs research design, though it is more aptly about epistemology. Steven G. Jones and Kathryn S. Steinberg's chapter is especially useful in this regard. In addition to creating a typology of ISL program models (based on variables such as type, intensity, and duration of the service component; whether courses are taught by host or home culture instructors; and the degree to which the service is "sandwiched" by course-based learning, orientations, and other preparations), the authors conduct a meta-analysis of 40 or so studies on the impact of ISL. This chapter identifies several shortcomings in the extant research on ISL, including rare use of comparison or control groups; failure to account for student demographics and predispositions in research design; not accounting for (or analyzing) the role of intervening variables; difficulties eliminating the role of self-selection bias; too heavy reliance on qualitative methods with very small sample sizes; failure to examine discrete program characteristics in relation to hypothesized student outcomes; little attention to context variables in the host culture, community, or service setting; surprising lack of focus on relative length of the ISL experience in relation to outcomes; over-reliance on student self-reports and journals for data; and all the usual limitations of case study research. In other words, their discussion points out the array of pitfalls in social scientific research and the manifestation of these hazards in the small but growing body of ISL research. However, I do not mean to suggest that this chapter is hypercritical of existing research or demor-

alizing to researchers; on the contrary, it motivates us toward next steps in our research.

Susan Buck Sutton's chapter on anthropological approaches to ISL research serves as a kind of counterpoint to Jones and Steinberg. She asserts passionately, "qualitative methods are more than techniques. They are an epistemological stance, and they are deployed within a theoretical framework" (p. 136). Defending the case study, she reminds us that "well-contextualized case studies are not mere illustrations; they are the building blocks of cross-cultural theory and essential for the conceptual reformulations that must accompany thinking about service learning outside the context where it arose" (p. 127). Sutton makes a compelling case for understanding ISL courses as a crucial component of a comprehensive program of ISL research given the ways student inquiry in ISL contexts reflects anthropological fieldwork in activities such as sustained and close observation, interviews and focus groups, dialogue, and participation. Her argument recalled for me Kenneth Reardon's (1998) assertion that participatory action research is service-learning. Sutton's case study of the evolution of her ISL course in Greece also reinforces what many of us know from our own experience—that through ISL our teaching, research, and service are nurtured in relation to the other, each mutually informing the other until the paradigmatic boundaries between these traditionally disparate categories of academic labor disappear. Further, our ISL research often arises from our pedagogy and progresses in relation to the trial and error we encounter in our practice. Sutton offers frank reflections on missteps along the way; I couldn't help but recall my own struggles. Sutton concludes with a list of contextual learning objectives for ISL, and while these are not presented as measurable learning outcomes, they provide the basis for developing them.

Also in this section are chapters on the role of reflection within ISL practice and research (which seems more akin to the articles in section three, *Conducting Research on International Service Learning*, so I discuss it with those pieces, below), and an evocative, if somewhat hyperbolic essay by Hilary Kahn, who posits *cinéma vérité* as both method and metaphor for ISL. I'm not sure the metaphor works, but the idea of interrogating the gaze in ISL as well as the potential for using cinematic/photographic methods in ISL research is very intriguing. What is captivating about section two of this volume is the way the pieces seem to work from vastly different epistemologies: Jones and Sternberg as empirical social scientists (largely in the quantitative tradition based on their critiques of the literature and the assumptions revealed therein), Kahn deploying the language and methods of the arts, and Sutton

as a cultural anthropologist and qualitative/critical researcher. Rather than producing an epistemological debate, however, these chapters work in dialogue with the others, each reminding us of diverse ways of seeing and ways of knowing, and how each approach challenges our taken-for-granted assumptions about research, ISL, and ourselves as practitioner-scholars.

In the third section, the promise of the title is realized with the six articles on ISL research. These include a brisk overview of topics in a comprehensive ISL research agenda (by Humphrey Tonkin), chapters that relate ISL research to the extant research on service-learning (Janet Eyler) and international learning (Richard Kiely), respectively, and chapters that provide theoretical, research design, and methodological frameworks for quantitative (Bringle, Hatcher, & Williams) and qualitative (Richard Kiely & Eric Hartman) research. The section ends with a discussion of ethics in ISL research, but ethical considerations are in no way ghettoized in this chapter. In fact, in all of these chapters I was pleased to see so much exploration of the ideology and ethics of ISL, concern for local organizations and people (despite the stated focus on students and their learning), and attention paid to the power dynamics of ISL practice and academic research alike. As well, numerous configurations of ISL are used as examples throughout these chapters such that, even though ideals for practice and research are provided and promoted, the discussion meets us wherever we are and guides us from there. These chapters are as useful for the reviews of existing literatures each provides as for the many gaps identified by the authors for our attention and next steps. Given the range of project types and research designs included, this section will be of value to most ISL practitioners and researchers regardless of discipline or methodological bent.

Chapter 8 by Brandon C. Whitney and Patti H. Clayton about reflection is important to highlight here. Though it appears in the second section of the volume (about course design), it does as much as any of the chapters in section three to outline a research agenda, advance a variety of research questions, and suggest specific study design ideas. It is now a commonly understood principle that "reflection is key to the shared learning promised by [SL] pedagogy" (p. 149); Whitney and Clayton explicate carefully how and why reflection is the primary mechanism through which learning is generated in I/SL. In addition to creating and deepening learning, critical reflection also *documents* learning and, sometimes combined with other measures, can provide the primary data through which we study SL programs and their outcomes. The authors use three vignettes to illustrate various models of ISL (short-term immersion and service trips, semester-long programs that integrate coursework and ser-

vice, and summer internship/independent study experiences), and note a variety of roles for reflection in each. I appreciated that they did not dismiss the relevance of any of these ISL models, given that most of us inherit the models previously established and practiced at our institutions; rather, they focus on maximizing the value of each. In five elaborate tables, Whitney and Clayton present examples of reflective prompts, reflection-related research variables, and strategies for reflection in ISL programs, individual courses, and research projects. As do many of the chapters in this volume, Whitney and Clayton's contribution stands strongly on its own. It includes philosophical foundations for SL, exploration of the relationship between domestic and international SL experiences, a discussion of the fundamental characteristics of good practice, a research agenda with accompanying methodological frameworks, and many compelling questions for our own reflection on this pedagogy, its practice, and our study of it.

