At the 2008 International Association for Research on Service Learning and Community Engagement (IARSLCE) Conference, I participated in a plenary panel discussion titled “Research for What? New Directions and Strategies for Community Engaged Scholarship: International Perspectives.” I was asked to represent perspectives on this question developed from my long-term experience as a service-learning practitioner/scholar in both the United States and overseas. As part of my presentation, I offered the following remarks:

…most service-learning research focuses on students and faculty rather than on communities… [because] going into the community is just more difficult. It is easier for researchers to focus on students, because they are a captive audience – if you want them to fill out a survey, they will. Tracking down community people to get them to answer surveys or actually sit down and take time to plan a collaborative research project is very challenging and time-consuming. My challenge to all of us is that if we are really going to bring community voices and information needs into our research, we have got to express the same determination, courage and sensitivity to diverse cultural norms and demands as we ask of our service-learning students. We’ve got to make the effort to walk away from our campuses, into the communities, and build relationships with community partners – research relationships as well as practice ones. Then perhaps, we can begin to bring community voices loudly, clearly and effectively into our dialogue. (Gelmon, Stanton, Rudd, & Pacheco-Pinzon, 2009)

Thankfully, since that time, more service-learning research has begun to focus on the experience of communities and community partners. To my knowledge, most of this research is focused in the U.S. and on outcomes. More recently, however, International Service-Learning (ISL) research is surfacing. While it too is largely student outcomes-focused, attention to community partners is beginning to appear. Marianne Larsen’s book under review here, New Directions and Strategies for Community Engaged Scholarship: International Perspectives, with its focus on voices and perspectives of ISL partners and community hosts in the global South, is a most welcome addition.

Right off the bat in her Acknowledgments, Larsen notes Michel Foucault’s suggestion [no citation given] that “we turn out attention to the views of those who have been ‘out of sight’ in history … [Without] these disqualified voices … the critical work of interrogating and imagining ISL differently could not take place” (p. 9). Indeed, in this book, we find numerous global South community voices that share experiences and perspectives of ISL community partners – program coordinators, NGO partner organization staff, and homestay mothers. This book’s arrival is way past due.

Bookends

Part I of the book includes two chapters that provide an overview and critical orientation to the chapters to follow. In her excellent literature review in Chapter One, Larsen summarizes the evolution of service-learning research as it relates to communities and partners, and its gradual expansion from domestic to internationally-based programs. While noting the importance of these developments, especially the “focusing on those working within NGO and other partner organizations, their motivations for engaging in ISL partnerships, and the benefits and challenges that accrue in these relationships,” Larsen spotlights the fact that these studies continue to “leave out the voices of others in the local community that students interact with during their stay…” concluding that
...it is worth noting that the existing research [I have] reviewed ... is carried out by individuals in the global North universities, rather than by individuals from the global South. Mabel Erasmus’ (2011) study of her experiences hosting study abroad and ISL students from the United States at the University of the Free State in South Africa is one of the few exceptions. This book is an attempt to address the lack of community voice in ISL research... (p. 16)

Perhaps most helpful in this introductory chapter is Larsen’s “Problematization” section in which she describes and interprets the critical lenses – feminist and critical race theories as well as post-structural – with which most of the contributing authors view and portray their ISL experiences and research findings. “Central to these critical approaches,” she notes, “is the quest to problematize not only ISL research and practices, but also the values, knowledges, and assumptions that underlie ISL” (p. 21). This raises a question that appears to have motivated her undertaking the book and flows through its chapters: “Why is it that the impact of ISL on students’ learning outcomes has been framed as a problem to be studied and improved, while the impact of ISL on host communities has not” (p. 22)? The chapters in the book are in a sense a series of answers to this question. Larsen proceeds to “problematize” the concepts of community, service, and international service-learning itself. In the latter analysis she hones in on the term ‘international service-learning,’ noting Bringle and Hatcher’s (2011) “most commonly cited definition” (p. 11), which highlights the academic nature of ISL and associated cross-cultural and global understanding student learning goals. Its focus, she says, is on “what the student desires, does, and learns through ISL experiences” (p. 27), adding:

Learning results from interaction with the ‘Other’ and through the service provided to an identified community. The ‘Other’ is without subjectivity, illustrating the asymmetrical nature of the relationship where only students are positioned as ones who learn and serve. (p. 27)

Larsen acknowledges that a more recently derived term, ‘global service-learning’ (Hartman & Kiely, 2014, p. 60), complicates the simpler ISL definition above with its emphasis:

on concepts of power, privilege, and hegemony; the broader contexts within which GLS is played out such as the global marketization of voluntourism; and responsibilities of the GLS student by engaging the critical and moral imagination. … GLS engages participants in the activity of deconstructing hegemonic structures of oppression and attempts to establish egalitarian epistemologies.

