

## **Towards an Ethical Ecology of International Service Learning**

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### **Abstract**

*International Service-Learning (ISL) is a pedagogical activity that seeks to blend student learning with community engagement overseas and the development of a more just society. ISL programmes have grown as educational institutions and non-governmental organisations have sought to achieve the goal of developing 'global citizens'. However, Service Learning (SL) in general and International Service-Learning (ISL) in particular remain deeply under theorised. These educational initiatives provide policy makers with a practical response to their quest for a 'Big Society' and present alluring pedagogical approaches for Universities as they react to reforms in Higher Education and seek to enhance both the student learning experience and graduate employability. After outlining the development of ISL in policy and practice, this paper draws on the rich tradition of ISL at one British university to argue that ISL is a form of engagement that has the potential to be ethical in character although we identify a number of factors that militate against this. Our contention is that ISL which promotes rational and instrumental learning represents a deficit model and we therefore conceptualise ISL here as a transformative learning experience that evinces distinctly aesthetic and even spiritual dimensions. Upon this theoretical groundwork we lay the foundations for conceptualizing ISL in ways that ensure its ethical integrity.*

### **Overview**

International Service-Learning (ISL) integrates community service overseas with the curriculum: it is a pedagogical approach, with a cosmopolitan orientation (Hansen, 2011), that emphasises learning as opposed to teaching and draws on theorists who have proposed that we learn through

combinations of thought and action, reflection and practice, theory and application (Aristotle 1941; Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984; Schon, 1983). ‘Service’ itself has multiple connotations from charitable to consumerist. For some universities ‘service to others’ such as volunteering is of primary importance while for other providers this service is secondary to an ‘academic strategy’ which emphasises service delivery of student learning. Crucially, ISL allows students to reflect upon their experiences, knowledge and understanding of global issues within a structured framework of learning (Jacoby, 2009). This provides the opportunity for educators to draw on real world contexts and develop analytical and problem-solving skills related to a student’s discipline. ISL has been defined as

A structured academic experience in another country in which students (a) participate in organised 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.

(Bringle and Hatcher, 2011: 19)

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.

The transformation of travel, technology and communications that has accompanied globalisation has ensured that, in contrast to our great grandparents, ‘the number of lives that enter our own is incalculable’ (Berger, 2005: 161). For Ulrich Beck, in a world of global crises and dangers

produced by such a civilisation, the human condition has already itself become cosmopolitan (2006: 2). From this cosmopolitan perspective, ‘the old differentiations between internal and external, national and international, us and them, lose their validity and a new cosmopolitan realism becomes essential to survival’ (2006: 14)

This paper highlights the ontological and epistemological aspects of such cosmopolitan learning and conceptualises ISL as a transformative pedagogical approach that involves shifts in both our ways of knowing and being in the world. As such, it lends credence to claims that cosmopolitan education has a distinctly aesthetic dimension (Hansen, 2008). It also involves being ‘receptive to all the contacts of life, which means being open to their transformative influence’ (Hansen, 2011: 102). We seek to move our conceptual understanding of ISL forward by focussing on its inherent aesthetic, moral and spiritual dimensions. We seek to develop an ethically based theory of the transformative aspects of ISL. From this view, cultural differences must be seen ‘as neither absolute nor antagonistic, but deeply interconnected and relationally defined’ (Rizvi, 2006: 32). It involves learning from other cultural trajectories and their interrelationship with our own. It demands being both ‘open reflectively to the new and loyal reflectively to the known.’ (Hansen, 2011: 36) This demands holding differences in tension and confronting issues of social inequality. This political and moral dimension is central to David Held’s definition of cosmopolitanism as the ‘ethical and political space which sets the terms of reference for the recognition of people’s equal moral worth, their active agency and what is required for their autonomy and development’ (Held, 2010: 49). Transformation from this perspective is incremental rather than epochal and involves an ongoing process of becoming.

### **Policy Context of International Service-Learning**

In International Service-Learning (ISL), students use their skills and knowledge to make a distinctive contribution to partner communities overseas and have a commitment to learn from their engagement in this activity and immersion in their new context. This is an ambitious endeavour; communities in diverse contexts across the world become sites of learning for students as they participate in programs that attempt to solve issues relating to poverty and social injustice. This presents a series of inter-related issues demanding further interrogation if educators are to avoid exacerbating the social inequities they seek to ameliorate. Development initiatives have been criticised for being self-serving and epitomising a new form of colonialism with negative outcomes (Chambers, 1997) and ISL therefore presents educational opportunities with complex ethical considerations.

The allure of the opportunity to travel to remote locations off the tourist trail while making a contribution to disadvantaged communities is demonstrated by the proliferation of organisations offering young people from the North (developed world) volunteering opportunities in the South (developing world). This includes ‘gap year’ companies accountable to young people as consumers of a product which offers exposure to other cultures, adventure and a “life-changing” experience that is rarely defined or evaluated. These organisations have been accused of operating without reflection on their impact and even of exploiting the communities they seek to serve (Simpson, 2004). In contrast, respected and established non-government and third sector organisations such as Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) or British Universities North America Club (BUNAC), offer programmes of which the authors of this article have had first hand experience.

A growing number of individuals, particularly from developed countries, have enjoyed the opportunity of an international educational experience. Although traditionally these take place over a

semester or a full year, their duration is often now much shorter and they are no longer available only to the most affluent students. For instance, a number of teacher education projects in the UK include the opportunity to observe alternative educational systems overseas during brief study trips during their postgraduate training. In the USA, participation in international study programs tripled from 1985 to 2000 (Gordon, 2003; Holland and Kedia, 2003; Parker and Dautoff, 2007). There are clearly differences between study abroad and ISL: the latter emphasises reciprocal learning, contrasting with the view that the students themselves are the principal beneficiaries. However, concepts that have developed as central to (I)SL such as reflective practice (Dewey, 1933), cultural understanding (Gmelch, 1997) and exposure through immersion (Kiely, 2004) are all pertinent to enhancing the student experience of study abroad.

