As scholars we focus on producing knowledge. In doing so, we hesitate to share our excitement, hopes, desires, doubts, discomforts, and misgivings about our work. Often unconsciously, we cling to the comfort of traditional scholarship, writing, and evaluation without “pulling back the curtain” to show our failures and missteps that often resulted in learning. This book aims to flip these propensities upside down and instead delve deeply into our discomfort as an opportunity for individual learning and field development.

The editors and authors not only examine the tensions inherent in the field of ISL but believe deeply in the power and potential for ISL to lead to student and community transformation. The chapters include case studies, research studies, tools/strategies, conceptual models, and theoretical contributions to the field. The different foci of the chapters as well as the variation of represented institutional contexts ensure that there is something for everyone. Despite wide variation, all chapters point to the fact that working in ISL is developmental – a continual learning process in a field that is itself still young.

The Significance of Context
Each chapter describes the specific program, institutional context, goals, and challenges encountered in order to explore both tensions and transformations. The chapters in this volume and the cases/programs highlight the importance of the local historical, political, and economic context as well as the higher education institution sponsoring the program.

Heeding cautions about ahistorical work that one might find in postcolonial perspectives, the book begins and ends with chapters specifically highlighting the larger context in which ISL is situated – contexts marked by colonialism, problematic patterns of international aid/development and North-South relations, asymmetrical globalization, and faulty assumptions about the server/served dichotomy and the notion of “help.” In the first chapter, Mellon and Herrera use two case studies of programs in rural Costa Rica and urban Guatemala to illuminate how the history of U.S. involvement in the region influences local partner attitudes and engagement. Grounded in postcolonial theory, in the final chapter, Hartman and Kiely provide an extensive review of the theory and literature related to global citizenship in the fields of study abroad and global service-learning (GSL). Similarly, in Chapter 9 Mohamed, Loggins, and Floyd explicitly focus on the historical, political, and economic context of their program in Jamaica, the “land of contradictions” (p. 161), by exploring the problematic history of North-South relations and Jamaica’s economic relationship with the U.S., both as the program context and as the ultimate goal for student learning.

Highlighting the importance of multiple perspectives and the influence of cultural context and understandings, several chapters are co-written by a U.S. university partner and an international university partner: in Chapter 3, Halami, Keckes, Ingle, and Phuong describe a partnership between Portland State University and the University of the Science in
Ho Chi Minh City; in Chapter 4, Morales and Barrón discuss a partnership between DePaul University and the Universidad Marista de Mérida (Mexico); and in Chapter 7, Stokamer, Hall, and Morgan discuss a Portland State University master’s program managed by the International Partnership for Service-learning and Leadership Program in Jamaica.

Other chapters illuminate the tensions between study abroad and ISL and how the push for the internationalization in higher education has created a “race for ISL programs” (p. 145). In Chapter 8, Ong and Green openly describe the pressures on university administrators, faculty, and staff vis-à-vis program marketing, student recruitment, and program financing as a result of the growing demand for international programs; the authors argue that the tendency in study abroad to treat students as consumers is influencing how ISL programming decisions are made. In Chapter 12, Hartman and Kiley, in addition to their review of the GSL literature and its undergirding theory, further investigate the tension between study abroad and ISL by specifically exploring how global citizenship is understood differently in each field.

The description of different institutional contexts—from faith-based universities (Chapters 4, 9, and 11) to community colleges (Chapter 5)—illuminates institution-specific tensions and opportunities. While Chapter 4 (DePaul University/Universidad Marista de Mérida) and Chapter 9 (University of San Diego) refer to their institutions’ Catholic identity as an influence on the philosophy of their program and partnership, Chapter 11 (University of Notre Dame) delves deeply into how ISL at faith-based institutions can inform and improve the overall ISL field. In Chapter 5, Halverson-Wente and Halverson-Wente, explicitly discuss how student demographics at Rochester Community and Technical College (RCTC) may influence programs when they write that “most RCTC students have never traveled far” (p. 92).