The process of democratization of knowledge is acted out in reciprocal partnerships between the university and the partnering community. GSL scholars and practitioners heavily emphasize the value of local knowledge in the community and often refer to local and international NGOs they partner with as co-educators (Murphy, 2015). In this way, GSL represents a more progressive understanding of what constitutes knowledge, the source(s) of knowledge, and how knowledge is acquired through learning. These are important discursive developments, pushing ISL practitioners and researchers to commit to a more critical approach to their work. (p. 28)

Nevertheless, Larsen concludes her analysis by calling on us to reframe our focus critiquing GSL as still one-dimensional.

Like its predecessor ISL, [GSL] still begins with the student and the development of their intercultural competence (Hartman & Kiely, 2014) through service. It is [still] the privileging and coupling of ‘student’ learning and service that calls for further interrogation about who is able to learn and serve and why. (p. 28)

This final remark echoes service-learning principles articulated by Robert Sigmon (1979) almost 40 years ago, in which he advocates that in service-learning everyone involved is a learner and has something to contribute.

Chapter 2 extends this introductory section “by exploring the specific ethical, methodological, and theoretical challenges associated with carrying out ISL research” (p. 29). As such, it expands our lenses for reading and understanding the research reports that follow and the methodological perspectives of many of the authors. Expressing collaborative values called for in the book, the chapter represents a (presumably edited) conversation among four contributors “who chose to engage in an online discussion about the epistemological, theoretical, and methodological challenges in carrying out international service learning (ISL) research in and with host communities” (p. 36).

There are many strengths to this chapter, among them: its focus on relational and ethical implications of undertaking research in and with ISL host communities in the South when most of the researchers are from the North; and the epistemological questions raised including what knowledge is assumed to be valuable, how is it acquired, and how ISL knowledge is embedded within and reflective of social and historical contexts. The authors draw on critical theory, transnational feminist theory, and indigenous and decolonizing theories, which readers frequently will revisit in subsequent chapters. They “think out loud here about the implications of methodological and theoretical choices we make, including how
these choices exist within a world [with] injustice and inequality” (p. 37). They ask how they as researchers and others can learn from host communities, especially when they are not resident in them, and acknowledge that they know more about these questions than about their answers. The work is “messy and ambiguous and the conversation is far from finished” (p. 38). For several years I taught a preparation course for undergraduate students seeking to undertake community-based “partnership” research in South Africa; I would enthusiastically include this chapter in a future syllabus. The references cited in this and other chapters provide a critical bibliography of scholarly resources for ISL scholars and practitioners around the world.

I have given substantial attention to these first bookend chapters because they provide such a comprehensive introduction to the ones that follow, providing lenses through which readers can review and assess what is offered. The other bookend, Larsen and Jennifer Kozak’s excellent concluding chapter, provides a clear and insightful summary of the positive and negative aspects of ISL identified and analyzed by the book’s contributing authors with what they describe as a “post-colonial” edge. Negative implications of ISL include: economic challenges associated with hosting North American volunteers; socio-cultural ones such as “cross-cultural misunderstandings based on deeply embedded stereotypical and in some cases, racist, ideas about the Other” (p. 388) and language barriers; and failure to consult with NGO partners and local community members in planning and conducting ISL programs. Noted positive implications for ISL include: economic benefits such as stipends paid to homestay families and donated materials such as building supplies; skills development, for example, by homestay mothers who host ISL volunteers; co-education toward cross-cultural understanding that enables community members to consider themselves not just as service providers and receivers, but also as co-educators and co-learners along with the students; and community members’ appreciation of their local culture developed through observation of visiting students’ valuing things they normally took for granted.

