A Qualitative Approach to the Assessment of International Service-Learning

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Introduction

International service-learning combines aspects of conventional study abroad with aspects of conventional service-learning,[1] offering an exceptional degree of integration into a target culture and an intensive experience of community service. The present study describes an effort to establish, through qualitative assessment, the degree to which such integration and experience actually take place, and their effects on the students involved. The target group is a single organization (the only such organization) with a twenty-year history of providing a range of intensive service-learning programs for American students outside the United States.

The International Partnership for Service-Learning and Leadership (IPSL), was founded in the early 1980s with a lofty goal: it wished to create conditions in which colleges and universities could operate programs of academic study combined with meaningful community service across the world. Such programs would take place in a setting in which service would be demonstrably socially useful, would be of sufficient depth and duration to challenge students' assumptions and ways of thinking about the world, and would be linked to conventional theory-based academic work and a pedagogical process in which students could reflect on their work in the field in ways that would inform and deepen their academic studies. The Partnership saw its programs as preparing the way for a new pedagogy in which action and reflection would be linked — a pedagogy that might extend beyond its own programs to inform the educational process itself. Partnership leaders stressed that their goal was to break down the politics of the classroom by providing students with first-hand experiences that would allow them to make up their own minds about the larger world. The Partnership sought to minimize ideological conditioning by empowering students to think for themselves.

The Partnership began its work in the early 1980s, with programs in Britain, Liberia and Jamaica. Students generally went abroad for a semester. They were hosted by an institution of higher learning in-country and were placed in community service agencies for 15-20 hours a week. Academic study and the service component were linked by at least one academic course, taught by an in-country faculty member, that was designed to process students' experience in the field and help them link it with the theoretical knowledge they were gaining in the classroom.

Today, twenty years later, the core programs of the Partnership are organized along similar lines, although the educational environment in which they operate has changed considerably. Many more American students now travel abroad to study. In the United States, service-learning is now an accepted pedagogy, even if it remains at the margins of the curriculum in most colleges and universities. Its techniques have spread to elementary and, particularly, secondary education – although, unfortunately, what is called service-learning at each level is often little more than institutionalized community service. Several of the institutions across the world where Partnership programs were once an innovation have now introduced service-learning programs for their own students, inspired by the example of the Partnership. Many hundreds of students have passed through the Partnership's programs – about 2000 over the past fifteen years (years for which the Partnership has fairly complete files), and several hundred before then.

Central to the Partnership's philosophy is the belief that immersion in another culture in a service role broadens students' horizons and makes them better adapted to playing an active role in global citizenship. The Partnership also maintains that in order to be effective in the students' personal and intellectual development, service-learning should be both sustained and people-centered. The Partnership's leadership has traditionally been skeptical about the relative effectiveness of short-term programs. Given its focus on personal development and service, it has been particularly interested in programs that involve sustained interaction with the people they are designed to serve. This emphasis on sustained service to individuals, and on leadership through service, makes the accurate measurement of outcomes particularly elusive. Furthermore, such measurement needs to be informed by and calibrated with two other major Partnership goals: the propagation and expansion of the philosophy of service-learning in its host institutions and beyond, and the Partnership's emphasis on sustained and productive relationships with its service agencies. Service-learning programs designed simply to educate students, and not, at the same time, to maximize the effectiveness of service to the populations in question, raise serious ethical questions (questions in our opinion insufficiently addressed in the U.S. context). The Partnership has, in many cases in its longer-established programs, worked with the same agencies over a span of fifteen or more years.

In addition to the Partnership leadership itself, there are three principal actors in Partnership programs: the students, the agencies where they serve (including their clients), and the institutions where the students do their academic work. Recently (2001-2004), with funding from the Ford Foundation, the Partnership embarked on a study of each of these three actors in an effort to assess the impact of the Partnership programs on the students passing through them, the extent to which the students have had an effect on the agencies where they serve,[2] and the degree to which the institutions housing Partnership programs have themselves changed by opening themselves up to community involvement, through service-learning and in other ways.[3] The present authors have both been involved in this effort, Tonkin as primary investigator and director of the project (and formerly a long-time board member of the Partnership) and Quiroga as a member of research project team (also as director of the Partnership program in Quito, Ecuador).