Combining a period studying abroad with service-learning in this new context (Parker and Dautoff, 2007) has been made possible as individuals in a growing number of countries are exposed to service-learning concepts and practices. For example, in India many universities have established social involvement programs (Bamber et al, 2009) that complement disciplinary study. The International Partnership for Service-Learning and Leadership (IPSL) operates semester long and summer programs in over a dozen countries in both the North and South (Tonkin, 2004). In Europe, science shops established in the 1960s involve students conducting research on behalf of community organisations. There is also an emergent service-learning discourse (Strait and Lima, 2009; McIlrath and Mac Labhrainn 2007) demonstrated by the success of the International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement Research Conference which has taken place annually since 2001.

A concern for what we term ‘service apathy’ among citizens in general, and college students in particular, along with an awareness of the development of an individualistic society, less concerned

with the common good (Bellah et al, 1985), has led to growth in service-learning activity (Bamber and Hankin, 2011). Proponents of ISL argue they contribute to social change through helping to modify the attitudes, values and beliefs of participating students (Crabtree, 2008). Substantial anecdotal evidence of the transformative nature of an overseas experience belies a paucity of research into the exact nature of this learning experience. Further research is also required into secondary education where students, especially sixth formers, engage in ISL. For instance, some academies in the UK sponsored by charities or organizations already working with communities in the developing world often provide ISL in such a context for their students. Research is ongoing in one such academy (Pike, 2010) whose sixth formers engage in ISL in South Africa on an annual basis. First hand exposure to other cultures opens up an eclectic range of learning opportunities such as language learning, cross-cultural awareness, personal transformation and growth as well as the creation of a world-wide horizon. However, Pusch for example explores the continuum from ethnocentric to ethnorelative attitudes as experienced by ISL participants (2004). An appreciation that the anticipated outcomes for young people do not automatically result from time spent overseas has driven calls for regulation of the international volunteering sector in the UK (DEA, 2007: 4) which is reflected in the development of codes of practice for international volunteering organisations (NIDOS, 2009).

In the USA there has been a significant movement towards models of service-learning in general and ISL in particular as an extension of the notion of charity and volunteerism over the last half century (Jacoby, 1996; Butin, 2006; Annette, 2008). In the 1960s a group of loosely connected practitioners (Stanton et al, 1999) began exploring integrating community service and academic learning. The involvement of college students with community action was propelled by the launch of the Peace Corps in 1961 and Volunteers to Serve America in 1965 (Jacoby et al, 2009). National Campus Compact was subsequently established in 1985 to support colleges and universities to

promote public and community service that develops students' citizenship skills and helps campuses forge effective community partnerships. By 2006 it had over 1000 campus members with the organization claiming 298 million service hours were completed by students on 25,000 different service learning programs during 2005.

The growing prevalence of this service-learning activity was buttressed by at least two other concurrent developments in higher education in the US: The growth of service-learning initiatives continues to be driven by calls for active-learning strategies in undergraduate education (Shulman, 2002; Butin, 2006: 1) and a renewed acknowledgement of the public roles and responsibilities of American higher education captured in Boyer's notion of the 'scholarship of engagement' (Boyer, 1996). Service-learning has therefore gained prominence in American higher education in a short space of time. John Dewey's pragmatism, Boyer's engaged scholarship (Boyer, 1996) and most recently Robert Putnam's concern for the decline in social capital (Putnam, 1995) have provided a firm foundation for theorists and practitioners in the USA and elsewhere

In the UK, developments in this area are not as extensive although they are still significant. Of course, the engagement of the University with the local community is not new in the UK. The original university settlement house, Toynbee Hall in London, was established in 1884 and became the basis of the settlement movement that swept England and the USA, inspiring Dewey through his collaborative work with Jane Addams and colleagues at Hull House, a settlement house in Chicago, in the late 1890's (Saltmarsh, 1996: 17). In the last two decades of the nineteenth century students from the universities of Oxford and Cambridge came to Toynbee Hall to work among, and improve, the lives of the poor of the city during their holidays. In the words of its founder, Anglican clergyman Rev. Samuel Barnett, the students came 'to learn as much as to teach; to receive as much

to give'. Well over a century later, Barnett's words are echoed by students returning from an ISL experience:

I think we all went thinking we were doing something fantastic, and we probably did do something fantastic, but not as much as what... the effect it had on us.

*Angela, ISL student participant, Sri Lanka, 2005*

In terms of education policy, however, attempts to encourage service-learning in the UK are very recent. The 1997 Dearing Commission into Higher Education advocated an increased emphasis on the development of key skills and work related or community based learning (Annette and McLaughlin, 2005: 86). The Russell Commission (2005) however recognised that volunteering conferred economic and social benefits to both the individual and society and it recommended developing an ethos of volunteering, understood as "planned, non-obligatory, pro-social activities to benefit another person, cause or group" (Penner, 2004), across all phases of formal education in the UK. The emphasis on 'active citizenship' (Pike, 2007) in UK education parallels developments in the US, although the scope for SL within citizenship education could be made more explicit and expanded significantly in the light of the importance of the 'Big Society'. The focus recently has been on political participation (voting) rather than service-learning (Pike, 2011). From the view that separating citizenship education from forms of global education perpetuates a less relevant understanding of citizenship (Davies and Reid, 2005), ISL provides one particular pedagogical response. We propose that some of the income generated by the the fee changes in UK higher education in 2012 be devoted to those whose needs are greater than our own and which put the recent western 'austerity' into perspective.