Kozak and Larsen offer “pragmatic suggestions” (p. 395) for improving ISL that range from strengthening pre-departure orientation of student volunteers to providing in-country support for host community members, thereby highlighting ISL practice frameworks in chapters 16 (Hartman) and 17 (Duarte). They close with ruminations on service and responsibility, and how these terms, so damaging in their conventional sense, can be re-conceptualized as being with, learning from, and being vulnerable with others – suggesting that maybe that stance is the service that ISL volunteers can and should provide. Surely these are important thoughts, but I’m left with the question, What would ISL practice that aspired to this vision look like? I return to this shortly. First, a brief tour through the book’s contents.

**ISL Case Studies**

Part II of the book contains eight case studies seeking to better understand the impact of ISL on host communities in the Caribbean, Central America, and Africa. In the first of these, Nora Reynolds and her Nicaraguan co-author, Junior Cezar Gasparini, focus on community partners in a Villanova University-sponsored ISL program in Nicaragua. Viewing their work through a lens of post-colonial theory and hyper-reflexivity, they ask, What do our community partners want? Writing as a North-South, institution-community team, they share their collaborative, dialogical journey seeking to identify factors in ISL valued by the hosts and program partners – factors such as ‘shared austerity,’ physical presence, and student preparation that prioritizes learning about the history, politics, and culture of the service context over technical skills, etc. Of note in the data presented, there is no mention of what the students do/did in these communities. Rather the focus is on how community partners articulate their interest in teaching students about their personal lives as their primary motivation to engage in the partnership. Reynolds and Gasparini end by asking, “How might we get institutions to pay more attention to what our partners think, want and wish to contribute to us and our students?” (p. 74)?

In Chapter 4, Michael O’Sullivan and Harry Smaller report on a study of community and “coordinator” perceptions of Canadian students’ service and homestay experiences in rural Nicaragua. A local researcher was used to collect residents’ responses. The authors interviewed the coordinators, who appear to be staff of Nicaraguan-based NGOs that contract with Canadian schools and universities to arrange short and longer-term service experiences. In contrast to Chapter 3, this study inquired about what students actually did and how that was viewed – positively by all residents and coordinators but in a more critical way. Echoing John McKnight’s (1977) critique of helping professions, they asked whether apparently autonomous communities were requesting and accepting external aid that could lead them to becoming more dependent? As in Chapter 3, residents and coordinators surveyed in this study commented favorably about non-service related benefits they received, including learning about the lives of the visitors and teaching them about their lives and culture. This chapter left me wondering if there may have been program variables among the ISL projects.
researched (e.g., short-term vs. longer-term, nature of the service provided) that could have correlated with degrees of host/partner satisfaction and learning they derived from the experience.

In chapter 5, Cynthia Toms reports on findings from interviews, document analysis, and participant observation in three Costa Rican sites of volunteerism and service-learning. In contrast to the two previous chapters, the results from this study surfaced partners’ interest in the economic impact of hosting Northern students rather than the service contributed or educational relationships established. Respondents appeared to share a perception that what would be missed if ISL programs disappeared was not the service volunteers provided but rather the economic activity generated through homestays and sense of empowerment that developed in homestay mothers as a result of learning how to host students and generate income. Interestingly, Toms found that because of these attitudes, community hosts preferred short-term over long-term stays since they “paid better.” Reflecting on the findings, she wonders whether this sort of service tourism might be better construed as an economic development initiative shifting tourist business from cities and corporate hotels to small, grass-roots communities.

In Chapter 6, Barbara Heron reviews interview responses from NGO volunteer/ISL program coordinators in Guatemala, South Africa, Malawi, and Zambia, which reveal their perspectives on global North volunteers. She found general support for continuing these programs, but also much concern about costs to the partners and local communities associated with hosting volunteers especially short-term ones who do not get past the “adjustment phase” before they leave. What is noteworthy in this chapter is Heron’s extensive, deep reflection on how local NGO staff members articulate their responses to these volunteer adjustment challenges, which she says calls for “an alternative frame for thinking through what these encounters mean to Southern NGO staff” (p. 127). She concludes,

From a Northern perspective, the encounter between ISL volunteers and other short-term young Northerners and Southern NGO staff and communities … may be thought of in critical terms as a neocolonial (or postcolonial) encounter. From a Southern perspective, however, such an analysis may work to foreclose a deeper and more nuanced appreciation of how this encounter is conceived and experienced, given the very crucial ways in which the postcolonial era is not like colonization. … This is a stance that defies the binaries of North-South, developed-developing, helper-helped, and as such lies outside of Northern notions of resistance to postcolonialism or neocolonialism.

