

## Article

# A Paradigm Shift in International Service-Learning: The Imperative for Reciprocal Learning

Lynn Gregory <sup>1</sup>, Kathleen Schroeder <sup>2,\*</sup> and Cynthia Wood <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Communication, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28607, USA; gregoryld@appstate.edu

<sup>2</sup> Department of Geography and Planning, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28607, USA

<sup>3</sup> Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28607, USA; woodca@appstate.edu

\* Correspondence: schroederk@appstate.edu

**Abstract:** The US-based authors argue that the practice of what we currently call “international service-learning” does not generally achieve its most important goals in the context of the global South, especially those based on the development of mutually beneficial relationships with host communities. The primary impediments to achieving this goal in any interaction between students and vulnerable peoples are: (1) the belief that a student’s reflection on their experience is *sufficient*, both to evaluate community impact and to promote student learning; (2) the assumption that service always has positive results; and most critically; (3) the concept of service itself. While something new and positive can be created to replace international service-learning, the changes required to do so are so fundamental that the result will be something completely different from the way that international service-learning is conducted today. We argue for the need to reframe international service-learning with a focus on reciprocal learning or risk continuing to function as a neocolonial practice with likely harm to communities and to our students as we engage in practices that reify global inequality.

**Keywords:** service-learning; reciprocal learning; neocolonial



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## 1. Introduction: Critiquing International Service-Learning

Service-learning in general (e.g., [1]), and international service-learning in particular, have been the subject of longstanding critique (e.g., [2–8], and there have been serious attempts to quantify the impacts of international service-learning on students [9], and on places [10]. However, we argue that the practice of what we currently call “international service-learning” generally does not achieve the most important goals of sustainability in the context of the global South, especially those of establishing mutually beneficial relationships with host communities and constructive learning outcomes for students with respect to cross-cultural understanding and social justice. The primary impediments to achieving these goals in any interaction between students and vulnerable peoples and communities are:

- (1) The belief that student reflection on their experience is sufficient both to evaluate community impact and promote learning;
- (2) The assumption that service always has positive results; and
- (3) The concept of service itself.

While we believe that something new and positive can be created in place of international service-learning, the changes required to do this are so fundamental that it will no longer be recognizable as “service-learning” as currently understood. What we are calling for is a fundamental paradigm shift in how we conceive, design, and implement these programs, one which centers on community learning, where visitors and hosts meet on a

more equitable basis and learn from each other. Without these changes, ISL will continue to function as a neo-colonial practice that is likely to harm communities and teach our students the opposite of what they must learn if global inequality is to be dismantled.

It is within this context that Ivan Illich [11] made his classic appeal:

*"I am here to suggest that you voluntarily renounce exercising the power which being an American gives you. I am here to entreat you to freely, consciously and humbly give up the legal right you have to impose your benevolence on Mexico. I am here to challenge you to recognize your inability, your powerlessness and your incapacity to do the 'good' which you intended to do . . . Come to look, come to climb our mountains . . . Come to study. But do not come to help". [11]*

The critique offered in this article comes from the perspectives of US based-academics who have devoted much of their careers to study abroad, service-learning, and developing a robust understanding of the ways that we reify global inequity. In addition, we believe that now is the critical time to implement the changes we call for in this article. As our international programs have been put on indefinite hold by the COVID-19 pandemic, we are being forced to pause our international work. This global health catastrophe coupled with widespread calls for social justice could provide the needed opportunity to, at long last, rethink our roles and engage seriously with the potential damage that we do in the name of "service".

## 2. The Limitations of Student Experience and Reflection

The first problematic assumption embedded in the current theory and practice of international service-learning is the belief in the inherent educational value of direct experience for our students. While it is repeatedly emphasized in the service-learning literature that service in itself is not sufficient for learning, learning is thought to be achieved through systematic and thoughtful reflection on students' experience. According to Maureen Porter and Kathia Monard [12], for example, "[w]e aim to generate meaning by effectively linking formal reflection and meaningful engagement" [12], see also [6]. According to this line of argument, formal study of a place or situation before departure is not necessary or is, at best, secondary to a student's direct experience. It could be argued that, for many, there is an abiding antipathy to such study which is seen as an actual impediment to learning. As Martha Merrill [5] has argued, the results of experiential learning may appear to be embedded in U.S. culture. First is the idea that the self-reliant individual is capable of learning through an encounter and his or her subsequent reflection on it, and indeed may learn better as a result of that interaction than by having "truth" presented to him or her by an authority [5].

### 2.1. Experience and Reflection Alone Are Not Enough

Experiential education, understood as education gained through direct experience accompanied by reflection, is often represented or practiced in service-learning as a substitute for substantive knowledge gained through research and study, rather than as a complement to this knowledge. Unlike some faculty, we do not "bristle at the use of 'reflection' in academic learning" [6]; we agree with the arguments that it is a necessary part of the pedagogy of experiential education. What we take issue with is the belief that experience alone is necessary for reflection to be useful for learning outcomes in the context of the global South. We argue below that this assumption is so fundamentally flawed that students not only fail to learn what they should, they actually learn things that work against the possibility of individual student development and meaningful change.