A Roadmap of the Book

Setting the tone for the book, Chapter 1 begins by problematizing the notion of the server/served and the word “help” in the historical, political, and economic context of North-South relations and U.S. imperialism. Reflecting many of the chapters, this one does not shy away from these tough topics—how we as U.S. citizens are perceived when we enter another country or enter into a discussion with a potential GSL project in another country. Mellon and Herrera describe two programs, one in rural Costa Rica and the other in urban Guatemala, and in doing so present a framework of four stages—hostility, acceptance, humor, and home—that implicitly acknowledges these past relations while coaching students toward a social justice worldview.

Continuing the effort to recognize the problematic role of the U.S. in the world and in higher education, Chapter 2 interrogates the meanings of service-learning and associated terms in different cultural contexts. In their pilot study, authors Espenschied-Reilly & Iverson interview four Irish administrators/educators and four U.S. administrators/educators about the concept of SL, describe their findings, and advocate for ISL practitioner and researcher awareness of culture-specific SL terms and concepts.

In Chapter 3, Halami, Kecskes, Ingle, and Phuong provide thick description of a 10-year partnership between the University of the Science and Portland State University, discussing the context of Vietnam and why and how the partnership was initiated. This chapter focuses less on explicit connections to theory or research in the field and instead on the nuts and bolts of, and the recommendations that emerged from, this partnership.

Chapters 4 and 5 change gears by proposing theoretical contributions to the field through the exploration of their specific programs. In Chapter 4, Morales and Barrón utilize the partnership between DePaul University and the Universidad Marista de Mérida to recommend the usefulness of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) and Integral Human Development (IHD) for the theory and practice of ISL. One particularly interesting finding from this chapter is the attribution of program success to the intentional presence of U.S. bilingual and bicultural staff. In Chapter 5, Halverson-Wente and Halverson-Wente present the case of Rochester Community and Technical College’s (RCTC) work in Cambodia and propose the notion of “reciprocity-based ISL” (p. 86) that highlights a comprehensive set of stakeholders (students, faculty, educational institutions, NGOs, and rural villages).

In Chapter 6, Gardinier focuses on practical tools and strategies and in particular describes an assignment used in several different ISL programs. She situates her work in the internationalization of higher education, and provides details of the assignment that aims to teach students program evaluation while supporting the work of nonprofit organizations. The comprehensive description of the assignment will provide ideas about program evaluation for educators irrespective of discipline.

In Chapter 7, Stokamer, Hall, and Morgan share the story of a “partnership dissolution,” a topic often absent from conference presentations, journal articles, and book chapters. Co-written by representatives from U.S.- and Jamaica-based institutions, the chapter explores the graduate program run by the International Partnership for Service-Learning and Leadership in Jamaica and openly states that they
“realized their institutions were no longer well suited to each other” (p. 141).

Returning to the larger context, Ong and Green focus Chapter 8 on the tensions between study abroad and ISL and the resulting pressures experienced in their university. They draw from two case studies to argue that institutional structures are crucial in determining how programming will meet different goals. Further widening the context, Chapter 9 returns to the focus at the beginning and end of the volume – the problematic history of North-South relations for the work of ISL. Mohamed, Loggins, and Floyd foreground the postcolonial history of Jamaica and the interdependence with U.S. tourism as the context for their program.

In Chapter 10, Doll, Mu, Jensen, Hoffman, and Goulet present the only discipline-specific chapter, focusing on the preparation of health care professionals. They draw on cases in the Dominican Republic and China to support their recommendation for ISL as a pedagogy to help health pre-professional students develop critical consciousness. While I was discouraged by the limited discussion of ethics in direct health care service (Evert, 2014; Fischer, 2013), I found their faculty training model particularly interesting and generalizable for other programs and institutions.