The Present Study

The present article will focus on the first of the three studies, the impact of the Partnership on the students passing through its programs, and specifically on one phase of that study, the interviews with the students themselves. Our purpose is to present some of our findings and also to indicate opportunities and pitfalls inherent in the qualitative work that we were attempting. While our sample consisted only of Partnership program students, no other organization has been engaged in semester-long international service-learning programs over the length of time, and with as many students, as the Partnership. Knowledge of the Partnership's experience could, therefore, be valuable to other organizations and institutions contemplating similar activities. The data might also reveal interesting comparisons with students engaged in service-learning in the United States, and with students engaged in conventional study abroad.

The purpose of the student study was to research student goals and attitudes through data-gathering on past and present students, their opinions, their career patterns, and experience. Information would be sought from the students themselves, along with parents, home institution faculty members, advisors, program directors, and others.

The first step in the study was to establish what we knew about Partnership students. Partnership programs were analyzed using the Partnership's written records, with the goal of assembling "a demographic profile of past and present students in the program, with information on their sending institutions, their majors, and any other evidence."[4]

The demographic study revealed that from 1986 (the earliest year for which Partnership records are reasonably complete) to 2000, of 1893 students participating in the Partnership's undergraduate programs, 1516 (80.1%) were female and 377

(19.9%) were male. Although efforts are underway to enroll non-US-students in Partnership programs, the vast majority of participating students were from the United States. The data showed that Partnership programs were particularly favored by students from smaller, primarily undergraduate institutions (61.69%); only 35.63% of Partnership students came from research universities. There are many possible reasons for this bias; among them the fact that larger research universities have study abroad programs of their own, and also the fact that smaller colleges often emphasize forms of community service. A large proportion of Partnership students were majors in the humanities or public-service oriented fields. Of 918 applicants indicating majors, around 11% were foreign-language majors, primarily students studying and serving in France, Mexico, and Ecuador.

Qualitative Methodology

In April 2003, a group of 17 Partnership alumni from the past 15 years were brought to New York City for a series of interviews and focus groups. These alumni sessions formed the core of the student study. They were led by Margaret Pusch (a specialist in intercultural communication), Diego Quiroga (an ethnographer), Michael Siegel (a psychologist and specialist in higher education), and John Whiteley (a psychologist). They were invited to come to New York (in the words of the formal letter of invitation sent out in February) to meet "with a small number of IPSL alumni and experts who will assess the effectiveness of the programs [of the Partnership] and their impact on students in such fields as cross-cultural communication, moral and ethical development, and critical thinking." They were chosen primarily because they had stayed in touch with Partnership staff in New York or in the field and hence were easy to track down, and because they represented a wide array of Partnership programs and participation years. Some were enrolled in graduate school, some were working in fields with an international focus, and some had entered or were preparing to enter a profession. Not all of the alumni invited to participate were able to do so, although the vast majority of those invited seemed eager to share their experiences. Most of the students were in contact with the Partnership staff by phone or e-mail in the weeks before their arrival. No attempt was made to withhold from the students any information about the meetings, so they were free to ask questions and to draw their own conclusions about the Partnership's initiative and intentions.

One major consideration in the conduct of interviews and focus groups of this kind is the emergence of a master narrative to which all participants – interviewers and interviewees alike – conform. This is related to what anthropologists call the observer effect – the desire of the subject to tell the observer what he or she wants to know. In a measure, that narrative already exists. In the authors' informal experience, American

students are inclined to see such total changes in environment as are involved in study abroad or intensive community service as life-changing, as epiphanies, or at the very least as events that they feel under some obligation to regard as important (especially if they are specifically asked about their importance). For Americans, the process of growing up is often self-described as a series of conversion experiences.

