We are very excited to bring the Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning readership another special section on global service-learning (GSL). This issue’s special section includes an article by Emily Morrison and two book reviews, and builds on the Fall 2014 special section in this Journal that featured two rigorous and theoretically-grounded GSL articles on community perceptions of partnerships (Reynolds, 2014) and GSL pedagogy (McMillan & Stanton, 2014).

Calls for articles during the past two years have drawn on the following definition of GSL:

Global service learning is a community-driven service experience that employs structured, critically reflective practice to better understand common human dignity; self; culture; positionality; socio-economic, political, and environmental issues; power relations; and social responsibility, all in global contexts. (Hartman & Kiely, 2014, p. 60)

As we will discuss below, reviewing more than 50 article submissions has tested peer reviewers’ and editors’ understanding of the boundaries of the field. As we continue to move forward with anticipated additional special sections, our aim is to encourage theoretical, qualitative, and quantitative contributions that engage with existing GSL research and propel us forward with respect to our understanding of field boundaries, theoretical foundations, impacts across all stakeholders, best practices, and the importance of place, population, and program factors.

Before turning our attention to Morrison’s article, a word about the two book reviews in this special section. Nora Pillard Reynolds reviews Crossing Boundaries: Tensions and Transformation in International Service-Learning (2014) edited by Patrick Green and Mathew Johnson. Cynthia Toms reviews Working Side by Side: Creating Alternative Breaks as Catalysts for Global Learning, Student Leadership and Social Change (2015) by Shoshanna Sumka, Melody Christine Porter, and Jill Piacitelli. Both books expand our understanding of the GSL field while offering unique insights into both the value and challenges of campus-community partnerships that cross cultural borders and boundaries.

Morrison’s compelling article makes a significant contribution to the GSL field by bringing attention to the concept of reflexivity and its significance to the process of qualitative research in GSL contexts. We commented on the importance of reflexivity as an important dimension of qualitative research in previous work (Kiely & Hartman, 2011), and we are delighted that Morrison offers a deeply rich and thoughtful account of her own attempts to embrace reflexivity throughout the process of conducting research in Pakistan. Her article makes an eloquent contribution to the field by illustrating the multiple ways researchers might weave reflexivity into their own research process.

In addition, Morrison’s article reminds us how crucial it is to unpack our epistemological assumptions in order to be more fully aware of our research stance at various stages before, during, and after the research process – just as we would encourage our students to be mindful of their assumptions when they enter into a relationship with community partners. Given that much of our GSL work involves crossing borders into communities with limited resources and that have experienced some form of marginalization, exploitation, and colonization, it is all the more necessary for us to incorporate a reflexive stance into our research process. Indeed, the knowledge that we generate through GSL research will likely have an impact on who participates in the research design and process, who benefits from the research, and how resources are allocated among diverse stakeholders. As reflexive practitioners, the knowledge generated, in this sense, has decolonizing potential, and we would concur with Morrison that “to prevent doing harm, increase the quality of our research, and deepen our understanding of GSL, we need to engage in a continuous practice of reflexivity, paying particular attention to our research paradigm(s) and assumptions (p. 56)”.

The message of Morrison’s essay on reflexivity in research gave us, as GSL educators, practitioners,
and researchers, pause to reflect on our own set of assumptions. We not only bring an epistemological stance to our researcher roles but also a set of ethical, political, spiritual, and cultural assumptions filtered by our unique individual biographies and relevant experiences. Our introductory essay in the first GSL special section (Hartman & Kiely, 2014) articulated our approach to and definition of GSL, our understanding of the distinctive boundaries of the GSL field, and the sets of assumptions that have guided our research and practice. Prompted by Morrison’s past work and her article in this issue, we reflected on our initial conceptualization of what makes GSL a distinct field (Hartman & Kiely, 2014) and considered whether we truly had an adequate understanding of the philosophical assumptions driving GSL research, theory, and practice. We were left with a sense that the GSL field is in a state of flux, evolving but not having a fully matured identity. Having edited two special GSL sections of the Michigan Journal, it has become ever more clear to us that there is an acute need for attention not only to the contributions of but also the gaps produced by previous GSL scholarship. The stakes here are high. GSL field research can have immediate implications for practice in communities around the world. Our journal article review process has clarified for us that many programs still begin their efforts without consulting established GSL scholarship and that established scholarship has only begun to create a clear knowledge foundation. We have much more to learn than we had thought.