In Chapter 11, Kollman and Morgan explore the context of faith-based institutions and their potential to inform ISL practice. The authors present the findings of a research study on a summer service-learning experience and the resulting transformation of students’ worldviews related to justice and inequality. Addressing the debate about the role of universities in society (Fish, 2008), they delve into an exploration of the specific suspicions of faith-based institutions and theology coursework in shaping students. Instead of shying away from this debate, the authors argue for the potential to learn from the context of ISL in faith-based institutions in responding to the debate about the role of universities in society.

In Chapter 12, Hartman and Kiely draw the reader back to the larger historical, political, and economic contexts of ISL, and propose an alternative model for critical global citizenship education meant to compensate for the narrow focus of study abroad on intercultural competency and the narrow focus of SL on civic education. Responding to a lack of consensus about the meaning of global citizenship, they use data from case studies in Jamaica and Tanzania to propose a conceptual model of critical global citizenship that includes six learning outcome domains – intellectual, political, moral, social, cultural, and personal.

The chapters all explore tensions and transformation and hold true to the book’s acknowledgement that ISL is developmental. However, I found myself working hard to figure out how chapters fit together and struggled to understand why chapters were organized the way they were. Assuming there were intentional decisions about chapter order, an explicit articulation of those decisions in the introduction could have aided the reader.

The chapters also clearly demonstrate the lack of conceptual consistency and use of the literature that exists in the ISL field. For example, authors use different definitions for key terms (e.g., service-learning, global citizenship). In the case of the term global citizenship, while Hartman and Kiely’s chapter specifically responds to the lack of consensus about the meaning of the term, it would have been helpful for the editors and authors to acknowledge this and for the chapters to be in dialogue more directly with one another about this. In addition, the chapters showed very different levels of engagement with the existing scholarship in the field. Although the field is in its “infancy” (p. 141), if we do not engage with the existing theories and research, we risk continually reinventing ourselves – at the possible expense of our students and/or community partners.

Chapter Unevenness in Exploring Discomforting Aspects

According to the book’s introduction, the editors and authors aspire to explore the tensions inherent in ISL. However, as I read the book, it seemed that some authors were more comfortable delving into those tensions than others. I found myself wanting more details in many of the chapters when authors would write, for example, “community members did not seem to consider CB-SL [community-based service learning] projects as a mutually beneficial activity” (p. 59) or that they “realized that our institutions were no longer well suited to each other in this endeavor” (p. 141). In both cases in which these quotes are taken, there are missed opportunities for learning; the lack of critical analysis sacrificed potential learning for the authors, the programs, and the readers of the book.

In contrast, the transparency of some authors in sharing their missteps and challenges was refreshing and thought-provoking. In Chapter 5, Halverson-Wente and Halverson-Wente share several examples of failed projects. For example, they describe an experience in which RTC’s students built toilets in a Cambodian village without realizing that there was no way to empty the toilet tanks once they were full. The authors openly write, “such an oversight was indicative of ignorance on RTC’s part” (p. 98). In addition, Morales and Barrón in Chapter 4 discuss the process of the memorandum of understanding between DePaul University and the Universidad...
Marista de Mérida that was “insensitively originally prepared only in English” (p. 80). The transparency of this mistake will surely give many university-based readers pause, and encourage them to ask themselves whether their institutions make an effort to prepare MOUs and other documents in their partner’s language.

The University Still at the Center

One tension inherent in every ISL partnership is the presence of different stakeholder groups who not only have different perspectives but also different goals for the partnership (Bringle, Clayton, & Price, 2009). I was discouraged to find many authors skimming over the different, often competing goals present in their respective ISL partnerships. By listing “program goals” focused only on student learning or university goals without acknowledging those as only one set of goals in the partnership, the authors overlook the other stakeholders’ perspective and reaffirm the common criticism of SL/ISL that privileges U.S./university interests over all others (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Crabtree, 2008; Ferrari & Worrall, 2000; Miron & Moely, 2006; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Schmidt & Robby, 2002; Stoecker & Tryon, 2009). In contrast, several authors, including Morales and Barrón as well as Gardinier, identify the goals of each stakeholder group in their partnership.