We were eager to minimize the effect of these shared frames of reference, although we were aware that the questions asked in such interactions shape the narrative that emerges, and also that if the Partnership invited its own alumni to talk about their experiences, those experiences were likely to be accorded primacy of place in the perceived personal development of the subjects. Furthermore, we did not wish to treat the day as simply an occasion to record facts, opinions and feelings coming in, but to provide an opportunity for participants to come to terms with their memories and perhaps to reformulate them in ways that made sense in their current life circumstances. However, this also meant that they saw themselves as part of an emerging community, chosen because of their experiences, and this in turn might have caused some of them to romanticize these experiences.

Nor could the process be described as fully objective on the part of the researchers, as two researchers, Pusch and Quiroga, were associated with the Partnership, although the other two, Siegel and Whiteley, had no significant prior exposure to the Partnership's work. Further, one of the goals of the day's activities, spoken or unspoken, was to identify strengths and weaknesses in the program and to find ways of making improvements. So among the researchers themselves (and between them and Tonkin as project director) there was also an incipient master narrative, developed by their own experience of the Partnership and immersion in its history.

All four researchers were careful to evaluate and move beyond the questions asked and the answers received in the interviews and focus groups. They also sought to bring their questioning back to matters of fact. For example, it is one thing for an alumna/us to testify that she or he has become more aware of the need for social involvement, but such a statement should be supported by an explanation of the ways in which that awareness has been translated in concrete terms into community activities or social involvement.

When the 17 alumni arrived in New York, there was no specific attempt to isolate them from one another upon arrival. Separately from the research study, they were invited to dinner by the Board of Trustees of the Partnership, which was meeting in New York at the same time. Some of the ISLP alumni accepted the invitation, and at the dinner took the opportunity to get acquainted with one another and, inevitably, to share stories. To minimize the emergence of common narratives, the following day's schedule started with individual forty-minute interviews conducted by individual researchers, each interview-

ing four or five students in succession, and working from a protocol developed by the four researchers in the weeks before the meeting. Focus groups were deliberately left until after each student had been interviewed individually. Each interview was taped and transcribed.

During the interviews, the researchers focused their attention on the transformative aspects of service-learning in general, and on those aspects of the cross-cultural experience most associated with study abroad. In particular, they focused on the double clash of cultures that students confront in a service-learning situation abroad: sharp ethnic and often linguistic differences, along with socio-economic differences and differences in the physical environment. Place and sometimes language change, as they do in conventional study abroad, but the student is confronted with social situations, and the need to adjust to them, sometimes wrenchingly different from those experienced at home. Working with the destitute and dying at the Mother Teresa Homes in Calcutta, or with the desperately poor inhabitants of the squatters' communities of Guadalajara or Manila, often involves a significant adjustment. Partnership students are taught and supervised exclusively by in-country personnel, and the Partnership makes special efforts to place them in agencies where they work independently of one another, so the immersion experience of Partnership students is close to complete.

Following the interviews, interviewers met in an hour-long closed meeting to review their progress. The interviewers then met with the alumni in one-hour focus groups of four or five, each with one researcher, followed by one-hour groups of eight or nine, each with two researchers, and finally in a 75-minute plenary session involving all participants and all researchers. The smaller meetings were taped and the larger meetings included a Partnership staff member taking minutes. Topics identified in the morning interviews resurfaced in the group discussions or were brought back to the table by the researchers, though always with the initial protocol in mind. Inevitably, participants were suggestible: the researchers looked for commonalities in the group and guided the discussion in fruitful directions. The result was rich data, but data framed by the participants' current perceptions and by a desire to reach a common understanding. As the day progressed, the participants increasingly assumed an active and leading role in the dialogue.

Findings

We will turn now to what the students had to say about some of the major components of the international service-learning experience, and our response to their observations.[5] We will begin with responses to community service itself (our study focused more on service than on the impact of academic study *per se* because it was community service that was new for most students) and go on to consider the process of transition to a new culture, the ability of students to reflect on their own Americanness, the challenge of re-

entry to the United States, and the effect of the international service-learning experience on career choices. We will end with a discussion of what the study revealed about ways to improve that experience.