A corollary assumption is that understanding the general principles of partnership, and applying these principles faithfully, are enough to establish ethical and mutually beneficial relationships between academic institutions engaged in service-learning, students, and the communities served. That is, a deep knowledge of the possible or likely effects of students on specific communities, or of the possible or likely effects of the service provided by students, is not necessary for ISL programs to have a positive impact. However, that

general experience is not sufficient to provide an understanding of how communities are affected by ISL and that this lack of understanding consistently undermines the principle of mutual benefit, so much so that any benefits to students, such as they are, are likely to occur at the expense of communities and people served.

One claim routinely made in the literature on international service-learning is that exposure to other cultures in ISL contexts functions to increase students' cross-cultural understanding and knowledge of other societies. "Experiencing a culture at its roots makes teachers, doctors, nurses, businesspeople, lawyers, and engineers more aware of and sensitive to the needs of the population whose concerns they are trying to address" [13].

## 2.2. Cross-Cultural Understanding Is Not a Given

Evidence suggests [9] that, while the potential for building cross-cultural understanding exists in encounters between students and the people they meet abroad, it does not occur automatically. One study found that while cross-cultural appreciation does occur among individuals participating in volunteer tourism, "this does not necessarily lead to change in broader perceptions of nationalities or cultures" [14], see also [15]. Researchers at Portland State [16] found that frequent travel by monolingual students to non English-speaking destinations actually had a negative impact on cross-cultural attitudes, suggesting that such travel may serve to reinforce preexisting stereotypes of cultural difference, notions of exoticism, and, perhaps, ethnocentric beliefs and values. (One student wrote: "Mexico is such a dirty place, I couldn't wait to get out of there".) This finding underscores the importance providing a solid educational structure for short-term study abroad [16].

While Carter, Latz, and Thornton [16] argue that this problematic outcome results from tourist travel "unconnected to structured educational goals", they do not present data to support this assertion. We argue that there is nothing magical about educational goals or travel occurring in the context of study abroad, especially when experience is privileged over formal study, as in ISL. In fact, Zappile, Beers, and Raymond [17] found that students who engage in "real-time problem-based simulation" can have significant increases in their scores on survey items that measure "global empathy" without ever leaving the classroom. There is reason to question the sometimes hotly asserted difference between students and tourists. Michael Woolf [18] suggests that the expansion of short-term programs of 3–4 weeks.

*"blurs the distinction between education abroad and educational tourism. There is certainly a place for educational tourism, but to give academic credit for these activities seems to me to weaken the credibility of our field". [18]*

No matter what the educational goals of study abroad, if leaders and students in the international service-learning program do not have adequate knowledge to guide and process their experience, as well as their interactions with the people they meet in the host community (including language skills), these goals are unlikely to be achieved, even if there is significant pre-departure orientation and post-return sessions which include reflective essay assignments [16]. Reflection, therefore, must emphasize critical thinking and integration of the students' experiences with knowledge of the place and its history. This is particularly true for international service-learning in the global South, because the concept of "helping", and even of "development" have been problematized by critical approaches to development emerging from postcolonial theory, including postdevelopment theory [19].

## 3. "Bad Service" and Its Community Impacts

In order to establish a more critical perspective on how communities are affected by ISL programs, we must broaden the concept of community and examine all of the avenues of student impact. This requires both study and knowledge. As we have argued elsewhere, the "community" affected by international service-learning is broader than community partners and clients, and service is not the only source of impact (see [8,20]). No less than tourists, our students are travelers from richer countries to poorer ones and have effects on

local communities beyond that related to service, whether or not these effects are intended by ISL program organizers or participants.

### 3.1. *Community Impact Is Broad*

Critical literature on tourism, as well as ISL, points to the many avenues of negative impact that students can have simply by being abroad—this has never been more true than in the world of COVID-19. For example, because of COVID-19 protocols, inequality may be maintained or even worsened by student groups staying in foreign-owned hotels or in host family housing owned by more affluent local people. Resources may be diverted from local people or community-based projects towards fulfilling the needs or desires of people from richer countries. The environment may be harmed by overuse of local resources. Local culture and society may be transformed by encounters with comparatively wealthy foreigners, especially through “demonstration effects”. Relations of dependency may be created, and the dignity and self-esteem of local people may be undermined [6,21,22].