There are good reasons to support such policy although critics would argue that service-learning might be better placed outside of the institutions formal curriculum. Participation in community



activities is known to confer economic and social benefits to both the individual and society. There has been a substantial increase in the number of students in Higher Education (HE) accessing volunteering opportunities within their local community and abroad (Bamber and Hankin, 2011). The initiatives developed to date by UK HEI's are primarily extra-curricular and concerned with graduate employability. For example, the University of Bristol recently launched the 'PLuS award' whereby students who gain professional and life skills through involvement in extra-curricular events and activities receive an extra curricular qualification. In this initiative work experience is commensurate with voluntary community action. Manchester University's Leadership Programme attempts to combine academic study with volunteering through offering a series of academic units, although these are run by the Careers & Employability Division as opposed to being discipline based. The 'Service and Leadership Award' at Liverpool Hope University rewards both local or international volunteering that also takes place outside of students formal study. The latter is the only such Award in the UK to include 'service' in its title and entails structured preparatory work and subsequent reflection upon service. The implementation of the recommendations of the Browne Review into the future of Higher Education in the UK is anticipated to increase pressure on institutions to consider the role of pedagogical approaches such as ISL that will enhance the student learning experience and improve graduate employment rates (Collini, 2010: 24|)

HEIs have therefore been accused of ignoring the moral aspects of the challenges associated with contributing to a democratic, civilised and inclusive society by concentrating much more on instrumental processes (Arthur, 2005; Pike, 2007, 2011) and academic or vocational knowledge and skills. It has been claimed that education for democracy and citizenship has historically been seen as

the responsibility of the school system (at least in the UK) and an irrelevance to Higher Education (Annette and McLaughlin, 2005: 76). Byron (2000) suggests that faith-based HE institutions in the UK are more likely to build upon the grounding that students have engaged in compulsory education for citizenship within the secondary school curriculum that was inspired by the Crick Report (QCA, 1998) although this was more 'political' and based upon civic republicanism (Crick, 2000) than notions of service. It might even be argued that the emphasis on student voice often reinforces a focus on the developed world rather than listening to those in the developed world. Further, such citizenship is often more about inculcation in democracy and participation in one's own country rather than serving others overseas (Pike, 2008)

Annette (2008) argues that service-learning should be instrumental to challenging students to think and act politically in a way that volunteering alone does not necessarily do. Critics of service-learning are concerned by any perceived moves away from the critical thinking associated with research and teaching towards skills development and a concern for community cohesion generated through establishing reciprocal relationships that arise through partnerships within the community at home and abroad. To date initiatives to this end within HE have not been investigated in any detail either in the US or UK. Theoretical groundings for ISL are embryonic and have only recently been discussed in the literature. (Bringle et al, 2011; Crabtree 2008). Crabtree concludes that regardless of whether ISL is 'conceptualised as teaching, development work, or a movement for social justice' (2008: 29) we must become more attuned to the relational aspects of ISL.

### **Transformative Learning**

Transformational learning theory (Mezirow, 1991, 2000) is an approach to adult learning that contrasts its potentially transformative nature with the formative, socializing and acculturating

process of learning in childhood. This theory of learning interrogates the ways we make meaning of our experiences. Our underlying values, assumptions and beliefs are often uncritically absorbed in childhood through family, school, community and culture. These influence the way we see the world and make meaning – our worldview. Transformative learning (TL) occurs as we are led to question or at least perceive our own ‘bias’ and way of seeing the world and our assumptions.

The goals that transformative learning sets itself are both daunting and inspiring. The transformative process of exposing and bringing to our consciousness distorted and unchallenged assumptions provides a counterbalance to the resilience of ignorance and deception. Dirkx argues TL ‘represents a heroic struggle to wrest consciousness and knowledge from the forces of unconsciousness’ (1997: 79). The challenge of becoming aware of our worldview can be related to seeing a windscreen that we are accustomed to looking through. This presents one side of the claim that TL demands learners to ‘think for a change’ (both senses intended) by surfacing, interrogating and overhauling unquestioned assumptions about the world in a process where reason and logic overcome instinct, ignorance and irrationality. Mezirow asserts that transformative learning experiences should question taken-for-granted assumptions and should be interpreted to bring to light contradictions and thereby facilitate the move toward inclusive, permeable, integrated-meaning perspectives (2000: 21).

This is consistent with Rizvi’s conception of cosmopolitan learning, an attempt to ‘develop in students a set of epistemic virtues with which to both understand current discourses and practices of global interconnectivity and to develop alternatives to them’ (2006: 30). The term epistemic virtues is used to highlight ‘habitual practices of learning that regard knowing as always tentative, involving critical exploration and imagination, an open-ended exercise in cross-cultural deliberation

designed to understand relationalities and imagine alternatives, but always from a position that is reflexive of its epistemic assumptions (2006: 30). This is not a straightforward process, indeed:

‘A cosmopolitan orientation makes possible picturing cultural and individual differences more clearly, while also grasping just how challenging it can be to take on new perspectives and habits.’

(Hansen, 2011: 11)

Rather than assuming transformative learning to be dependent solely on the deconstruction of taken for granted assumptions, an epistemological process of disrupting and overturning habits of mind, this study considers the possibility that transformative learning also involves an ontological rather than ontic process that changes ways of being in the world as well as ways of knowing that world.

The approach of Mezirow is influenced heavily by Habermas’s theory of communicative rationality (1972) and includes the assumption that linguistic communication is capable of making transparent all aspects of individual and social life. However, Habermas for example has been accused of failing to:

address the necessity of creating a moral environment which touches the deep structure of non-hierarchical, caring and solidary relations and where the negative task of diagnosing and correcting distortions is complemented by the positive task of nurturing and practicing new virtues and of acquiring new ethical sensibilities for a social intercourse which is not based on the need to control or be controlled.

(Hart, 1990: 134)

The progressive rationalisation of society envisaged by this theory gives a central role to the rationality of critical insight and is redolent of Stables' (2005) semiotics (Pike, 2008). While much of our learning adds to 'what we know' with a focus on 'information', transformative learning in this sense can be seen to focus on 'formation' and 'transformation' by changing 'how we know' (Kegan, 2000: 49). The concept and terminology of habits of mind is pivotal to transformative learning theory and is symbolic of a rational approach that idolises cognitive reasoning, critical dialogue and reflection on assumptions. A more holistic orientation to TL would be concerned with very personal, imaginative and spiritual ways of knowing, grounded in a more intuitive and emotional sense of our experiences. Transformative learning conceived holistically includes rational, affective, extrarational, and experiential dimensions depending on the person engaged in the learning and the context (Cranton, 2006). For us this includes the education of the spirit, mind and body.