The Service

The most distinctive aspect of the Partnership experience is the service component of the program and the way in which it is contextualized, analyzed and processed through academic study. Participants remarked that the service was not always easy, and that they often experienced frustration, particularly at the beginning. Some of this frustration was due to language differences: communication breakdowns are perhaps more frustrating when there is work to be done than when students are sitting in a classroom or riding the bus. Participants also spoke of what they initially perceived to be a lack of organization in the agencies where they served and their frustration at the pace at which things moved. Their responses indicate that they now see some of these shortcomings as essentially perceptual, a process that began with the reflective component of their program. Although agencies are often not run as effectively as they might be, by American standards, at the very least, their operations must be judged on their own terms. In many cases their mode of operation fits the culture in which they operate. Most participants expressed admiration for the Herculean efforts that the agencies were making to maintain the level of support they provided, given limited resources. Alumni felt that they learned a lot about the ways in which people can be creative and effective in the face of financial limitations.

Many participants felt that their experience in the agency transformed their conception of service and their understanding of what it means to help others. The ways in which service was understood varied from one student to the next. In some cases they saw service as a religious calling, in others as a matter of personal duty. Some of the alumni thought that it was important to make a distinction between service-learning and other types of charitable activities, and that their service helped them understand different approaches to social development and the provision of assistance. The combination of service and learning (providing opportunities for action and reflection) allowed them to contextualize good service as related to development and empowerment, and they contrasted that with charity.

The structures that students encounter in their service work represented challenges that they had to face and successfully manage. Students recognized that their agencies were often understaffed, and underfunded. These problems seemed overwhelming at first, but the very lack of recognizable structure and available resources created a uniquely instructive environment; the challenges that the situation presented also opened possibilities.

When asked about the impact of their work for their agencies, some students commented that they wished there were more continuity in the agencies so that they could feel they were actually generating change through their service. Others felt that it was unrealistic for students to think a serious impact could be achieved in the space of two or three months. Many alumni emphasized as an important aspect of personal growth the fact that service helped them recognize the limits of their ability to effect change in complex situations. One student thought that by being in their agencies in a different culture they could understand why many of the solutions that local people have developed are the best within a cultural, political and economic context. Students re-evaluated core western cultural values, such as efficiency and the correct management of time.

A much-repeated sentiment was the development of a strong sense of commitment and a certain empathy with people in a distant country. Many participants commented on the fact that the service component generates a sense of involvement with a situation that before was foreign and distant, a globalization of their feelings and concerns and of their sense of citizenship. This deterritorialization of social commitments and globalization of sensibilities was reflected in the way students talked about world issues and current politics. Many alumni felt a link to the place where they served, which lasted well beyond the duration of the program. This link was more than a feeling: it also had practical outcomes in their behavior. Many students maintained contact with their agencies after their return to the United States, and several felt an obligation to go back to volunteer again in the place where they had served or to other places that they felt had pressing needs, or to contribute financially.

These returns were not always happy ones; some of the students who went back to visit their agency felt that the place had not improved. For "Shreela," who went to India, going back was a sad experience, as she was concerned that the situation of the people with whom she was working would never get better through the agency where she had been volunteering. She commented that in her agency the conditions were poor because it was so tightly institutional, and she hoped that the leaders of the agency might relax some of their policies. In many cases, however, students who had post-program contact were pleasantly surprised to see that the place where they had been working had indeed improved.

Despite differences in material wealth, some students said that they learned about the common humanity shared by people around the globe. "Elizabeth" indicated that through her experience she learned how to maintain a dialogue with people and discover similarities and commonalities. The community service helped students understand common concerns. In an ever more globalized world the creation of worldwide service networks might be an important consequence of programs such as that of the Partnership.

Transitioning to a New Culture

One of the most unsettling aspects of participants' experience was their confrontation with a type of social reality where people's lack of formal education and material resources generate a significant cultural distance. As "David" pointed out, there are many different negotiations going on during service. These negotiations involve sorting out cultural differences between the students and host parents, the community, the agency, and their fellow students. Such interactions generate an environment of symbolic reflection.

As in conventional study abroad experiences, quite mundane experiences were often among the most important in giving the participants a sense of empowerment in a different culture. Such daily activities as being able to use a foreign language, traveling on a bus each day to get to work in an agency, controlling a classroom full of teenagers, and feeling wanted and needed by an agency, helped them rise to the challenges inherent in living in a different culture.