These problems could be addressed in ISL programs, at least to some degree, through [23,24]:

- (1) Good destination selection;
- (2) Real control by local people;
- (3) Long-term relationships with host communities;
- (4) Substantive preparation and processing with students; and
- (5) A reduction in the number of ISL students and programs

However, the mitigation of negative impacts, or promotion of positive impacts, that might be achieved through these efforts will only occur if universities, faculty and staff, students, and the communities themselves all see them as requirements for study abroad and understand how these impacts occur. We are calling for a high standard of evaluation for developing and approving programs, and even participant selection, similar to informed consent or institutional review for human subjects research, as well as previous knowledge and ongoing study of host communities and how they are affected [8,20,24]. Faculty expertise and student experience is a necessary, but not sufficient, component of the education needed for this process to be successful. In a similar vein, the American Psychological Association is now calling for more serious consideration of the ethical considerations of international research [25].

### 3.2. *Service Can Be Damaging*

A second component of understanding how communities are affected by ISL is a thorough evaluation of all of the potential impacts of service itself, including the negative impacts. The possibility of “bad service”, is a particularly uncomfortable concept for service-learning advocates, who generally assume that the impact of service is necessarily positive and “continue to urge its practice on the basis of its intended value to communities” [3]; see also [26–28]. However, there is serious reason to question this assumption, including evidence of actual harm done through service, in the service-learning literature, though this evidence is rarely discussed. Generally, the impacts of service are not evaluated at all in the literature on ISL, as Cruz and Giles [3] point out, but in the few cases where it is, the possibility of negative impacts are dismissed. For example, in Susan Deeley’s [28] widely cited study of the effects of International Partnership for Service-Learning and Leadership programs in Jamaica and Scotland, one welfare agency reported that the effect of students’ departure “was ‘awful’, with the service-users very upset and unable to understand why students leave. In some instances counseling had to be given to overcome their distress”. Though this issue was also documented by another agency dealing with children, Deeley asserts that “[o]verall, [the students’] presence had positive effects on staff and service users”, though she presents no evidence for this conclusion [28].

The growing criticism of “voluntourism” provides evidence of problematic service, often resulting from a simple lack of skills or knowledge, either of the area where the service is being performed, or of the more specific effects of the service itself. A few examples

of standards from other fields will illustrate this concern. Professional humanitarian aid worker Heather McLeod [29] reports on the problematic impacts of untrained volunteer groups arriving in Pakistan after the 2005 earthquake to distribute needed winter clothing. Many engaged in what professionals refer to as the “truck and chuck” method. This is when aid is thrown out of the back of a truck to a waiting crowd. The result is normally chaos, with the biggest and strongest in the crowd pushing to the front and those more vulnerable missing out. The most vulnerable people then dig through rejected piles of clothing on the ground for whatever they can find that might be of any use. The lack of dignity and inability for the most vulnerable to access such aid is one example of why standards and agreed practices for distribution have been developed by the humanitarian industry. That is why volunteers need to know these standards and be affiliated with a recognized humanitarian aid organization [29].

In another example, child development professionals Linda Richter and Amy Norman [30] evaluated the practice of short-term visits of volunteers who act as caregivers to “AIDS orphans” in South Africa. Their knowledge of the specific vulnerabilities of such children make it possible to understand why such volunteering is particularly damaging: Short-term volunteer tourists are encouraged to “make intimate connections” with previously neglected, abused and abandoned young children. However, shortly after such “connections” have been made, tourists leave, many undoubtedly feeling that they have made a positive contribution to the plight of very vulnerable children . . . Unfortunately, many of the children they leave behind experience another abandonment to the detriment of their short- and long-term emotional and social development. Inherently, the formation and dissolution of attachment bonds to successive volunteers is likely to be especially damaging to young children being cared for in such environments [30].

This is perhaps the starkest case of the failure of self-reflection and the absolute necessity of a knowledge base with regard to the service provided. It appears to be common sense that children deprived of adult care and affection would need such care, but such children are particularly vulnerable to repeated departures, as must inevitably happen with service-learning. Further, the uninformed service provider is likely to take the smiles and hugs of children as evidence of the positive impact of their service. When instead this is a sign of exactly the vulnerability that makes this service damaging: “Consistently observed characteristics of children in institutional care are indiscriminate friendliness and excessive need for attention” rather than wariness around strangers, which is the more common behavior of children raised in families with healthy attachments [30]. Humanitarian organizations are expected to create protocols and codes of conduct to “reduce the risk of abusers having access to vulnerable populations” [29], but obviously, these policies must be required for international service-learning programs working with children as well.

Criticisms of the possibility of “bad service” might be summarized as follows: how can unskilled, untrained, and unscreened students, who stay a very short period of time, do not speak the language, and have little understanding of the history or culture of the region, or of the likely impacts of their service, actually do any good or even do no harm? Since this describes the vast majority of service-learning participants, it is a very serious criticism, one increasingly raised by agencies themselves, when they feel able to do so (e.g., [31]). Lack of skill or training, when important for the task, inevitably leads to a low quality of service, as does inability to speak the local language. Even when those providing service have relevant skills, coordinating volunteer groups takes time away from workers at the agency that might be better spent doing something other than making arrangements for visitors [32].