### **The Research Project**

Over the last 20 years more than 500 staff and students have participated in SL projects in developing countries, or what could be known as International Service-Learning, at Liverpool Hope University (LHU) that have aimed to support resource poor communities overseas (Bamber et al, 2008). The strap line adopted by LHU for this work, 'Making a Difference, Changing Lives', implicitly acknowledges the importance of reciprocity to this endeavour. This paper draws upon the findings of a larger study at LHU into the transformative nature of International Service-Learning (ISL) experiences for student participants (Bamber, 2010). The study investigated how LHU students described their ongoing experience of ISL. It explored the conditions for learning and associated learning processes and outcomes associated with ISL. This research was concerned with

the implications of findings for professional practice (Radnor, 2001), in particular how ISL is constructed in Higher Education policy and practice.

<b>Phase</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>Number of research participants</b>	<b>Date of data collection</b>	<b>Year of ISL experience</b>
<b>1</b>	Semi-structured, intensive interviews	7	March 2007	1993, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2005
<b>2</b>	Structured grouped interviews	16	March 2008	Summer 2007
<b>3</b>	Semi-structured, biographical interviews	6	May 2009	Summer 2009
<b>4</b>	Focus groups	5	June 2010	Summer 2009

Data was collected across four phases. The first phase comprised unstructured interviews with a small purposeful sample (Patton, 2002: 46) of 7 returned volunteers in 2007. This drew on the existing database of all 124 students who had completed ISL at LHU between 1990 and 2006 and attempted to include student participants from projects across a range of locations and years. The final sample comprised of students who had participated in these projects in 1993, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2004 (x2), 2005. The skew towards recent years was due to over half of the 124 LHU students having had their overseas experience since 2002 and inevitably the contact information held was more accurate for those who participated most recently. The students in the sample had volunteered with LHU in the following project locations: Malawi (x2), Tibetan communities in India, Brazil, Sri Lanka, non Tibetan communities in India and South Africa. 5 of the 7 students were now teaching in schools and 2 were working in other educational settings. 2 of the students were mature students when they studied at University and took part in ISL. The overseas placement for these students ranged from 2½ to 7 weeks in length.

The second phase involved structured interviews with all sixteen students who undertook projects in in 2007. This included all of the above locations and a new project in Nigeria. The final phase included narrative-biographical interviews with 6 participants' prior to departure in 2009 followed

by a focus group with the same students one year after re-entry in June 2010. Data collection and analysis have been complemented by ongoing observations of ISL in the field. Data analysis has involved phenomenological description (Van Manen, 1990; Groeneweld, 2004), constant comparative thematic analysis (Cresswell, 2007: 64) followed by a critical, hermeneutical analysis (Allman, 1999). In the present article, all quotations are taken from this qualitative data however, rather than present a detailed systematic presentation of findings the purpose is to engage in theory building and work towards an ethical ecology of ISL.

### **Student experiences of ISL**

Of the 29 students involved in this study, 24 of them described their experience of ISL as ‘life-changing’. Some of the following quotations from LHU students give a flavour of such transformation. ISL participants at LHU have subsequently changed career path for example to work for NGOs, taken up longer term volunteering opportunities with VSO, relocated overseas or become, along with their families, lifelong advocates for causes or ambassadors for charities such as SOS Children’s Villages. The significance of the experience for students is well expressed by Alison:

[ISL] had a major impact on me it changed everything that I wanted to do..... I came back and completely shifted the job that I wanted to do so now I work in the third sector I work for a charity, and I work within mental health so again that’s part of my job is challenging the preconceptions people have of people with severe mental health problems, and that all came about really because of the experience I had on [ISL]

Alison, India, 2005

Moreover, unlike many educational initiatives, through ISL students learn to ask questions which concern the 'ultimate meaning and purpose of life' (Wright, 2000, p. 16):

I now realise things like... life... life is a gift. People squander life... we are all guilty of it at times, we don't make the most of the day, we don't make the most of the week. I say at work... can't wait 'til Friday... the wee old lady on the till said to me the other week 'You're wishing your life away! And when you're in Africa, and you see how precious life is, you sort of realise... this kid's going to die of aids... and there are people doing this to their bodies, or whatever... life's a gift whether you believe or not you've got to make the most of it.

Patrick , Malawi, 2004

Students often report being more content with their life on return to the UK and state that their life has shifted in pace. This emerges for students as a conscious process as they rationally re-assess their priorities but also as a subconscious process: having lived alongside others in resource poor communities where life is relatively less complex and chaotic they find that their habits of being are transformed:

I am just more relaxed and the pace of life has slowed down a lot more and a lot happier in that I have seen you don't have to be rushing around all the time to enjoy life, and to just make the most of it.

Kathryn, Nigeria, 2006



This provides evidence that students experience both shifts in their habits of mind and being through ISL. A reconnection with time on their return to the UK has implications for both the personal and professional lives of students. For example, a number of students talk about the desire to 'go with the flow' more on their return to the UK. This, of course, is hardly the sort of stimulus for social action that may be the best preparation to fight injustice, an issue to which we will return with reference to spirituality and the work of liberation theologians.

Immersion in an ISL context contrasted significantly for participants with their previous experiences of travelling. Living alongside members of resource poor communities students re-assessed their own values and approach to life:

I realised my life wasn't as fantastic as I thought it would be because I have a house and a car, and it made me realise it's actually what's within that makes the bigger difference, and I came back much less materialistic and more driven to helping others...

Julie, South Africa, 2005

It is clear that while students often re-assess their self image and lifestyle through purposeful self-reflection, they can also find that they experience a shift in their priorities that evolves beyond consciousness. A significant aspect of the ISL experience is that students spend a sustained period of time living with those with fewer material belongings. Reflection on this experience leads students to value life more on return to the UK. They report a renewed sense of urgency and purpose in life. Students realise that what is important to them in the UK, such as a career or material possessions, may have less significance elsewhere. This contextual feature of the overseas

environment has a clear impact upon student learning. However, as important, is the way in which ISL distances students from the complexity of their lives in the UK. This helps students to question not only what they value in their ongoing everyday life but also what informs these values;

In that environment I was no longer defined by all the things and people that define me at home. I initially felt like I was stripped bare of the things that make me who I am. It was extremely formative.