Some participants talked about the sheer range of their interactions during the Partnership semester, from their contacts with the universities and their host families, who often tend to be from the wealthier sectors of society, to their experiences with the least affluent in the agencies. They pointed out that the academic work that they did in the classroom was vital in allowing them to contextualize and understand their cultural interactions within a more general theoretical framework. The flexible and loose structure that constitutes a cultural symbolic system is renegotiated through the journey to different cultural spaces provided by the service-learning experience. These encounters with the other constitute opportunities to learn and also challenges to cultural centricity. Encounters with the unfamiliar cause U.S. to question and reexamine the familiar.

Leaving the Comfort Zone

Anthropologist Victor Turner (1974) identifies liminal stages of rituals as those moments in which reversal and antistructure create the opportunity for growth and transformation. Turner's idea of liminality can help U.S. understand the service-learning experience and how it represents a journey from a zone of comfort to a zone where reversals and inversions can be part of the growing process of students. The comfort zone as construed by many of the alumni is a space of safety, control and material well-being. This construct is generated, reinforced and at the same time transformed through their journey. Such a construct is based on a dualism between the familiar and ordered and the foreign, unfamiliar and uncontrollable. In her book *Charting a Hero's Journey,* widely used by Partnership students, Linda A. Chisholm (2000: 79) talks about "crossing the first threshold" and quotes extensively from the writings of travelers who, on arriving in a foreign country, have experienced the shock of the unfamiliar from the vantage point of their own received cultural assumptions. "Accompanying responses to the initial

exhilaration," she writes, "may be delight, wonder, joy, surprise, but also apprehension, disgust, disappointment, or confusion." Reconciling these contradictions is a slow and sometimes painful experience.

Participants alluded to some of the positive and the negative aspects of leaving their comfort zone. The journey forced many to question aspects of their home culture, such as consumerism, individualism and the linear understanding of progress and success. While it is a moment of cultural criticism, at the same time the liminal experience usually serves to reestablish and consolidate a sense of identity as one's culture is not only questioned but also partially reaffirmed. Gender and racial equality were aspects of home culture that seem to be reinforced. But even when it comes to these basic beliefs, liminality is a reflected reaffirmation, and the service-learning experience transformed participants' understanding of what constitutes equality. Thus a student who went to India expressed the belief that women were actually treated better there than women in the west. In India, roles were better defined and women did not have to do double work as in the west; gender equality must be contextualized.

Particularly disturbing for the participants was their confrontation with poverty. They seemed eager to address the question in our sessions and voluble in their interventions. It was not only the lack of material wealth that they found upsetting but also the way material wealth was understood, transformed, managed and even denied. Many participants were in constant contact with poverty in their work and in the agencies, causing them to compare the way in which wealth and poverty are lived and experienced in various cultures. Some who had experienced poverty in the United States thought that one of the main differences between developing countries and the United States was the way in which family structure in the developing world helps people deal with scarcity.

Although the poor in India or Ecuador might at first seem worse off than in the United States, some agreed that solitude and isolation might mean that the poor in the United States feel more desperate. Social support networks and family structures, they felt, serve to transform the experience of poverty so that it is felt not as a sense of hopelessness and anxiety, but with a certain sense of opportunity and support. Thus, they questioned conventional definitions of poverty based solely in material concerns. Students noticed that tasks were ordered and organized differently in the agencies: the agencies had very different ideas about how to manage resources and time, often based on assumptions about the value of communal solidarity, sharing and reciprocity. The experience of such contrasting social environments provided insight into alternative value systems.

Students found themselves questioning the long-established dualism between Us and the Other. The portrayal of the Other as dangerous and threatening was an

issue that many participants felt they often had to confront critically during their service experience. Students were surprised to hear that in other countries there was concern about violence and insecurity in the United States. During the Columbine killings, for example, people suggested to Shreela that she stay on in India because the United States was too dangerous. Cities in the United States, some students learned, are considered by many people in foreign countries to be dangerous and threatening. They soon learned that their home country was, for their hosts, simply another version of the Other: as they saw the rest of the world as being full of danger, so the rest of the world saw the United States. Thus their journey made them first reverse center and periphery and then question the all-too-easy duality of U.S. and Other itself. We are dealing here with what might be called the mirror effect, in which an individual examines his or her own construction of the Other by being immersed in the Other and looking back at his or her own cultural reflection.