In the review process, we struggled to determine what manuscript content counted as GSL and what was outside our stated definition. For example, do we consider service-learning research in a country outside the U.S. as GSL? Is research in cross-cultural settings with international students or with indigenous students and communities considered GSL? Are there other characteristics that define GSL beyond those offered in our definition? If so, what qualifies service-learning as global and what, then, should not be considered GSL? Apart from the open-ended and evolving parameters and definitional boundaries of the GSL field, we continue to reflect on what core set of philosophical assumptions inform our understanding of GSL theory, practice, and research.

Earlier attempts to understand the “origins, practice and future” of the service-learning field through interviews with “pioneers” (Stanton, Giles & Cruz, 1999) suggested that service-learning has always been a contested territory based on how service-learning educators understand three interconnected axes – service, democracy, and education (Pollack, 1999). An initial effort to organize research in international service-learning (ISL) (Bringle & Hatcher, 2008) demarcated the field with a Venn diagram depicting ISL as the integration of three areas of education: service-learning, study abroad, and international education. Crabtree (2008) organized ISL through a set of intersections among a number of potential theoretical lenses including: international education and study abroad, civic education and service-learning, development and collaboration, participatory research, cross-cultural adjustment and communication, learning theory, and disciplinary theory. Hartman, Kiely, Friedrichs, and Boettcher (in press); also see globalsl.org organize GSL as the inter-relationship among seven areas: critically reflective practice, learning and assessment, health and safety, global civic engagement, community-driven development, intercultural learning, and power and privilege. Beginning a conceptual understanding of GSL with “community-driven development” as opposed to one of a number of areas focused on education clearly has considerable implications for scholarship and practice. The scholarly perspectives highlighted above, while not an exhaustive list, represent a number of potential conceptual frameworks for understanding GSL as a field and for guiding and advancing GSL scholarship.

If we were to interview GSL pioneers and/or current GSL scholars, what meanings, motivations, concepts, and theories would emerge that might help us better understand the field of GSL? There likely would be multiple perspectives on definitions, concepts, theories, goals, and purposes, just as we have seen from submitted manuscripts, but we might have a better sense of the key conceptual axes and theoretical and/or philosophical dimensions that can help organize the parameters of the GSL field. We might find that we have much in common with the origins, theories, and practices of the service-learning field. Is GSL, as much of what the scholarly literature suggests in our sister service-learning field, informed by Dewey’s progressive education (Giles & Eyler, 1994; Hatcher & Erasmus, 2008; Saltmarsh, 1996); Freire’s (1970) dialogic, radical, and liberating alternative to banking education (Deans, 1999); and/or critical, feminist and/or postcolonial theories (Andreotti & de Souza, 2012; Daynes & Longo, 2004; Hayes & Cuban, 1997; Mitchell, 2008)? Should the field borrow theory from disciplines such as international development, international relations, intercultural communication, or other disciplines to make sense of what we do when we cross cultural borders and boundaries in the name of community-driven development (Hartman & Kiely, 2014; Kiely, 2011)? Is GSL a teaching pedagogy, a development philosophy, or both (Hartman, Kiely, Friedrichs, & Boettcher, forthcoming)? Just as robust philosophical debates have thrived in the service-learning literature, (Butin, 2011; Leeds, 1995; Lui, 1995), the
philosophical assumptions, conceptual frameworks, and undergirding theories that guide our research and practice are imperative considerations as we continue to work to advance the GSL field.

Along with the GSL scholarship mentioned, the articles that make up the GSL special sections over the past year — Reynolds (2014), McMillan & Stanton (2014), Morrison (2015), and the books critically reviewing promising new GSL scholarship (Green & Johnson, 2014; Sumka, Porter, & Piacitelli (2015), all show us different pathways into systematic development of GSL knowledge and understanding — through theoretical, qualitative, and quantitative methods of inquiry.

We urge GSL scholars and practitioners to embrace a “reflexive stance” with their research and find ways to communicate and share the set of theoretical and philosophical assumptions that guide their work. In addition, we encourage authors of future manuscripts to this and other journals to draw upon the increasing number of GSL research studies and to articulate more fully the paradigmatic lenses and theoretical frameworks that inform their work. We look forward to future GSL research so as to build a more cohesive GSL community, a more coherent field, stronger local and global partnerships, and ultimately more effective practice.

References


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