Sue, India, 2005

Students enter ISL with a heightened sense of awareness and open-ness that contrasts with the anaesthetised experience of our everyday life, as one student described, ‘you are going in with far more interest and enthusiasm than if it was your everyday job’. The ISL experience cultivates self awareness and a deeper understanding of their horizons of meaning or worldview: the framework of ideas and beliefs through which students interpret the world. Students realise the need to both deepen and broaden their horizons of meaning through ISL

..it made me realise there is so much more going on out there that people don’t know about, or choose to be ignorant about, because at the end of the day it’s easy to put yourself in a little bubble here safe in England.

Julie, South Africa, 2005

However well intentioned, the language used by students prior to departure is consistently framed in terms of patronising notions of ‘what we can do for you’ or ‘what we can give you’. Phrases that are used by students include ‘giving them ideas’ or ‘self esteem’. These comments are indicative of an

ethnocentric perspective that views one's own culture as superior to others. Mary is left asking 'Do the teachers take on board what we have left them with?' Other students demonstrate a more ethnorelativist approach that recognises differences in behaviour and values and appreciates those differences as viable alternative solutions. Amy, for example, refers to 'giving them ideas' yet does suggest that these should be seen as different rather than better than their own:

it's kind of like bringing them stuff from a different point of view... and giving them ideas that might just alter a little bit the way their lives go, you know and the way they think about things and stuff.

These accounts demonstrate that students do not generally outline their contribution in terms of vocabulary that proliferates in the development literature such as bottom up approaches, 'helping others to help themselves', empowerment and sustainability. Students experience a shift from a tendency to judge from one's own cultural perspective to appreciating local approaches as viable solutions through their experience of ISL. This reflects a shift from 'delivering the project' and 'what we can do for you' to learning together. For example, rather than seeing teachers as recipients of aid that privileges Western ways of knowing, Louise began to appreciate the reciprocal nature of interaction:

We soon realised that the approach 'this is how you should do it' was totally inappropriate. When we were marking the books we sat in the staff room with the class teachers and had a look at the work and discussed it..... we tried to involve them as much as we could and we all learnt a great deal.

While students develop consciousness of what they would like to do or the right thing to do, in

some cases a lack of congruence between values and actions reveals the contradictions in our everyday lives. For example, the ethical dilemma of choosing where to shop whilst overseas can expose a mis-match or lack of congruence between their values and actions. Mark describes a desire to live in solidarity with partners overseas whilst in Malawi, but he and his team, opting not to do their shopping in the local market shopped in town at the ex-patriate supermarket at night:

Yeah, the supermarket thing... Obviously, there are four people coming back with bags of stuff... and yeah, you've spent more than the wages maybe for a month of the teachers. What we did, when we went to the supermarket, we use to come back late at night and sneak all the stuff in, so it wasn't done deliberately during the day in front of everybody. Inevitably you will get one or two people come out who want to help you move some stuff... but it was better when we did that at night time.

Mark, Malawi, 2005

The decision to do this was taken by the group of staff and students and is suggestive of a lack of fortitude: doing what is right in the face of difficulty.

ISL demands an open-ness and receptiveness to seemingly unfamiliar ways of being requiring participants to trust a process which exposes them through disclosure. Habits of being developed overseas can also be surprisingly resistant to change upon return to the UK. Amy for example, had no choice in Romania but to conserve a limited water supply. Habits she developed during her short immersion overseas have subsequently become part of her way of being in the UK. Her comments suggest the habit of being combined with a rational justification for her changed actions have helped to sustain this change in her actions:

...and I do I turn the tap off I used to leave it running but now I turn the tap off, and when you fill....when you fill like the basin full of water you think I don't really need all that water I will just fill it to there you know little things like that.

Amy G, Romania, 2009

### **Conceptualising International Service-Learning as Aesthetic and Spiritual Engagement**

Arguably, the ISL experience exposes participants to aspects of knowing that cannot be explicated on the basis of entirely scientific or rational understanding. ISL can provide a significant contribution to the development of a unified curriculum that develops holistic ways of knowing that evince aesthetic and even spiritual dimensions. We will take each briefly in turn. The transformative processes discussed here have rational and affective components as students experience shifts in their habits of mind and being. The smells, sounds, heat, colour and emotions of life in unfamiliar contexts provide an assault on the senses that eludes and transcends factual description in words. An analogous encounter may be found in Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* where a description of the physiology of dehydration or explanation of the mechanics of navigation cannot do justice to the mariner's experience. There are, of course, countless other examples where the aesthetic experience transcends the sum of its parts. Similarly, ISL removes the distractions of participant's everyday 'Western' lives and challenges them to be fully present in the new context in which they find themselves:

I think I only wrote about two e mails. It's something that I do now when I'm going away; I kind of cut off and *get in* to where I'm going.

John, Malawi, 2004

Aesthetic theory (Pike, 2003 and 2004) applied to the educational endeavour would appear to offer us the conceptual tools to interpret the processes by which a student may, or may not, 'get in'. Dewey lists the enemies of the 'esthetic' that lead to 'anesthetic' experiences. These include 'the humdrum; slackness of loose ends; submission to convention in practice and intellectual procedure', 'tightness on one side and dissipation, incoherence and aimless indulgence on the other' (Dewey, 1934: 40). This challenges us to consider the ways in which potentially aesthetic experiences in everyday life are anesthetised, such as in failing to engage with unexpected incidents, being interrupted, focusing on pre-conceived learning objectives, being distracted by technology, lack of criticality in watching and listening and needing to be entertained:

Zeal for doing, lust for action, leaves many a person, especially in this hurried and impatient human environment in which we live, with the experience of an almost incredible paucity, all on the surface. No one experience has a chance to complete itself because something else is entered upon so speedily. Resistance is treated as an obstruction to be beaten down, not as an invitation to reflect. An individual comes to seek, unconsciously even more than by deliberate choice, situations in which he can do the most things in the shortest time.

