

# **The Impact of Faculty Reflection on International Service Learning Experiences**

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## **Abstract**

Higher education institutions are embracing international service learning experiences in an effort to fulfill their missions and create opportunities for students to meet the challenge of global citizenship. The engagement of faculty in service and learning presents them with a unique opportunity. Namely, to explore self-study in the development of both personal and professional skills, as well as the tools necessary to meet the instructional needs of preparing students for citizenship in a globalized world.

## **Introduction**

Rapid advances in information technology are binding each of us into an interconnected world community. Thomas Friedman (2005) warns us as a result of globalization and “flattening” individuals must determine how they will fit into the global competition and opportunities. Determining how we educate our children will be more important than how much. To succeed in an increasingly interconnected global economy, Bell-Rose & Desa (2005) conclude that today’s students must acquire a far different set of knowledge, skills and perspectives than previous generations.

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This article focuses on my reflections as a faculty member engaged in a meaningful International Service learning (ISL) experience. Examining the ISL outcomes for students, community and faculty shaped my faculty development. Personal self-study and reflection improved my teaching effectiveness, developed cultural competency, and improved the quality of international service learning experiences.

### **Faculty Professional Development**

Economic and societal demands have shaped and redefined faculty development at higher education institution over the years. The focus of faculty development has progressed from the advancement and expertise of subject area (Sullivan 1983, Gaff and Simpson, 1994) evolving into the improvement of teaching effectiveness (Baiocco and DeWaters 1995). Consumers of education have changed and there are ongoing rapid changes in technology and globalization. Faculty development must align personal and professional growth with institutional mission and sustainability (Bland and Schmitz 1990, Camblin and Steger 2000). Essential issues of contemporary faculty development include expansion of personal faculty awareness (Hubbard and Atkins 1995); strengthening relationships among colleagues (Gaff and Simpson 1994), advance institutional missions and sustainability for individual faculty members and higher education institutions (Blackburn and Lawrence 1995).

Critical reflection is necessary for teachers to meet the challenges facing students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Yost et al, 2000). It is equally important for faculty to develop their reflection skills (Brookfield, 1995; Crabtree, 1999; Eyler, 2002). Reflection supports the development of critical thinkers who analyze, evaluate, and explore possibilities and prepare individuals for global citizens. Faculty modeling of the reflective practitioner for students is another avenue to meet the complex and multi-faceted goals of service learning. Faculty self-reflection has the potential to improve teaching effectiveness as it supports the development of their pedagogical repertoire. (Harden, 2000; Loughran, 1996; Smith, 2001; Wideen et al., 1998). Loughran (1996) describes explicit modeling for teachers as journal writing and “thinking aloud”. Lunenburg et al (2007) note that an active facilitation of student learning requires modeling from the teacher to meet the changing needs in education. The reflection process for students and faculty can foster an enhanced sense of the uncertainty or uniqueness of situations that arise in a changing world (Schön, 1983).

Reflective practice for teachers has evolved and influenced the practice of self-study (Russell, 2004). "Self-study has thus been an important vehicle for many teacher educators to find meaningful ways of researching and better understanding the complex nature of teaching and learning about teaching" (Loughan 2005). LaBoskey (2004) outlines four components in her perspective into the methodology of self-study. Self-study is improvement-aimed, interactive, employs primarily qualitative methods and sharing of the work with the professional community. Korthagen and Lunenberg (2004) conclude, "self-study research contributes to a process of growing professionalism and empowerment of the teacher educator community as a whole" (p. 446). Connecting my personal account from an International Service learning experience with the broader practice of teaching is aligned with current approaches to practitioner inquiry or self-study. My personal reflection and self-study of an International Service learning experience contributed to my pedagogical development and improved effectiveness of future service learning experiences.

### **International Service Learning for Global Citizenship**

Higher education institutions are using international service learning (ISL) to fulfill their mission, create opportunities for students to define skills and learning outcomes needed for effective global citizenship (Brown, 2007). College campuses across the country are developing structures and capacity for students to expand their learning, develop themselves as civic community members and engage in meaningful partnerships through a variety of experiences, including ISL experiences. "Today's students have no choice but to be global citizens. As educators, we are challenged to provide learning 'experiences that integrate how students think, feel, and relate to others, i.e., develop students to become global citizens'" (Braskamp, 2008).

ISL combines academic instruction, reflection and community-based service in an international context (Crabtree, 2008). Benefits from international learning experiences for students in a variety of disciplines have been noted in the literature. They include learning cultural differences, comparing health care systems, and augmenting personal development (Berry & Chisholm, 1999; Button, et al 2005; Zorn, 1996; Duffy, 2005; Sawyer and Lopopolo, 2004). Kiely and Nielsen (2002) note ISL programs facilitate "intercultural competence, language skills, appreciation of difference, tolerance of ambiguity, and

experiential understanding of complex global problems related to their academic program of study."