Other negative results of service may be indirect. Many service-learning programs work with young people or children, who are especially vulnerable to the demonstration effects mentioned above [32]. Service “[m]ay actually impede development that is desired by host populations” by ignoring local desires with respect to change in their community [32]; see also [6]. A community or agency may be paid by the university to allow students to perform service, or it may simply be provided for free, which can harm local workers if



the service substitutes for paid employment, as for example in construction [32]. Dependency can be created, or maintained, by providing a reliable influx of students engaging in service [22]. When an emergency, such as a pandemic, strikes, income and labor from ISL disappears from the community leaving it even more vulnerable than before.

### 3.3. Possible Ways to Improve Service

As with the critique of unintended and indirect community impacts, there is much room for improvement in response to concerns about the impacts of service [33]. An obvious solution would include sending only those students who know the language and have skills relevant to the task, establishing good orientation pre-departure, processing during the ISL program [23], and establishing protocols for monitoring students and their service over time so that they do not burden the agency or community. Knowledge of the impact of service might lead to useful statements on better practice. For example, further research might suggest that students can work with children if they have strong adult attachments, or with the elderly, without doing significant harm. Parameters could be developed which promote the most positive impacts. However, we must start from the basic assumption that it is the ethical responsibility of universities and ISL faculty to be sure that service-learning programs abroad do no harm and to establish review and approval structures that enforce this principle. Again, these standards should be comparable to those set for human subjects research [8,24].

Knowing the impacts of service requires understanding the context in which the service occurs, analyzing likely effects and the potential for harm on the basis of this understanding, and evaluating the actual impacts of service through longitudinal research. Students feeling good about their service is not a good measure of its impact. Neither are their good intentions or those of faculty, or agency staff [11]. Ignorance and meaning well are not excuses for engaging in service that does harm. It is the responsibility of those promoting service-learning to have a very good idea of what the actual effects of that service will be. Our collective desire “to help” can no longer justify our actions. As a field, we have come too far to continue to turn a blind-eye to the broader implications of our actions.

Failure to address the impacts of international service-learning on communities in the global South, even when that failure is due to ignorance, makes the current practice of ISL a form of neocolonialism, to the degree that students, faculty, and academic institutions benefit from ISL at the expense of local people. Knowing how ISL programs affect communities makes improvement possible, though it is likely this would require significant change in how many, as well as how, international service-learning programs are conducted. Faculty and staff involved in service-learning programs are likely to want to make these changes, and to desire help in doing so. Many will have to acknowledge the need to design their programs in consultation with those who are knowledgeable about their potential destination or service, and accept having programs turned down with good grace [20]. Educational institutions will have to accept that ethical conduct requires change that emphasizes quality over quantity. However, in terms of the direct and indirect impacts of ISL, reform is possible.

## 4. The Problem with Service Itself

A major conceptual absence in the literature on international service-learning is that of the neocolonial history of many of the places students visit and of widespread Northern perceptions of the global South. It is important to remember that students do not come to international study as blank slates. They travel to their destinations bearing with them a plethora of negative or otherwise problematic representations of people in the global South. Previous travel are unlikely to have challenged these representations; many of our students come to study abroad with a background in “mission trips”, both secular and religious, where charitable service to the poor defined their experience [34]. In this context, the real learning objective of study abroad and international service-learning may not be to teach

students about the people and places where they are traveling, but to create an environment where what they already “know” about such people and places can be unlearned.

#### 4.1. Insights from Postcolonial Theory

A vast postcolonial theory on travel writing (e.g., [35]) suggests that what people from the North know about those in the global South (and vice-versa) shapes cross-cultural encounters in profound ways, including what is learned during travel. Moreover, this knowledge is neither random nor innocent. Movies, television, and literature systematically portray people from poorer parts of the world as villains, clowns, or victims. These portrayals are taken as being “representative” of all people of the global South. More importantly, these images are carried over into other spheres of representation, such as politics, and shape how actual individuals are perceived. It follows from such analyses that these representations matter in the world. Edward Said argued in *Orientalism* [36] that eighteenth century portrayals of an exotic and irrational “Orient” in European art, literature, and visitors’ memoirs contributed to justifications for colonial interventions in those areas, by portraying their people as incapable of governing themselves. Lest we believe that we are living in a more inclusive and representative world, The Annenberg Foundation’s 2016 report on Diversity in Entertainment found that, “For the past 10 years, we have quantified disturbing patterns around the lack of media representation concerning females and people of color in film. Despite elevated awareness around this issue, the numbers have not budged”. [37] It would be naïve of us to ignore the impact of the media on our biases as we engage in critical ISL programs.