(ibid: 44-45)

If ISL is to be construed as aesthetic education (Pike, 2004) practitioners and participants may need to learn to draw upon pedagogic approaches described in this journal (Pike, 2003) derived from reader response criticism (Rosenblatt, 1985, Tompkins, 1980, Freund, 1987) to realise the potential synergy of the personal and 'poetic' (Pike, 2011a) in ISL pedagogy (Bamber, 2011). For instance, an instructor or program director can design annotation, paired-talk and group-talk activities focussed on extracts from participants' diaries kept while overseas. The diary text can function as a 'stimulus activating elements of the reader's past experience' (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 1) and the reading of it will often have aesthetic and ethical characteristics not least because 'in the aesthetic transaction the reader's attention is focussed on what he [sic] is living through during the reading event' (Rosenblatt, 1985, p. 38). In other words, what the diary means in a different place and at another time to the one in which it was written. Such diary extracts might well evince qualities of Wolfgang Iser's literary work which 'diverges from the ordinary experience of the reader in that it offers up views and opens up perspectives in which the empirically known world of one's own personal experience appears changed' (Iser, 1971, p. 7). This 'aesthetic distance' (Jauss, 1982) between the 'world' in which the diary entry was penned and the current physical location of the reader could map out the landscape across which learners make 'spiritual' journeys (Pike, 2002). A similar approach can be taken with photographs and can generate 'ekphrasis' (Benton, 2000) and moral reflection (Pike, 2011a). There are certainly numerous parallels between pedagogy appropriate for vicarious and actual 'exploration' (Rosenblatt, 1968). Technocratic conceptions of education focus on curricula, exams and assessments as opposed to lived experience whereas ISL, rightly conceived, provides first-hand experience of a secondary world that participants find otherwise difficult to imagine or comprehend, engendering an ongoing connection with other ways of living and ongoing moral affiliation with other people around the world:

Before I went to Malawi, you'd watch things on TV, and you sort of imagine it and you feel it, but having been there and met people who looked similar to people on the TV you can relate to it a hell of a lot more....not only to the people there, but the environment they are living in, you can see outside of the TV, you can see what's left and right of it, even though it's not there, you can imagine, and the background to the people, and it has a bigger impact

John, Malawi, 2004

What John describes here (to borrow a term from aesthetic theory) is an altered 'horizon of expectation' (Jauss, 1982, p. 25). Response to a new encounter can augment or reconfigure the student's experience and can result in a 'change of horizons' (Jauss, 1982, p. 25) and new ways of 'reading' of one's world. In describing the importance of aesthetic experience, the poet W.H. Auden suggests each of us inhabits both a 'primary world' of experience and a 'secondary world' of imagination or aesthetic response. There is much here that might inform our understanding of ISL:

Present in every human being are two desires, a desire to know the truth about the primary world, the given world outside ourselves in which we are born, live, love, hate and die, and the desire to make new secondary worlds of our own or, if we cannot make them ourselves, to share in the secondary worlds of those who can (W. H. Auden, 1968, *Secondary Worlds*, p. 49)

We contend that ISL, rightly conceived, must enable students not only to negotiate both worlds but to acknowledge their interdependence. Destinations must not be understood as separate from, but rather related to, our primary world. Analogously, learning in our primary world is always an expansion or development of what we already know. Through contact with a secondary world we



check our prior understanding of ourselves and of our primary world. Exposure to an unfamiliar secondary world may challenge deeply held assumptions and ways of interacting and helps students come to a more integrated perspective and way of being in their primary world. This takes place until the secondary world 'becomes you' morally, ethically, spiritually. Further, the ways in which one reflects upon, interprets and responds to experiences in any secondary world is rather important. In *Art as Experience* (1934), Dewey argues that we should recover 'the continuity of esthetic experience with normal processes of living' (p. 10) and ethical ISL should reflect the continuity between different worlds.

For Dewey, aesthetic experiences are 'consummatory' because they attain union and harmony or 'experience in its integrity' and the artist 'does not shun movements of resistance and tension' (1934, p. 14). This is important because ISL is rarely a comfortable experience. If the function of art as 'a central and essential human and social activity' (Stibbs, 1998, p. 202) involves 'art's ability to shock and inspire, to change vision, ideas and feelings' (Stibbs, 1998, p. 210) we need to consider the ethics and the aesthetics of the changes experienced by students. Vygotsky, better known for his work on the social nature of learning and cognitive development, points out in *The Psychology of Art* that 'from the most ancient times art has always been regarded as a means of education, that is as a long range programme for changing our behaviour and our organism' (Vygotsky, 1971, p. 253) and we need to consider the nature and quality of the questions it enables students to ask.

In the brave new managerialist world of targets, avoidance of ultimate questions is all too common. Many students exist but do not appear to question existence and ISL may bring about what the Greeks termed *aleitha*, or the unconcealment and disclosure of things leading towards 'seeing in the widest sense of seeing' (Heidegger in Krell, 1993: 184). Such disclosure has been interpreted as 'a readiness to anticipate and act in an unknowable future in a way that reveals what our intentions to

be are' (Gibbs and Angelides, 2004: 340). Dewey certainly provides a theoretical anchor for service-learning that is grounded in the notion of engaged interaction as opposed to passive reception and notes that, 'no experience of whatever sort is a unity unless it has esthetic quality' (Dewey, 1934: 40).

Boarding a plane to embark on an ISL experience provides participants with the opportunity to leave behind chaotic, over stimulated and fragmented everyday lives that divides their attention and over complicates their being. It may also mark the beginning of a spiritual journey. The 'inner' distance travelled may be 'aesthetic distance' (Iser) but may also be the landscape across which a spiritual journey is made. Certainly, an inner journey, such as that described by Wordsworth in 'The Prelude' (1799/1988), can bring about a profound personal resolution, realignment and fresh vision where the individual's perspective is radically altered. We should not forget, however, the aspect of spirituality that is related to struggle, and is epitomized by the work of liberation theologians and also prefigured in the work of Dewey on aesthetics. Through ISL, knowing emerges from a way of being and not vice versa and is redolent of the suggestion that 'we don't think our way into a new kind of living; rather we live our way into a new kind of thinking' (Palmer, 1980: 57). This is especially important if, like Heidegger, one considers existence relationally whereby 'being' is more akin to 'being in love' than 'being in Africa'; yet we should remember that Heidegger 'had to struggle ... to recover an understanding of the agent as engaged, as embedded in a culture, a form of life, a "world" of involvements' (Taylor, 1993, p. 317) and that 'the dominant rationalist view has screened out this engagement, has given us a model of ourselves as disengaged thinkers' (Taylor, 1993, p. 319). Dewey suggests 'the esthetic quality that rounds out an experience into completeness and unity as emotional' (ibid: 41) and spirituality too has been defined as 'relational consciousness' (Hay and Nye, 1998). Reimer and Furrow refer to Nye's concept of relational consciousness as a 'relational orientation toward people or symbols at a spiritual level' (2001, p. 15) which leads them

to conclude 'it does make sense to expect a point of dynamic interactivity between the internalization of spirituality and its social referents' and therefore to advocate a 'praxis spirituality of shared activity' (Reimer & Furrow, 2001, p. 19).