Graduates overwhelmingly support international education and described its personal and professional impact well beyond the actual experience. Sawyer and Lopopolo (2004) reported significant changes in students' abilities to focus on relevant information, to think critically, to strategize systematically, and to problem solve effectively in their provision of care. Haq et al (2000) found multiple significant impacts on students' knowledge, attitudes, and skills gained through international health experiences, which are important for medical practice in the United States and abroad. In the past 10 years, 28% (US) of the US programs had ISL with positive effect on student personal development and the facilitation of the students' development of cross cultural competencies were found to be the greatest benefits of ISL (Pechak, 2007).

### **The Role of Faculty in ISL Experiences**

"Service learning classes, with their triad of partners, have complex and multi-faceted goals that set them apart from traditional courses" (Seifer & Connors, 2007). Community Engaged Scholarship and experiential learning, including service learning can be messy and fraught with obstacles for faculty. "Many faculty remain uncomfortable with this type of instruction since it is time consuming, naturally introduces issues of ethics and personal development, creates difficulties in grading, and challenges the traditional standards of academic quality" (Braskamp, 2008). Furthermore, Taylor (2009) reminds us of the demands of tenure is frequently cited as a barrier for faculty engagement generally in service learning.

ISL requires extensive time commitments, appropriate outcome assessments, and development of quality experiences including ethical community partnerships. The knowledge and skill of individual and institutional capacities shape the quality of the international experiences for students. Knowledge, skill, motivation, time and previous international experiences contribute to individual capacity and expertise and the final student learning and community partnerships of ISL (Sherridan et al, 2008; Crump & Sugarmen, 2008).

As with all student-learning experiences, faculty members have a responsibility to develop high quality international experiences (Haq et al, 2000). The Faculty Toolkit for Service Learning In Higher Education encourages faculty

to develop themselves towards the goal of cultural competency through their own “ongoing self-assessment, reflection, and meaningful action” (Seifer & Connors, 2007). Faculty participating in ISL requires language training, communication workshops, and significant experience in relating educational tasks from and across curricula to assist in this process (Urraca et al, 2009; Tonkin, 2004). Explicit learning achieved through ISL experiences coupled with reflection provides an opportunity move beyond yourself and look at the big picture.

### **International Service Learning Experience**

This article highlights the improved effectiveness of ISL experiences through personal faculty reflection, ongoing self-study and meaningful action. The students and faculty of the University of Massachusetts, Lowell, along with other volunteers, have been participating in a project in the communities surrounding the city of Huarney, in the province of Ancash, in coastal and Andean Peru, since July 1997.

The Village Empowerment project focuses on installation of solar power stations in mountain communities, which have lacked electric power. Electrical power has provided lights in the medical posts, supported longevity of vaccines through refrigeration and improved radio communications between medical personal in the mountain clinics and the hospital in Huarney. Medical needs have been communicated to the solar energy team through the ongoing collaboration and semiannually visits in the medical clinics. The Peruvian villagers had identified some rehabilitation needs to the engineering faculty who, in turn, contacted the physical therapy department. This interdisciplinary engagement presented an excellent opportunity to incorporate an ISL experience, while satisfying a curricular need to meet core competencies required for graduate entry-level physical therapy practitioners.

I was contacted about the rehabilitation need in Peru at the time I was teaching a service learning course in the physical therapy department. By that time, I had developed a service learning course to meet the curricular needs of the physical therapy program. I had also completed my doctoral studies and was a new faculty member with 20 years of clinical expertise. Service learning as a teaching pedagogy was introduced to me by faculty colleagues. Service learning was a natural fit that combined my experience in the community and desire for social justice. I developed my skills in service learning through faculty mentoring and faculty development workshops. The Village Empowerment

Project met the academic objectives of the service learning course addressing cultural diversity and promoting wellness in diverse populations.

I planned my initial trip to Peru with the Village Empowerment project in June 2006 after meeting with the engineering faculty and students. My initial visit to Peru in June 2007 with the Village Empowerment team was without students so I could benefit from the experience and be better positioned to develop a quality ISL experience for students. My trip preparation was based on the verbal experiences of the engineering team, who had little first hand knowledge of the medical structure of the Peruvian country. My preparation included research on the country and the Peruvian medical system. I am not fluent in Spanish and had never traveled in a developing country. A volunteer, fluent in Spanish and English with experience in medical mission trips in developing countries, served as an interpreter for me. I visited medical clinics listening to the communities' needs, delivered equipment as appropriate, and distributed educational materials while training a rehabilitation community health worker.