While I would argue that it is the responsibility of all of us in the North … to unpack postcolonialism and neocolonialism it is also our responsibility to not impose these frames of interpretation on peoples in the global South, but rather to recognize that alternative views are operating, and to listen, as best we can given the limits of our discursive frameworks, for what these views may enable us to understand about the neocolonial encounter. (p. 141)

Marianne Larsen continues this theoretically rich reflection in her Chapter 7 discussion of interviews with Tanzanians partnered with a Canadian university project. Here, again, interview responses are largely favorable about outcomes, the student volunteers, and the interactions between the local population and the ISL students. As with Heron, Larsen begins her analysis by examining these responses through a postcolonial lens that assumes that Northern knowledge is privileged over Southern by all parties involved. However, in a refreshing next move, she questions that interpretation by introducing anthropologist Ferguson’s (2006) complicating of these “60s era theories” by suggesting that “a new form of human capacity … is ‘potentiated by postcoloniality’ - that is, “to live subjunctively as neither subjects nor objects of history but as both, at one and the same time” (p. 160). In other words, might Africans, who value charitable service, opportunities to learn English, and other cultural traits exhibited by Northern volunteers, which we in the North may assume to be subservient behavior, perhaps also be engaging with these programs as a means to opt into a global world and its hoped for benefits in a way that is not at the expense of their self-worth? Readers of these two chapters who are unfamiliar with the literature of neo- and postcolonialism may find them highly abstract and hard going, but they represent theoretically the main message of this book: ISL practitioners and scholars must take the time and make the effort to listen, “eloquently” as Langston Hughes (1968) put it, to clearly perceive the voices and messages of global South ISL partners and hosts.

The last three chapters of this section return our focus from theories to practice. In Chapter 8, Jessica Arends reports on a study she undertook with local partners and ISL students in east Africa, which she designed to better understand service-learning relationships. As with most of the other studies contained in this book, Arends identifies numerous positive aspects of these relationships but also complicated challenges from “interactions [that] occur at a complex nexus of expectations regarding race, gender and privilege leading to feelings of exploitation, entitlement, and stereotyping” (p. 170). In Chapter 9, Shelane Jorgenson discusses interview responses
from Canadian students doing study aboard at the University of Ghana, Ghanaian students, and a few Ghanaian international program staff members “to expose and discuss prevalent discourses that shape North Americans’ desires and preparations to go to Ghana and the effects these have on a host post-secondary community” (p. 181). While not about ISL, the article does identify actions to strengthen study abroad programs with a focus on a more in-depth orientation that surfaces stereotypes about the country and culture of destination, builds language skills, and perhaps involves people from these countries.

In Chapter 10, Katie McDonald and Jessica Vorstermans discuss the value of including host families as equal partners along with students and staff in ISL programing. The authors surveyed hosts involved in a 10-year old Canadian program, Intercordia, and discuss attitudes surfaced that go beyond interest in the intercultural exchange to more serious, self-interested goals of developing themselves and their children through the experience of hosting “white” students. This article carefully blends research analysis with description of what appears to be the strongest ISL pre-departure preparation program described in the book.

Re-Envisioning North-South ISL Relationships

“The chapters in Part III of the book focus on the ways in which we can rethink, re-envision, and re-theorize relations of all of those involved in ISL programs, with a particular emphasis on those that host North American ISL students” (p. 19). In Chapter 11, Joselin Hernández offers a local host perspective on ISL practice – both good and bad – from her experience working with Northern programs in Nicaragua. As with many of the other book chapters, we do not get a precise description of the ISL practice written about, how it varied across programs, etc., which would help readers evaluate the information provided. Nevertheless, the problems and success stories shared and the guidelines offered as recommendations – which include prioritizing community needs, attention to donation policies and their impact on the community, and the need for preparation and skill building in both students and hosts – are thoughtful, practical, and seemingly on target.