In distancing aesthetic experience from institutions Dewey makes an analogous point to that of writers on spirituality and religious experience since James (1902), who have argued that the spiritual need not be confined to places of worship. Of particular relevance here is the way Dewey explicitly links the spiritual and the aesthetic in his plea for both these fundamental aspects of human experience to be integrated with everyday life. There are 'forces at work are those that have removed religion as well as fine art from the scope of the common or community life. (Dewey, 1934, p. 6). That such a state of affairs contributes to the 'dislocations' and 'division of modern life' is, perhaps, unsurprising as the spiritual and the aesthetic should be valued as 'part of the significant life of an organised community' (Dewey, 1934, p. 7). ISL might be regarded as contributing to the restoration of community, broadly conceived::

lots of people have said it to me... when I came back... that I had changed, I was more easy going... take things as they come, rather than... before, I liked to have everything planned out, I needed to know what I'm doing.....

Jane, Tibetan refugee community, India, 1993

### **Towards an Ethical Ecology of International Service-Learning**

It is simply not enough, however, to champion ISL on the basis of its aesthetic merits and spiritual

potential. Not all forms of activity that have a spiritual or aesthetic dimension may be viewed as beneficial and conducive to human well-being and flourishing. The *ethics* of an endeavour such as ISL, however aesthetic and spiritual, cannot be ignored. Students driven by the opportunity to discover the world and its people may relegate disclosure and even risk generating an understanding of a world of a ‘disconnected aggregate’ (Couzens Hoy, 1993: 178). ISL may then become an instrumental process and a new form of colonialism as students seek to exploit and ‘master’ their experiences.

In order to behave in a fully humane and ethical way in their primary world students may benefit from time spent considering ways of living in secondary worlds. For once, as relatively affluent Westerners they cannot control their environment to the degree to which they are accustomed. They are dependent upon their global neighbours to act as expert guide in their understanding of secondary worlds – which is vital if they are to thrive in their primary world:

If you have come to help me you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.

Lilla Watson, an Australian aboriginal woman

Self-reflection is one way in which students experience transformation; for example as they re-assess their lifestyles and priorities in life. Yet an ISL experience structured around analysing and reflecting upon individual experiences rather than immersion in the local context might well be regarded as a deficit model:

If we are not careful we fix attention upon competition for control and possession *of a fixed environment* rather than upon what art can do to *create* an environment. . . . It is disastrous because civilization built upon these principles cannot supply the demand of the soul for joy, or freshness of experience; only attention through art to the vivid but transient values of things can effect such refreshment. (Dewey, 1988: 112 my italic)

On the one hand, providers of ISL may even sterilise the potency of immersion in a new context through over preparation, including the use of images, videos and first hand accounts that embeds expectations and colonises an environment that conflicts with the holistic, indefinable and unpredictable nature of the experience. On the other hand, an emphasis on the immediacy of experience and immersion is likely to miss important ethical considerations. We have conceptualised ISL here as providing of ‘aesthetic distance’ and even ‘spiritual experience’ but the moral compass of such learning cannot be ignored. Declaring one’s motivation and being prepared to disclose one’s agenda is essential if one is to act ethically. This is especially important given the history of relations between developed and developing world:

‘First you came to us as missionaries, then you came to us as colonizers, now you come to us as volunteers.’

Tselha Thakchoe, Principal, Tibetan Homes Foundation, Rajpur, India.

We contend that the experience of ISL must be an ethical one for all concerned and it is therefore vital that the values underpinning ISL should be disclosed. The missionaries tended to be clear about their values and were open enough to declare their ‘bias’. With regard to ISL we need to ask who the project is intended to benefit, what are its aims, how it seeks to implement those aims and

why. Important questions to address are: Whose lives are being changed? What 'difference' is sought? Which processes will bring this about? Which values underpin the project? We also need to ask how the answers to such questions are to be negotiated.

Some students engaged in ISL might be accused of lacking clarity of vision with regard to their values, as regards for example recognising local knowledge and as demonstrated in the dilemma of where to shop, the same would also appear to be true of many of those leading ISL projects. It seems that as a result of refraining from prescription regarding outcomes, a sort of undefined, or ill-defined, humanism is all that is considered to underpin some ISL projects. While the missionaries knew exactly why they were doing what they were doing, in our 'post-Christian', 'post-modern' time there seems to be at best a reticence to articulate beliefs and values and at worst the notion that they should be eschewed. Of course education in general and ISL in particular is deeply value-laden and, whether consciously or unconsciously, values underpin practice. If one declares one does not have an agenda then not having an agenda, for specific ideological reasons, may well have become one's agenda. If one is not seeking to influence young people and the idea is for them to learn by immersing themselves in the ISL experience there will be specific reasons for taking this stance and for such a commitment. If one considers there to be 'no right or wrong' as far as the lessons learned from ISL are concerned, some explication of such a position should be disclosed. After all, to seek to provide an ISL experience, or even to facilitate reflection upon it, without exploring the implicit values of the particular ISL programme is to, ironically, treat students in a somewhat colonial fashion (where they are more like subjects than citizens) (Pike, 2007). The pressing challenge for ISL educators is to find ways of enabling young people to critically engage with the sources of the values (their own, those of colleagues, those of providers, those of the host communities) they encounter and to reflect upon the ethos of their experience.