Richard Kiely's characteristically thoughtful and incisive chapter, "What International Service Learning Can Learn from Research on International Learning," is a good companion to Whitney and Clayton's in its ability to cover all the bases. Drawing on more than half a century of studies related to intercultural learning, Kiely lays out a number of the key concepts that can serve as dependent or independent variables in ISL research (e.g., culture shock, cross-cultural adjustment, intercultural competence) and summarizes general learning theories that have been applied to international education and study abroad. These concepts, which may be unfamiliar to scholars in many disciplines, are crucial to effective research on the impact of ISL, and the research traditions that explicate them are very well developed. The subsequent chapters on quantitative and qualitative research methods in ISL provide good advice for research design and reference exemplar studies in each epistemological tradition. Richard Kiely and Eric Hartman's (chapter 13) section on "qualitative research as pedagogy" (pp. 307-308) expands Sutton's earlier discussion of ISL courses as "the front lines of a comprehensive program of ISL research" (p. 126).

The last chapter in this section (by Carole Wells, Judith Warchal, Ana Ruiz, and Andrea Chapdelaine) invites us to consider the relative risks and benefits of ISL, delineating common, though not commonly discussed, ethical considerations and dilemmas. Their discussion constructively merges exploration of the ethics of service-learning with the ethics of research, and links these to practitioner-scholars' responsibilities, competencies, and methods, as well as to issues related to ISL partnerships and the dissemination of research. A "do no harm" philosophy emerges that focuses substantially on the host communities and

other partners in ISL (also see Crabtree, 2007; Cruz & Giles, 2000; Illich, 1990). Though it did not receive much emphasis here, it is important to consider, as well, the potentially deleterious effects of I/SL on students (e.g., Kiely, 2004).

The book's final chapter is by Mabel Erasmus, a professor in South Africa who has advanced SL in that country and hosted North American ISL partners. These vantage points allow her to discuss the burgeoning practice of service-learning around the world as well as the structural and ethical issues arising in ISL partnerships. She calls for an evidence-based approach to understanding SL partnerships and the principles of participation and reciprocity that should characterize them. The author explicates her argument with specific responses to or elaborations on information in earlier chapters. Erasmus reminds us that, in addition to the "urgency of internationalization" of education presented by Plater in an early chapter, there are urgent social problems requiring creative solutions and dialogic collaboration. ISL is a pedagogical approach that can cultivate the requisite civic and intercultural skills among young people around the globe toward this end.

International Service Learning: Conceptual Frameworks and Research, edited by experienced leaders in service-learning pedagogy and research, should be of great interest to faculty teaching ISL courses, to staff helping develop and (co-)lead ISL experiences, to scholars interested in conducting productive research on ISL and its outcomes, and to administrators at institutions seeking to enhance their traditional study abroad programs and/or globalize their service-learning engagements. While this volume does not take up the challenges of how we can advance ISL during these difficult economic times when we are doing more with less and less, some chapters provide compelling rationale and concrete examples that we can leverage in our arguments for resources. While the research on learning outcomes reviewed in and proposed by this volume focuses substantially on assessing general education and, to a lesser extent, disciplinary learning, it is also worth considering the relevance to employers of the learning that takes place through global community engagement. Results of a recent AAC&U survey of employers emphasizes application and hands-on experience, analysis of complex problems, collaboration and teamwork in diverse settings, understanding of the global context and the role of the U.S. in it, awareness of cultural diversity in the U.S. and other countries, and civic participation and community engagement, among others (Hart Research Associates, 2010). These are all learning goals shared by ISL and ones that can be multiplied and intensified through ISL experiences. This points to the con-

crete and practical importance of ISL, which we must promote to prospective students and their parents, and that we must help our graduates articulate as they pursue a variety of professional paths.

As an academic administrator with responsibility for creating the conditions in which high impact practices can flourish in my college and community, I found ample inspiration and numerous illustrations to support my efforts in faculty development, student recruitment and retention, program evaluation, and assessment of student learning. As well, I found it striking—and heartening—that 11 of 22 authors who contributed to this volume have served in significant administrative positions at their institutions; six of these have been at the level of vice president or higher. This bodes well for our institutions and indicates that two crucial changes have taken place in the past couple of decades: (1) our educational leaders increasingly understand the intricacies of I/SL pedagogies and community-based research and, (2) in many cases, it seems, those scholars and staff at our colleges and universities who dedicate their careers to community-based and international teaching and research are emerging as our institutional leaders.

The development of programs, courses, and partnerships that achieve the desired outcomes of such community- and globally-engaged experiences for students, while also doing so ethically and responsibly, will require significant communal reflection at our institutions in addition to ongoing research. Throughout this volume we are reminded that ISL provides a rich context for multi- and inter-disciplinary research, for the study of teaching and learning, and for research related to the needs and objectives of communities and other partners. Taking an integrative approach to developing, studying, promoting, and supporting ISL programs across higher education institutions will be critical to mounting the level of commitment necessary to realize the vision articulated in this volume. This book is an essential reference to inform this shared mission.

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