I learned much from my initial experience from the people in Peru and the interdisciplinary team despite the many challenges I faced. One of the stark realizations was that I had not prepared myself adequately. I realized how much I had to learn before I could provide a quality student service learning experience. My lack of familiarity with all aspects of this cultural experience was the most overwhelming. In addition, because I was not fluent in Spanish, I worked with a translator (whom I had never met) 24 hours 7 days a week. There were many challenges working with an interdisciplinary team. Although I was an experienced clinician, providing clinical rehabilitation in remote villages proved to be challenging. Limited access to health care for many of the villagers in the mountains highlighted the social justice issue surrounding poverty, health and education. I found the best coping mechanism for myself was going through a daily reflection process. The reflection provided a structure to processing throughout the experience and as a summative evaluation at the completion of the trip.

During the spring of 2008, two physical therapy students were assigned to the Village Empowerment project in partial completion of their service learning course work. The service learning project involved the students developing educational exercise materials for adults and children, which were translated into Spanish. The materials were developed based on Peruvian community

member feedback from my previous trip a year earlier. In addition, the student project included the development of a clinic assessment tool and obtaining equipment donations for the medical clinics. Furthermore the physical therapy students collaborated with engineering students to design a swing for children with disabilities. I was confident I had learned from my last experience and provided a different tactic for preparing the students and myself for the ISL experience. I built in planning meetings, provided the students with appropriate trip logistics, and incorporated cultural issues into the trip planning and service learning project. Although, I did structure the experience differently, including establishing a blog as a tool for reflection, I continued to feel underprepared.

In subsequent years, I have continued my work in Peru with students and explored other opportunities in Nicaragua as my international experiences are aligned with the university's mission of providing community engaged experiences locally and globally. Each ISL experience I incorporate new and additional strategies to design a quality ISL experience. The years of piecing together a quality ISL experience based in social action have been based on trial and error versus an organized approach to faculty development.

## **Discussion**

Although my experiences have been short-term ISL, lasting a maximum of ten days, the magnitude of the experience left me with long-term lessons as an educator and made a significant contribution to my faculty development. The lessons from the ISL experience enriched my overall teaching pedagogy affecting my role in the classroom as an educator and my capacity for connecting with students. I developed skills necessary for designing quality ISL experiences in the future. More importantly through self-study and inquiry, I analyzed teaching pedagogy and faculty development, which is critical to facilitate global citizenship.

### *Lesson 1-Teaching Effectiveness*

The process of reflection throughout the ISL experience had a significant impact on my overall teaching effectiveness. Effective service learning pedagogy requires reflection. Many faculty members skillfully engage students through reflection activities and assignments. I initially used daily reflections as a means of trip documentation, but they soon became much more than that. I developed a personal and professional need to document the process of culture shock, communication issues, and a growing bank of questions regarding the needs of the community. The reflection process was critical and effective tool in

managing the formative feedback throughout the process and demands of being a member of an interdisciplinary team. As global citizens, our students will be required to effectively manage interdisciplinary projects and teams.

Reflection is one of the three cornerstones of service learning. Following my initial ISL experience, I restructured reflection-learning activities throughout all my courses for students and myself to increase the learning opportunities associated with reflection. I have added smaller service learning opportunities throughout several courses, with a reflection component. I have incorporated reflection papers in all my courses with a mixture of formative and summative reflection throughout the entire semester. The ongoing student reflection coupled with instructor responses and feedback nurtures students' ability to write reflections over time (Correia & Bleicher, 2008).

One of the tools I developed for subsequent ISL experience after 2007 was an ISL blog. The blog has effectively modeled reflection and has broadened the ISL experience to include students and community members at home. In addition, I have allocated time throughout the ISL experience for student reflection each day through verbal exchange. The relationship between faculty and students needs to be open and honest for both faculty and student to give and take in thoughtful reflection. Both faculty and students need to be mindful and deliberate about the reflection that is shared. Students are encouraged to have a daily reflection, but are required to submit a reflection paper within a week following the termination of the ISL experience.

I am now more skillful at facilitating reflection, due to my own reflection process throughout my personal ISL experiences and ongoing development of my teaching pedagogy. I continue to be mindful regarding the use personal reflection throughout a semester to develop my teaching effectiveness.

Many ISL experiences are powerful for faculty and students with tremendous personal growth. Faculty are required to be engaged in reflective and recursive praxis in preparation for managing the changes and guiding ourselves and students through the transformative process (Crabtree, 2008).