Being an American and American Culture

We have already noted the view of many participants that one of the most important aspects of leaving one's comfort zone involves interrogating one's most basic and valued cultural constructs. National identity was one of the foundational cultural constructs that students addressed. Most participants did not feel that being an American while studying and working abroad was a significant problem. Americans were well regarded and, in general, they said that they were treated fairly. Nevertheless, they did find that their experiences caused them to question their national pride and identity and to confront their ethnocentrism. Some of the values that the alumni felt were basic to their cultural system, such as consumerism and individualism, were reexamined and reevaluated.

The sense of nationality is an aspect of identity that is deeply engrained. This sense of national identity is often challenged when one lives in a different country, and particularly in the context of a service-learning experience. The almost blind admiration of people for Americans and American culture was, for many, problematic and bothersome. "Marie" encountered anti-American sentiments when she was doing her service in Manila. After the attacks of September 11, the United States was training the Philippine military in Mindanao. She was able to talk about her ideas and express her opinions, but people knew that Marie was American and assumed wrongly that she was in favor of the American military. She noticed that people treated her differently once they learned her real position. The cognitive dissonance that is created by these types of experiences generates tensions that motivate reflection; observing the effects of the policies and practices of one's own country from abroad generates an external and reflective gaze. This effect is often acute in the case of service-learning students, because

their perspective is often constructed in their work in the agencies, in close interaction with those who are affected by international policies and practices

Several participants remarked that the people around them did not judge them on the basis of the actions of the U.S. government. This capacity to separate a citizen from his government was something, according to "Bill", that was not always true in the case of people who live in the United States, who tend to identify people from a particular country with the policies of that country. Some felt that their experience abroad helped them differentiate the two.

The Challenges of Reentry

If the move from home institution to study and service in a foreign location is jarring to the sensibilities and challenging to students' ability to adapt, it will come as no surprise to learn for many alumni returning to the United States was more difficult than leaving. Embarking on a semester of service was challenging and inspiring, and for some it was a way of giving their lives a sense of direction. A variable in any study of the process of departure and return is the frame of mind before departure; several participants remembered feeling disengaged and alienated before departure, and were seeking a challenge in their semester on the Partnership program. Having met that challenge, participants felt they were not prepared for the experience of re-entry and that they had little or no opportunity to talk about and process their feelings, their memories and their new understandings.

Bill told U.S. that he did not experience culture shock when he departed, but he did when he came back. When he came back, reluctantly, from Ecuador he had long hair and a beard. When his family saw him they did not recognize him. Bill was surprised that his friends and family judged him on the basis of his appearance, but he realized that before he had gone to Ecuador, he would have done the same thing. Bill believes that now he is more tolerant of diversity. He was distressed on his return by his family's emphasis on consumerism. In Ecuador he lived with few possessions and came to learn on his return that many of the possessions he once assumed were essentials were really not important.

Like Bill, several other participants thought that consumerism was one of the most problematic and difficult issues with which they had to deal on returning home. The fact that they had been living with very little, and helping people who had great needs and very few resources made them critical of what they perceived as unnecessary luxuries. Others were less bothered by such differences and thought that each culture and situation has its particularities. Despite their re-entry difficulties, many were glad to return and noted that their stay abroad helped reinforce some of the things they liked about their home culture.

In addition to the issues of poverty and wealth, necessity and luxury, participants mentioned other challenges they faced on return: they could not find people with whom they could share their experiences, they felt cut off from the fate of those with whom they had, they had difficulty contextualizing their experiences in their new reality. In addition to proposing some changes in Partnership programming to deal with these issues, several participants remarked that they jumped at the chance to come to New York to talk to people who had gone through the same experiences. Some had waited years for this opportunity to share experiences. The face-to-face contact with people to whom "they do not have to explain what they went through" was a way to reevaluate the impact and meaning of the Partnership experience and to relate it to their professional and personal development.