Chapters 12 and 13 appear to be in conversation with each other. In Chapter 12, Samantha Dear and Ryan Howard examine concepts of reciprocity and interdependence, calling for a move to interdependence as a means of getting away from the “transactional nature of reciprocity,” which they view as potentially harmful and unrealistic. They ask, How can there be equal benefit for both visiting and host communities in a world of inequality, whether it comes from what Northerners leave behind (e.g., service work, donations, etc.) or through cultural exchange? Perhaps, they theorize, interdependence can result from longer-term, sustainable partnerships with partners learning from each other. Chapter 13 reads like a direct reply. Here, Jessica Murphy poses the Haitian/Ayisen concept of “resipwosite,” or reciprocity, as the basis for rethinking mutual exchange in ISL and perhaps as a synonym for Dear and Murphy’s interdependence. Using direct quotations from university and NGO members of the Haitian Compact, Murphy explores deep, sustained, relationship-focused partnerships as the means to achieving reciprocity and mutual benefit, partnerships that promote and develop trust, dignity, and working with rather than for over a long term, so both partners may learn how to collaborate effectively on behalf of their mutual goals for coming together.

Chapters 14 and 15 offer two conversations among ISL practitioners – Canadians facilitating ISL and individuals in communities hosting Canadian ISL students. In Chapter 14, Intercordia staff members Godwin Agudey (based in Ghana) and Hannah Deloughery (based in Canada) describe how a team comprised of a program mentor and a host family coordinator work together to support both student learning and host families as important, active participants in the program rather than simply people who provide housing, an expression of an effective ISL program that seeks mutual benefit through well-supported partnerships. Intercordia stands out among programs identified in this book for its willingness to invest deeply in assuring high quality experiences for both its students and partners. However, absent in this conversation are teachers and other school staff with whom students work in their service assignments. Shouldn’t they be at the table as well?

In Chapter 15, based on years of ISL experience and reflecting a University of British Columbia student, staff, and faculty committee’s deliberations on ethical international engagement and service-learning, Tamara Baldwin, Salim Mohamed, and Juliet Tembe engage in deep, cross-cultural reflection on how to place the student learning agenda within an ethical engagement framework, without apology for the messiness, frustration, and delay when community development processes do not synchronize with course or other university timelines (p. 317). … Shifting the lens of engagement to center ethics and host community impact and perhaps de-center other objectives such as student learning or institutional goals is a behavior (perhaps even a worldview) change. This is not to say that student learning and institutional goals
are not important, but rather that they cannot be the starting point. (pp. 316 - 317)

Chapters 16 and 17 answer these calls for reciprocal and ethical practice with two sets of standards. In Chapter 16, Eric Hartman describes the history and development of Fair Trade Learning standards for ethical global partnerships that originated with a Jamaican community organization, Association of Clubs (AoC), which came to partner with U.S.-based Amizade Global Service Learning. He describes standards and a detailed assessment rubric for GSL practitioners and partners to use in striving for Fair Trade Learning in their work together. He provides examples of how and where things can go wrong that stimulated AoC and others to take up the standards development work. In Chapter 17, Gonzalo Duarte proposes a similar, perhaps more detailed framework, or audit instrument, for “reciprocal public benefit” that he defines as “a balanced distribution of common or integrated benefits achieved through collaboration” (p. 354), which he culled from a wide-ranging review of ISL literature. Both chapters are clear, straightforward, and practical. Duarte’s offering is particularly helpful by including carefully drawn definitions of important terms, something lacking in other book chapters.

In Chapter 18, Allyson Larkyn explores the African, indigenous philosophy of Ubuntu with its emphasis on generosity, unconditionality, and mutuality as a means of addressing the hegemonic assumptions found in most conventional ISL programs that do not encourage reflection on the values, outcomes, and epistemic foundations of “service.” She suggests that in following Ubuntu, service could emphasize learning from others rather than about them. She includes a brief Tanzanian case study report on Canadian students’ appalling lack of awareness of and sensitivity toward their host families and communities, which was at best highly annoying to hosts and perhaps damaging as well, to children especially. I was taken aback by this story and wondered how any responsible program could permit and possibly enable such things to happen.