### *Lesson 2-Cultural competency*

Embracing diversity and expanding our perspectives is essential in the development of the global citizen. One of the ISL benefits as noted earlier in the paper is the increase in understanding and appreciation of cultural differences. Cross (1989) & Campinha-Bacote (2002) each state that cultural competence is a

developmental process. Cultural competency education should be provided using a variety of teaching methods that immerse students in cultural encounters that may include lecture, discussion, role play, active training techniques, self-awareness and self reflection, case studies and community activities to name a few. (Committee on Cultural Competence, 2008)

Kumagai and Lypson (2009) identify a need for change in the traditional relationship between teachers and students and faculty development to ensure the cultural competency of graduates that includes social justice and meeting human needs with a “critical consciousness.” Prior to my ISL experience I had incorporated knowledge, skills, and attitudes in course work to facilitate the development of cultural competence in students. After my ISL experience I realized the importance of developing my own cultural competence to effectively prepare students for ISL experiences and as global citizens. The lessons I learned through the experience appear to be straightforward and intuitive, but going through the process myself, working in a community that is based in a different culture from mine brought issues to light for me personally. Certainly the power of language and the impact on the relationship become paramount when I was totally dependent on someone else to facilitate my communication 24 hours a day 7 days a week. Understanding the unique context of culture is apparent when you are asked to make critical decisions based on community needs without the benefits of the resources many of us, myself included, take for granted. As an example, I was asked to visit with a young man on a mountainside in a wheelchair following a spinal cord injury incurred years prior. He lives with his family with no access to water or health care. The family was looking for ideas to help their son. I remember being humbled by the experience. What advice could I give about living with a spinal cord injury in this setting? I was able to help the family think about sitting positions and exercises to improve their son’s quality of life, but I still remember how difficult it was for me to effectively process rehabilitative interventions based on the cultural context for this person. Even though I had incorporated knowledge, skills, and attitudes in learning activities, I lacked the personal connection and relationships to build my own cultural competency. ISL is a potential opportunity for higher education institutions to include in the repertoire of faculty development in cultural competency.

### *Lesson 3-Quality Student Outcomes ISL*

Quality of student outcomes in ISL requires extensive preparation. I realized after my initial ISL experience I needed more and different preparation in order to maximize student-learning outcomes. Since the initial experience in 2007, I have participated in three additional ISL experiences. Each time I have adjusted the preparation prior to an ISL experience. I have modified the amount and structure of the process of preparation. A Volunteer Handbook was created as an interdisciplinary service learning project between the English and Engineering departments. The handbook effectively provides information on the concrete information needed for traveling, packing, medical preparation. I have utilized Spanish courses and books to increase my Spanish vocabulary. I structured weekly meetings to discuss some of the main challenges the students will face in terms of housing, food, water, poverty, and access to health care. Part of the preparation is guiding students and faculty in being flexible as the ISL experience unfolds. No matter how much I prepare students, and myself there will always be opportunities presenting themselves for critical analysis and reflection. Being prepared includes thinking on your feet, problem solving and discussion with community partners, ethical management of issues of power emerge which during an ISL experience. My ability to model reflection and create relationships with the students provides a foundation in guiding and facilitating students active engagement in service learning experiences.

### **Implications**

Higher education needs to rethink how faculty development is provided to enhance the skills and knowledge needed to prepare students to effectively within an increasingly competitive global workplace. In addition, faculty and scholars have an obligation to move themselves beyond an exclusive role as faculty and scholars and reflect on their own response to social needs, citizenship and cultural competency. "Self-study will almost inevitably lead to reflective critique, there is a certain dissatisfaction with the status quo and a concern about change, social justice, and professional action" (Pithouse, Mitchell & Weber, 2009).

Based on the literature and my experiences described in this case study a few practical insights into faculty developments are suggested.

1. Longitudinal faculty development experiences with peers (Avalos, 2011). A combination of face-to face and online content and

discussion will develop the skill of reflection as part of teaching pedagogy (Steinert et al, 2006).

2. Creating fellowship experiences for scholars in the development of self-study.

The ability to model and mentor global citizenship that includes reciprocal and ethical relationships with effective reflection will be incumbent on faculty. The reflection process documented in this article serves as a model to integrate the lessons and insights into a sustainable and effective effort in development of global citizens in higher education.

### **Conclusion**

This article demonstrates an individual faculty experience, which goes beyond exclusive attention to student learning and outcomes and includes a focus on faculty development. I realized quickly during my first experience that creating quality sustainable experiences begins with increasing the capacity of the teacher. Effective strategies for faculty development have been documented in the literature, but as higher education institutions continue to prepare students as global citizens new strategies for faculty development must be implemented. Faculty must be open to the value of extending their teaching and learning activities to include subjects such as cultural diversity. Faculty must have the courage to experience the unfamiliar and newness in people, languages and communities. Endurance and persistence will be required of faculty and higher education institutions to forge ahead as experiential learning activities evolve based on community needs and consider social justice as an essential component of class content.

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