For two students the Partnership program experience meant going back to their place of familial ethnic origin. It helped Marie, a Filipino American, reformulate her identity. She enjoyed learning more about the language and history of her parents' country, and this discovery made her decide to get a job teaching Filipino children in California. Shreela's time in India helped her understand her parents and their perspectives. Each felt that going back to the country of her parents was an important part of her personal growth and a way of learning more about her origins.

Career Choice

The narratives that alumni created about their past ordered their memories in light of an expected future. In that sense their autobiographical analysis during the New York sessions should be seen not as a factual account of the past, but rather as a way of making sense of the present by organizing the memories of their Partnership experience in a meaningful way (and also, as we have already noted, with a possible bias toward the centrality of their experience). Some perceived it as having had a profound effect on their career choices; they construed it as a "turning point" and mapped their experiences in terms of their pre-Partnership and post-Partnership life. Theirs in many ways was a liminal experience and it reversed social positions, status and roles. Asked to help people who were old and incapacitated, they reversed ethnic, social and class structures.

Such was the case of Tamara, who said that she became a physician because of her service experience in London. Her interaction with the sick in hospitals in the UK made her decide to spend her life helping others. Tamara construed the impact of her service experience on career choice as direct cause and effect, but for others the impact was less direct. Participants now employed in education or in the service sector said that they were already largely decided on a career path when they went on the Partnership program, and the experience reinforced their resolve. Bill knew that he did not want a corporate career. He described himself as an idealist and that was why he was now a

teacher. "Gabriel," now a law student, said that his interest in law had to do with integrating service and the law. He was very enthusiastic about working for the poor. "David" was working towards a Ph.D. in anthropology and was bothered by the overly-theoretical nature of his studies: he would like to be more involved in hands-on, applied work. "Ashley," now working in an international relief agency, said that her life might not have been as difficult without the Partnership experience, but also not as fulfilling; without the Partnership, she would have gone into a less service-oriented international career. For "Jeanne" the Partnership program experience confirmed an interest in anthropology and in Latin America. While "Kate's" interest in medicine was confirmed, she realized that she wanted to be a physician rather than a medical researcher; the Partnership stimulated her interest in empowering people with disabilities and having in personal contact with the disabled. Through her work with the Lakota Nation in South Dakota, Elizabeth became interested in legal aspects of American Indian territorial rights and decided that she wanted to pursue these interests in her career. As with several other students in the group, her learning and understanding allowed her to connect the local and the global, the conceptual and the practical.

These participants addressed the question of career choice with a strong and clear voice: their attitude seemed to confirm that their educational and career expectations were decisively shaped by their service-learning experience. Many participants felt that the experience played such a transformational role because of the way in which service-learning combines academic work with practical work at an agency. The service experience became a metaphor that later guided what they considered to be a proper and significant blending of service and academia or service and office work. They stressed the need for a certain bi-dimensionality in their lives, mirroring the Partnership model. In the same way that a study abroad program based on traditional classroom experience would have been incomplete for them, they also thought that a job that was only based on office or academic work would be too removed from social action, while one that was involved only in service and hands-on activities would not be reflective enough.

For some alumni, the international service-learning experience created a need to leave the United States occasionally and to experience other countries. Others felt a need to be involved in some form of social service, or meaningful work leading to an improvement of the lives of people. This response to the Partnership program experience was clearly powerful for the group assembled in New York.

We have already noted that the combination of academic study and work in local agencies was an important catalytic experience for many of the alumni, helping them put into practice in a challenging manner the ideas and concepts learned in class. Several participants said that they were now involved in community work through their jobs.

Some also said that they felt they would like service to be a greater part of their lives than it is now. The word "meaningful" was used often; participants were critical of a search for purely material rewards. For some alumni this need for meaning involved going to a another country to help with development projects, or looking at activities with a positive impact on the more vulnerable sectors of American society.