Postcolonial critics have directed particular attention to representations of people in the global South as people in need of help, which they suggest are no less damaging than those that present them as inherently violent or dangerous. Chandra Mohanty [38], for example, analyzes scholarly articles on women and development and shows that “Third World women” are most often portrayed as irrational, uneducated, passive, traditional and oppressed. This portrayal, she argues, simultaneously allows for the representation of people from the North as the necessary “saviors” of women in “underdeveloped” places [38]; see also [39]. Postdevelopment theory argued that the concept of development itself is founded on the representation of whole groups of people as “underdeveloped”, i.e., defined in terms of their deficiencies and the things or qualities they are presumed to “need” [19].

This analysis clearly has relevance for understanding what happens, and what should happen, during international service-learning. Twenty years ago, the impetus for Chisolm’s *Charting a Hero’s Journey* [40] was to help the student through the many difficulties of living and working in an unfamiliar place in trying circumstances. In this context it does so at some cost. Defining the student as the hero of her international service-learning experience, and the people with whom she works as needy recipients of her help or instruments to making her a hero reinforces exactly the problematic ideologies development critics point to as supporting global systems of inequality. This book continues to influence the field [41].

Questions of representation are embedded in systems of power. The encounter between people from richer countries and those in vulnerable places is shaped by the privilege of the former. This concern is vital in considering the learning outcomes of international service-learning. Participants in international service-learning from wealthy parts of the world have been saturated with coded representations of people from poorer parts of the world. Without attention to the intellectual and conceptual baggage that students carry abroad with them as they encounter the “other”, students may “learn” exactly the opposite of what we want them to from study abroad by allowing them to “confirm” that people in the global South are passive victims in need of help from the global North [7]. This will be so even if they devote time to learning about the history of the region or of development itself [6], though these efforts are necessary components for achieving other learning outcomes.

Kate Simpson [15] makes just this point in her analysis of “gap year” programs. Simpson argues that “the very legitimacy of such programs is rooted in a concept of a ‘third world’, where there is ‘need’, and where European young people have the ability, and right, to meet this need” [15]. Doing something is represented as better than doing nothing in the gap year literature, and “development” is something done by those external to communities, in this case by unskilled 18 year olds with good intentions and enthusiasm [15]. From Simpson’s perspective, these representations contribute to a distancing of student participants in gap year programs from the people they meet abroad, and to their sense that poverty is something experienced by (and defining of) the “foreign other” [15]. In interviews after their gap year, students suggested that the people they worked with “didn’t mind” being poor, and that the inequalities they witnessed resulted from bad luck—something they could not feel guilty about [42]. Without any context for analyzing the social systems which bring about such inequalities, students are left with a focus on individual advancement rather than social change, leading Simpson to question “the presumption that travel to and encounter with ‘the other’ will be sufficient to generate structural changes and engender cross-community understanding” among students [15].

A similar analysis can be applied to the international service-learning experience of students, faculty, and their Mexican hosts described in anthropologists Jeanne Simonelli, Duncan Earle, and Elizabeth Story’s article, “*Acompañar Obediendo: Learning to Help in Collaboration with Zapatista Communities*” [4]. Simonelli and Earle are faculty with formal training and expertise on Latin America generally, and Mexico in particular, who have studied and worked for years in the Chiapas region of Mexico and are very familiar with and supportive of the Zapatista communities’ efforts to transform their situation to one that directly benefits themselves. The authors are also well aware of the potential harm service-learning can do:

*“[W]ith service-learning, not knowing enough can actually be dangerous to those we encounter. Our students, as service-learners, need to know as much as can be provided about the life-ways of the places they are to serve because one can make the mistake of helping in ways that are culturally inappropriate. This helps to lessen the possibility of unintended offense, or falling prey to what the Zapatistas call the Cinderella Syndrome—a subtle attitude of deprecating charity; providing cast-offs to the poor relation”. [4]*

As a result of their deep knowledge of the region, Simonelli, Earle, and Story [4] were able to create a model ISL program with respect to community impacts and learning outcomes. Students were required to read as much as possible pre-departure about the history and lived experience of the people they would be visiting in Chiapas. In addition, many hours were spent before they left discussing the Zapatista concept of “service”, and how it contrasted with the students’ expectations. Despite these critical preparations, very shortly after their international service-learning experience began, the students called the faculty in to discuss why they were not doing any “service”. Though the program had been designed in consultation with the Zapatista leadership, who considered the most valuable contribution students could make to witness and share daily life with their hosts, and take what they have learned back to the United States, “students still imagined service to be manual labor, such as building houses, planting fields, and picking coffee . . . In contrast, our Zapatista hosts define manual labor projects not as service but learning” [4]. Simonelli, Earle and Story [4], offer a useful analysis of this experience, which resulted in their acquiring a “deeper understanding of how to define service in ways that connect with community priorities” [4]. However, we believe that the students’ anxiety and their difficulty understanding a broader concept of service suggests a different conclusion: service is the problem.