Conclusion

Larsen articulated three main objectives for her book: (a) to problematize the impact and influence of ISL in Southern host communities; (b) to legitimize and privilege the experiences and voices of ISL partners and hosts in the global South; and (c) to encourage re-thinking of paternalistic and colonized relations between global North and South ISL partners in favor of principles of interdependence, reciprocity, solidarity, and mutuality. As is hopefully clear from the above, I find that she has achieved these ends in brilliant fashion. In doing so, she and the contributing authors have made a major contribution to the developing ISL field, putting Southern voices on the map with a large exclamation point. Nevertheless, there are a few neglected issues.

First, the book lacks consensus among the contributors about a conceptualization or definition of ISL. Programs represented here appear to range from study abroad with little or no service-learning to pure volunteer programs to intensive service-learning embedded in long-term partnerships with adequate staff support to enable critical reflection by student volunteers and collaborative problem-solving with community hosts and partners. Perhaps the emphasis in the book on surfacing and legitimizing community voices inadvertently led to lack of attention to the detailed nature of the ISL practices analyzed other than in the two chapters (10 and 14) focused on Intercordia. The result, however, is that it is difficult in many chapters, if not impossible, to decipher and correlate reported ISL impacts – whether positive or negative – with specific ISL practices. Thus, the reader is left wondering just how some of the problems identified can be mitigated or how certain practices may be more problematic than others.

Related to this lack of precision are some chapter authors’ weak descriptions of the populations they surveyed and their reporting of data gathered. In my reading, I found myself recalling the grading of students’ research papers when I would often ask the writer from where in her data her judgments came or what was the frequency of articulated sentiments that led her to make a specific judgment? For example, did all of the interviewees say such things, half of them, just a few? Readers need such information to determine the degree of validity of judgments made. For example, in Chapter 5, Tom’s theorizing about ISL’s economic impact is not clearly linked to data she gathered nor the population(s) from which it came. Heron’s otherwise brilliant Chapter 6 suffers from similar limitations.

A third issue arose for me from the cumulative references in most of the book’s chapters to “post-structural, post-colonial and de-colonizing theories.” While Larsen provides some background and explanation of these theories in her Introduction, it appears that apart from Heron (Chapter 6) and Larsen herself (Chapter 7), the book’s authors share a rather uncritical commitment to these theories that inform the “post-colonial lens” through which they view North-South relationships, which they repeatedly offer as a given way for ISL practitioners and researchers, and therefore readers too, to perceive this work. Heron’s and Larsen’s chapters are refreshing exceptions and counterpoints to these expressions, which otherwise, in their uncritical presentation, become less than illuminating and
rather predictable. Do all ISL researchers hold to these views? Perhaps the book would have been strengthened and enlivened with a contribution or two from ISL scholars with contrary views, or a chapter that interpreted and presented post-colonial theory’s evolution and the debates that surround it.

Finally, returning to my introduction to this review, one may infer that I bring a practitioner’s perspective to my reading of research and theory. Indeed, in that 2008 IARSLCE talk, I lamented the fact that an informal survey I had taken with practitioner colleagues across the U.S. did not identify even one who said his or her day-to-day practice of service-learning, domestic or international, was directly affected by research. At that time and since, I have called for research that is driven more by the “what do I do on Monday” kinds of concerns that practitioners deal with continually in their work, that presents portraits of practice (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) that enable readers to “see” just how, in this case, ISL practitioners can successfully respond to the kinds of challenges identified by Larsen and her colleagues. The practice standards and rubrics offered by Hartman (Chapter 16) and Duarte (Chapter 17) begin to take us there, and Kozak and Larsen’s concluding recommendations add to that as well. However, while I find this book a huge, welcome, and needed contribution to the literature of ISL with its critical questioning about the nature of current ISL practice and its evocation of a new, more equitable vision, I am left with a huge question of just how we move toward such a vision in our work. Responding to this desire is admittedly outside the scope of what Larsen and her colleagues intended. They met their mission and did so brilliantly. They also whetted my appetite for research and inquiry into ISL practices that can bring life to the postcolonial visions put forward and better inform the work of practitioners who wish to bring them about.

Notes

1 To view a comprehensive list of recent ISL research, readers may access http://globalsl.org/wiki/gsl-practice-research-wiki/gsl-research/global-service-learning/.

2 Page references in this book are approximate as the copy reviewed was not the final one.

References


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