Halverson-Wente and Halverson-Wente in Chapter 5 specifically call out this tension between university and community interests by noting gaps customary in assessment and posing the question: “Is this project meaningful and to whom?” (p. 101)? Now widely acknowledged as a major tension in the ISL field, I was disappointed that this book reaffirmed the disproportionate focus on and understanding of student outcomes and perspectives at the expense of the community’s. While some authors did raise this issue, such as Ong and Green in Chapter 8—“it can be easy for the concerns of the in-country partners and local community to be lost in the shuffle” (p. 157)—overall I saw limited exploration of this tension.

In addition, Halverson-Wente and Halverson-Wente’s aforementioned question not only draws attention to the multiple stakeholders involved in any ISL partnership but also to the illusive concept of who is the community in ISL projects (Hartman, Kiely, Friedrichs, & Boettcher, in press). I was disappointed here, too, by the limited interrogation of this term. Unfortunately, I read numerous sentences across chapters reflecting an essentialized or homogenous notion of community (Andreotti, 2006; Cannon, 2004; Christens & Speers, 2006; Kapoor, 2004) or claiming community outcomes rather than examining actual outcomes (Cruz & Giles, 2000)–two tendencies that have received ample critique in both the SL and ISL fields. Additionally, many of the authors claimed program “success” utilizing only feedback and perspectives from students. Nevertheless, there are specific examples that did collect feedback from numerous stakeholders in their partnership. For example, Kollman and Morgan in Chapter 11 explicitly reported on feedback from students and site partners in their research study, and Morales and Barrón (Chapter 4) specifically described the feedback gathered from each stakeholder group used to inform their program’s development. Although this book did not claim to specifically investigate community-related issues in ISL partnerships, I worry that the book’s surface treatment of this may reflect a reluctance to push beyond the editors’ and authors’ comfort zones.

Final Thoughts

Even given the foregrounding of the historical, political, and economic context of ISL as well as acknowledging the value and learning potential of discomfort, many of the chapters remained squarely focused on the university, student learning, and student satisfaction as the measure of success. Suggesting the aspiration to explore discomfort and doing so in genuine ways are very different matters. I was struck by the unevenness between some authors’ transparency about their missteps and learning and the lack thereof by other authors. Acknowledging that the audience for this book is likely university faculty and staff (because who is buying and reading edited volumes about ISL?), I expected the authors to push themselves (and therefore the reader) to have a stronger balance between attention to the student/university and the community. Most chapters remained firmly planted in, evaluated program success from, and identified next steps or best practices from the perspective of the university. While university administrators and faculty are the primary audience for this book, does speaking/writing to them as the only audience unintentionally reaffirm their place at the center of this work? Articulating recommendations and best practices in ways that clearly ascribe agency to the university actors with wording such as “establish criteria for international organizations” (p. 245) allows the authors and readers to remain in their comfort zone.

While making strides in engaging in discomfort and addressing tensions, clearly the book reflects the early developmental stage of ISL work. Nevertheless, by sharing their experiences working with the tensions inherent in ISL work—including MOUs, language, North-South relations, power asymmetries, institutional pressures, colonialism/ historical con-
text, faculty training and more – the authors “pull back the curtain” on their struggles and successes. By doing so, they encourage all of us working in the ISL field to embrace continual learning and push ourselves to explore and share transparently – to abandon the comfortable because difference and discomfort are where we find true learning.

Note

1 The book under review in this essay uses the term International Service Learning (ISL). The Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning in this special section uses the term Global Service Learning (GSL) because the definition of global service-learning used in the call for papers does not necessitate crossing a national border (international); rather, the definition employed focuses on a community-driven service-learning experience that systematically considers common human dignity; self; culture; positionality; socio-economic, political, and environmental issues; power relations; and social responsibility, all in global contexts – none of which requires crossing a national border.

References


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