#### 4.2. The Problem with “Helping”

Because the representation of people in the global South as “needing help” is central to the expression of Northern dominance and privilege, the concept and practice of “service” itself is highly problematic in the context of international service-learning in those areas. As



Vijay Prashad [43] clearly states in his introduction to *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World*, "The Third World was not a place. It was a project". We argue that this worldview remains the dominant conceptual practice in the design and implementation of international service-learning programs.

Allan Johnson [44] argues that "helping", actually reinforces privilege rather than calling it into question:

*"[Appealing] to privileged people's sense of decency and fairness, their good will toward those less fortunate than themselves . . . touches many people and sometimes moves them to action, but as a strategy for long-term change it fails . . . The do-a-good-deed approach . . . rests on a sense of 'us' and 'them'—the 'us' who help and the less fortunate 'them' who get helped . . . [T]he act of helping—of being able to help—can reaffirm the social distance between the two groups and heighten everyone's awareness of it. Thus, every such act of giving to others is always a statement, intended or not, of one group's ability to give and the other's inability to get along without it. And in a society that counts independence, autonomy, and self-sufficiency among its highest cultural values, it's impossible to avoid the negative judgments attached to those on the receiving end and the status-enhancing judgments conferred on those who give". [44]*

This is true in general, but especially so in the context of places that we are used to thinking of as "underdeveloped". Nadinne Cruz argued thirty years ago [2] that the particular history of a place matters for understanding the potential for bad learning outcomes to take place:

*"Even carefully constructed guidelines for practice can do damage if they are not placed in the context of social realities, namely different and competing interests as well as outright conflict, based on, for example, class, race, gender, and even nationality . . . [These realities] make difficult the application of concepts like 'reciprocal learning.' . . . [I]n the context of . . . the historical dominance of one . . . group over another, it is possible that 'service', in and of itself, can have racist or sexist outcomes despite good intentions . . . I think it is possible to empower learners (through) service learning and not promote the common good (by reinforcing a sense of inferiority among those 'served' or a false sense of power among those who 'serve'). It is possible to use experience as an integral part of education and simply duplicate the realities we wish to change". [2]*

Since everywhere in the global South is represented as "needing help", conceptualizing study abroad to those places in terms of service is worse than not useful, it is actively bad, because students learn that poor people need help, and they need it from "us". This is so even when the values, intentions, and work ethic of the people performing service are good, and even when these good-hearted people engage in substantive study about the place, its people, and the service they are performing, have skills relevant to the service, know the local language, and the material benefit of students' presence and the service itself is positive.

#### 4.3. The Problem with "Experts" and "Gratitude"

Two issues that repeatedly come up in service-learning programs reflect this problem. First, is the role of "expert" or "teacher" assumed by students performing service. When taken on by those with no particular experience, qualification, or knowledge, critics argue that this assumption "raises the specter of neo-colonialism in the tacit assumption that even ignorant westerners can improve the lot of people in the South" [21] or that they are "racially and culturally superior" [14], see also, [32]. However, even when students have relevant skills or knowledge, their service may nevertheless reinforce these ideas if for example, they are placed in a position of authority or in preference to local people, or simply if their presence emphasizes their capacity to "do good".

The second issue, is that of gratitude. According to McGehee and Andereck [22], volunteer tourists of all types seek to give, but they also want to receive—they want to be thanked for their efforts and to feel good about what they have done. The face-

to-face interaction with members of the community provide volunteers with a sense of self-affirmation they may not otherwise experience [22].

Students do not escape this desire, which may express itself in feeling good about being cuddled by children or other signs of local attachment, or wanting to see material evidence that they have provided service, something tangible they can “leave behind” [4,24,29,42]. McGehee and Andereck [22] suggest that in the context of power differences, the need to be thanked is part of a process of “othering”, something so well understood by local people in West Virginia that they categorize service arranged so that volunteers can see people receiving it as “pettin’ the critters” [22].

In another example from Appalachia, Carol Marchel [45] provides insights from student journals that were kept while working in service projects in the mountains of North Carolina. Students viewed service as something done for others and sometimes had “a glamorized view” of the impact they would have on the community. One student commented, “When it was time for me to leave that day, (my student) started crying, and this made me feel good about myself and the job that I did”. [45].

This suggests that students engaged in international service-learning are likely to begin study abroad from the position that the reason to go to Africa, Asia, or Latin America is to help the poor folk, who by definition need the help of people, any people, from the U.S. or other rich countries. If study abroad is not directly tied to deep efforts to undermine this belief, the learning outcomes of their ISL will only confirm it, and impede their learning about the structural causes of poverty or of global inequality.

## 5. Reciprocal Learning

What do people in host communities learn from international service-learning? People in vulnerable communities abroad do not necessarily meet people from richer countries from a position of power or an understanding of how inequality develops and is perpetuated. Many have watched the movies that depict them as villains and victims. Development programs themselves contribute to this dynamic. Postdevelopment critics argue that the most devastating aspect of representations of people in the global South as needing help is that the people themselves have come to believe it: “Scarcely 20 years were enough, for 2 billion people to think of themselves as ‘underdeveloped’” [46].