Service learning (Bamber 2008), especially in the US, is often considered to be an essential aspect of character education which ‘has long relied upon an Aristotelian principle that character is formed in large part through habitual behaviour that eventually becomes internalized into virtues (character)’ (Berkowitz and Bier 2004, 80). While many ISL programmes in the UK would distance themselves from the deliberate inculcation of values it is a significant oversight to write about ISL without considering the virtues that it might foster (Bamber, 2011). Certainly an Aristotelian virtue ethical perspective (where one’s motives and emotions inform one’s actions and commitments) has much to recommend it and provides important insights into ISL which, according to the students quoted in this article, combines affect and action. Certainly, for Aristotle (1987) ‘the virtue of justice is quite impossible without some measure of personal interest’ and we have recently been reminded that one can reach the wrong conclusions by ‘too much rational detachment’ as much as by ‘insufficient emotional attachment’ (Carr, 2007, p. 375). Unlike Plato (for whom affect may impede moral agency) and Kant (for whom emotion was irrelevant to moral reasoning), ‘Aristotelian virtue might be most simply understood as a particular rational ordering of the affective springs of human action’ (Carr, 2007, p. 373). Certainly Aristotle’s ‘doctrine of the mean’ might inform students’ rational ordering of, and reflection upon, their actions both during and after their ISL experience.

Put simply, for Aristotle (1987) one cultivates virtue in two ways; both are necessary and both seem especially relevant to ISL. One way is through serious moral reflection upon the human condition and the purpose of human life. Aristotle’s *phronesis* or practical wisdom in action is different to *techne* or skills where the focus is on the most efficient or effective means of achieving particular ends, because the *phronimos* engages in ‘reflection on the moral worth as such of those ends as goals of human flourishing’ (Carr, 2006, p. 172). The other way is through practice – we tend to get better at something the more we do it. I may become more just or courageous by committing just

and courageous acts. Evidently, there is no shortage of opportunities for engaging in such activities when participating in ISL. When students undertake ISL virtues may be fostered. We might think of the use of water (temperance) or learning to put up with hardship (fortitude) or how interact wisely and respectfully with hosts (prudence) or, upon their return home, having different priorities and striving for greater equity (justice).

In the case of Liverpool Hope University we should not forget that this is an institution with a Christian foundation seeking to serve wider society. The theological virtues of faith, hope and love, in addition to the cardinal virtues of prudence, temperance, justice and fortitude remain an important ethical framework. Certainly 'love' in the senses of *agape* (often used to describe the love of Christ for humanity), *storge* (familial love) and *philia* (brotherly love) between students and host communities might become a foundation to which ISL in such contexts could subscribe. A degree of congruence is also apparent as the virtues of 'faith', 'love' and 'hope' which appear on the LHU crest (LHU, 2011: 2) and provide the foundations for the University's mission and values (LHU, 2011: 6-7), also appear to be underpinning the development of cardinal virtues which are good for everyone (regardless of faith). Yet recourse to Aristotelian virtue ethics to interpret ISL at a higher education institution with a distinctively Christian foundation might be regarded as being flawed in certain respects. While Christianity certainly has an emphasis upon the individual becoming a certain sort of person (if asked to define virtuous behaviour Aristotle would say that it is what the virtuous man does), we should not forget that there is more to virtue than a rational ordering of feeling according to Aristotle's doctrine of the mean. We argue that Universities need to enable their students to engage in service learning not as a means to an end (either for institution or students) but because it is the right thing to do. University leaders may, like many an ISL student, need to adopt the attitude: 'Don't waste time bothering whether you "love" your neighbour; act as if you did' (Lewis, 1943, 48).



Carr's (2006, 2007) important work on Aristotle's virtue ethics in relation to the professional learning of teachers is especially relevant to the ISL programmes at LHU not only because most of the students participating in ISL were enrolled on programmes of teacher education but also because it enables us to see more clearly the connection between the aesthetic, spiritual and moral. Students' engagement in community-based learning in resource-poor communities (Farnsworth, 2010) or the development of an ethos of service in schools serving social priority areas (Pike, 2010) may contribute the professional learning of teachers for social justice. Yet the aesthetic and spiritual dimensions of teacher identity are all too often marginalised in accounts of moral development which can be predominantly rational in orientation. For Aristotle, poetry was superior to history because it dealt with the universal rather than the particular and taking his lead from Aristotle, Carr argues that because 'the great literary and artistic products of human culture have precisely sought to explore the roots and springs of virtue and vice, a special role may be claimed for the arts in helping us to understand human character' (Carr, 2007, p. 385). As personal development is inextricably linked to professional development especially where the profession in question (such as teaching or religious ministry) is a vocation, engagement with and response to the arts may foster *phronesis* (Carr, 2006, 2007). Our contention here is that engagement with the kinds of people one normally meets on during ISL may provide the aesthetic distance more usually associated with vicarious experiences mediated by poetry. I may never have visited a Muslim country let alone witnessed the jihad depicted by Imtiaz Dharkar in 'The Right Word' but I can profit from my reading of such works. Similarly, when I engage with the narratives and life histories of ISL hosts, my service learning has the potential to be ethical. We learn from people as well as poetry and the differences in the reading of each may not be as great as one might at first imagine. In 1616, Ben Jonson described his seven-year-old son as 'his best piece of poetry' and special relationships may have 'poetic' qualities – even though, tragically, Jonson's son died, aged 7, like many children in

the developing world.

It is perhaps easier to arrange for a student to have the opportunity to participate in service learning than to guarantee special relationships or ethical reflection upon learning; virtues to be acquired as a result of it may be equally hard to predict. It is important, however, that key virtues or core values which underpin ISL should be acknowledged and disclosed. Not all poems and persons are equally ethical, nor are all reactions and responses to poetry and people equally valid; our associations with some people and some artistic works will be better for us than others. Film is a good example (Carr 2006b) of this. . The documentaries of the German film-maker Leni Riefenstahl such as *Triumph of the Will* (where the subject is the Nuremberg rallies) are technically and aesthetically remarkable but are Nazi propaganda. The ancient Greeks would not have wrestled with such problematic cinematography as we do because to them there was no such thing as good art that was immoral. The Nazis had read their Goethe and Schiller and Goebbels undoubtedly had an exceptional ability to read human nature in order to manipulate it through propaganda. It is the nature and quality of the engagement with the work that is of determining significance morally. Analogously, it is not simply the nature of the ISL experience but the quality of reflection upon that experience and the values underpinning such reflection that determine a truly ethical ecology of ISL.

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