In this context, international service-learning may confirm this representation not only for our students, but also for the people in the communities they visit abroad. In one study of an international volunteer destination in Vietnam, “teachers and trainers were constantly asking for the volunteers’ input and recommendations . . . an implicit perception among the local people was that, as we were students at a highly regarded Australian university, we were well trained to give them valuable recommendations to improve their local project”. [42]. While students in this study felt uncomfortable with the responsibilities implied by this assumption, they nevertheless accepted the “expert” role, which led many of the volunteers to feel “welcomed and empowered”. The assumption of Northern expertise, whether deserved or not, can promote or perpetuate “deference in the local community to outside knowledge, therefore contributing to the curtailment of self-sufficiency” [32]. The flip side of this assumption, of course, is that local people believe they have nothing to teach visitors from abroad [34].

Even when there is no expertise involved, Allan Johnson [44] and Nadinne Cruz [2] both argue that the act of helping others affects the receiver as well as the giver, making a statement about one group’s superiority and “reinforcing a sense of inferiority among those ‘served’ [2]. However, we should not go too far with this argument. People around the world refuse to be defined by their poverty, or to accept the subordinate position required of someone receiving charity; they find ways of mocking or otherwise resisting the role of “poor person” assigned to them by rich folk. Many of the people students encounter abroad are very well able to analyze the role of power in the performance of largesse by people from the North, even that which is well intentioned. Subcomandante Marcos of the

Mexican Zapatistas has made much of a shoe received in a batch of “humanitarian aid” sent to them in Chiapas:

*“To these good, sincere people who sent us this rose colored, spike-heeled little shoe, imported, size 6  $\frac{1}{2}$ , without its mate, thinking that, as poor as we are, we will accept any little thing, charity and alms, how do we say to these good people, that no, we no longer wish to live in shame in Mexico?”.*

(quoted in [47])

Some people refuse help altogether, exactly because of the debilitating power dynamic between giver and receiver. Others work to reshape that relationship, so that it is understood by everyone involved as one of mutuality, which is likely to require that control rest in the hands of those hosting travelers from abroad. Earle and Simonelli [47], discuss alternative understandings of “development” among the Zapatistas, and document the rise of new mechanisms of controlling service and other forms of help from outsiders. The Zapatistas built these mechanisms from their own deep understanding of how “help” can be a means of dominance, such as when NGOs and other international organizations impose not just predetermined projects but also the timeframe and form they should take.

*“Imagine the desperation of a community that needs drinking water and they are saddled with a library, those that need a school for the children to be given a course in herb use . . . we have elected for our communities . . . to prove that we are not seeking “assistance-ism” and to demonstrate . . . that it is possible to govern and to govern ourselves”.*

(quoted in [47])

Among the requirements from organizations—including Earle and Simonelli’s service-learning program—was a 10% tax on all aid coming into Zapatista territory. They suggest a proposal process whereby any group wishing to give aid or perform service might have their projects directed to more remote regions or to different purposes. Proposals could even be declined altogether by a centralized Zapatista authority [47]. This level of control is far beyond the input from communities usually entailed in service-learning projects, but is much more likely to lead to aid and service that is beneficial to Zapatista communities in the long-term, and to build control over their own lives that they understand as deserving respect. In return, visitors from abroad learn that Northern control of “help” is a sign of their privilege, and they may be more likely to experience authentic relationships that destabilize global inequalities.

While the Zapatistas can serve as a model for teaching both foreigners and local people the meaning of mutuality, their level of analysis is far from the norm. This means that universities sending students abroad must take as much responsibility for preventing harm as we are able. Children who see white American students perform service are likely to learn that being white and being from the US denotes superiority and authority, because that is what being the one who can help means. They do not learn that they can help themselves or that benevolence can be an expression of privilege.

## 6. Discussion: What to Do?

Reforming international service-learning to take community impacts seriously requires institutional as well as personal commitment to understanding the place, and how communities are affected by students through both their presence and what they do. At the institutional level, this suggests a significant review process with a high bar for approval to assure, insofar as possible, that we do not do damage. Grain et al. [48] call for institutions to judge the course outcomes based on “relationships and knowledge as conceptualized by the host community”. Tessa Hicks Peterson [49] provides a useful template in Appendix II of her book *Student Development and Social Justice: Critical Learning, Radical Healing, and Community Engagement*, on how to co-construct these kinds of programs. As scholars, teachers, and program leaders, we are beginning to make progress in these areas.

While it is possible that local knowledge, such as that of a study-abroad vendor, the agency itself, or Peace Corps volunteers can substitute for that of the program leader, such

knowledge is only as good as the source. ISL program leaders must know enough about the kind of service they mean to provide, the community itself, and the mechanisms of social change and development that they are able to evaluate these sources, or they need to consult those who are knowledgeable, such as faculty with expertise in the region, and take their review seriously in the planning of their programs [6,8]. In addition, they must continually monitor what is happening in the community over the duration of both specific and repeated visits.

Real reform would almost certainly significantly reduce the number of programs abroad. Among the specific changes in the current practice of ISL this analysis suggests are:

- (1) Do not go to places that are particularly vulnerable to negative environmental or social impacts;
- (2) Widen the understanding of community impacts beyond the host agency;
- (3) Dispense with the concept of service;
- (4) Work to develop helpful interactions with communities.

In order for these practices to be effective, ISL experiences should only take students who are appropriately prepared in terms of communication, relevant skills, and knowledge of the place, and who have been carefully screened. As part of program preparation, participants should be well educated on the place and the potential for both good and harm resulting from student presence. We must ensure that the community has as much control as possible, including the power to say no; and focus on the assets rather than deficiencies in the community [3]. We must establish long-term relationships so that positive reciprocal partnerships can be developed over time, but avoid dependency. We must find ways of accurately assessing the impact of programs over time and be willing to sacrifice student learning, comfort, and pleasure for the well-being of the host community. We should not assume that it is our right to travel wherever we want and do whatever we wish when we are there. We must practice humility, or not go. If international service-learning disregards community impacts, even unintentionally, we are in the ethically untenable business of exploiting vulnerable people for the purported benefit of our students.

The larger implication of this analysis is that study abroad to the global South causes damage as long as it is embedded in the concept of service. Service, as we have argued above, can never be mutual or reciprocal, and it functions as an expression of privilege that reinforces global inequality rather than undermines it.

## 7. Conclusions: Building Something New: Time for a Paradigm Shift to Reciprocal Learning

The authors are calling for a fundamental paradigm shift in how we conceptualize and implement ISL. This call for action is based on acknowledging that three of the basic assumptions upon which ISL is based are flawed. We can begin dismantling colonial practices in ISL by starting with a recognition that student reflection is not sufficient to ensure student learning and cross-cultural understanding. Once we establish sound methods for assessment of student learning, including rigorous intellectual engagement in the scholarly products from the places we visit, we can move on to developing sound methods for examining the community impact of our programs, and conclude by questioning the very role of service itself. If we shift from traditional ISL programming to reciprocal learning, we have an opportunity to decolonize our practices.

Most participants in ISL programs know very well that they learn from the people and places they visit. Emphasizing this learning up front may shift everyone's understanding of what happens during study abroad to one of overt reciprocity. Rather than service-learning, such programs should be envisioned as community-based education or cultural exchange. When people in a community are approached as equal partners, givers rather than receivers, the power dynamic changes, as do learning outcomes for all involved. For example, organizers might say "students at our university have much to learn about agriculture, something your people know how to do very well. Would you be willing to teach them some of what you know?" or, "our students have been learning about Mexico

in classes, but books cannot teach them everything—would you help us learn about what it is like to live here?”

Discarding the concept of service makes possible a revision of our practice of study abroad in the global South that might function to undermine privilege and global inequality rather than support them, when combined with a deep understanding of community impacts and how power inequity works. As Nadinne Cruz [2] suggested in 1990, one key to this change may rest in an emphasis on learning:

*“[R]eciprocal learning [when partners-in-learning are not equal in power and resources] may be more possible when it is not tied to a notion of service . . . [T]he common good might be better served in certain situations if we emphasized learning as the primary goal and ‘service’ . . . as not involved at all”. [2]*

A project for the community might be framed in terms of paying their way: “Our students are very grateful for your hospitality and for what they have learned. Can you give us an idea of something they could do to express their thanks?” Students might even be able to pass on what they have learned in classes to hosts if it is done carefully: “Our students have been learning about preventing erosion by terracing in their classes. They could use some practice talking about this and doing it. Would you mind listening to them and making suggestions about how they could do better?” Children can be treated with respect, as someone from whom our students can learn the local language, for example. Community elders might be visited with respectful requests to teach what they know about the history of the place where they live. None of these would be difficult to do, in part because if they are well prepared and open to the experience, our students do learn from the people they meet abroad, and most have no difficulty acknowledging that reality.

More difficult is the issue of control, because it requires actively working against privilege. Every effort must be made to place students and faculty in a subordinate position to people in the host communities, and to have the host community define appropriate activities and behaviors from students as well as program development. Since there is a basic level of authority in being a host, the starting point should not be difficult, though the ongoing struggle with privilege certainly will be. It is likely that communities who feel themselves to be in positions of strength in their own terms will be best able to face the challenge of helping dismantle our privilege.

These changes, and others that emerge through thoughtful analysis of the problem of service, cannot be in name only. We must reimagine how interactions between our students and communities in the global South will take place, with the community as a controlling partner in an endeavor that benefits them at least as much as it does our students, and continually subverts the idea that they need help and we can give it to them.

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