Improving the Partnership's Programs

Three suggestions made by participants about ways to improve the program merit consideration in the context of this article. The first raised was the question of communication following students' return. Could the establishment of internet networks help ease the transition back into the mainstream culture of the United States? Could such communication be used to create a more permanent and meaningful impact on the agencies? Could it be used to bring alumni from different countries and different years into contact with students enrolling in Partnership programs before their departure? Alumni also suggested that service to agencies might be broadened to include service to the Partnership itself.

Participants also spoke about the need to involve more students in the Partnership and similar programs. Some proposed that more programs be established in the United States for students from other countries, and others stressed the need to integrate service-learning in general into the curriculum in higher education.

A third and more central issue concerned perceived strengths and weaknesses in the program and mirrored similar debates among study abroad officers about how much pre-departure information is enough, and how much support after arrival is required to assist students in adapting to their new setting. While there was some discussion about the need to give students and their professors a better idea of the nature of the pedagogical practices of the host country, most attention fell on the service experience dimension. Some participants felt that they needed better information on what to expect from the agency in advance of their arrival, and others spoke of the apparent lack of organization in placements and in the agencies themselves. While circumstances were different from site to site, and while, as we have already observed, what at first appeared to be disorganization in the agencies often turned out to be differences in perception between student and agency, the question of what students need to know and what they learn firsthand remained an important issue. Some recognized that these differences and the anxieties that they caused may have been to some extent the result of diverse cultural expectations, others argued that finding out where to catch the bus should not be left to students struggling with bigger and more complex cultural issues. Some participants pointed out that different students have different needs, and finding a balance between telling all and leaving all to the

students is likely to vary from student to student. Structure does provide students who need it with a sense of direction and security, but at the same time a lack of structure allows for more freedom and creativity and can empower students.

Despite all these inconveniences, many felt that over the long run the perceived disorganization on the ground in the agencies was not a problem but rather an advantage. Some felt that they would not have learned as much if the service-learning had been cut-and-dried." Jan" mentioned that she had always liked to take risks and valued the Partnership program because it gave her the freedom to take those risks. She felt that lack of information was good to a certain extent because it created a sense of self-sufficiency and empowerment for her. Students who went to Jamaica and Ecuador mentioned that they were surprised that they practically ran their agencies, despite the fact that they were only twenty years old. The experience developed leadership and initiative. In some cases students tried to change procedures in the agencies and some of their ideas were taken into account and implemented, a result requiring not just good ideas but also negotiating skills in a different culture. One participant who worked in a center for adolescent girls described the time she spent in the library learning more about her subject and how, on the basis of this research, she proposed changes in the agency and, to her considerable surprise, they were accepted. She told us. that it was only then that she felt she could accomplish more.

Participants also pointed out that a strength of the program was the fact that when they had a question there was always someone to help, not least because their academic work was tied to their service and vice versa. Classrooms provided the students not only with a sense of direction and a means for contextualizing their experiences but also a critical support network This structure worked better for students at some locations than for others, but all agreed that it ought to remain a vital part of the Partnership experience.

Conclusion

Evaluating international service-learning is not easy; the effects and transformations that it generates in students are long-lasting and in many cases not immediately obvious. Much of the process of evaluation is based on memories of events that in some cases occurred a decade ago. Memories are not faithful accounts of the past nor are they stable and accurate renditions of events that shape our life: they are dynamic constructs generated out of the past to find meaning in the present. In this sense the New York sessions became a communal searching for new meanings in shared events. The Partnership experience was clearly ongoing and incomplete for the alumni assembled in New York; to them it was vital that the Partnership recognize a responsibility for long-term of those who pass through its programs. If memories change over time, and if our

construction of reality changes in response to them, distinctions between facts and reinterpretations are important in our efforts to find ways of improving programs. However, reinterpretations are as vital a part of the process as the events themselves.

In his report to the team, project-researcher Michael Siegel summarized his principal findings in three conclusions: "many students experience 'reverse culture shock' upon returning from their service experience," "students typically undergo a significant transformation of their moral and intellectual character and work through the transformation with considerable reflection," and "as a result of the service experience, many students develop a renewed, and often more critical, perspective on American values, norms, behaviors, and beliefs." We would add to this list the influence of the Partnership experience in career choices, and in developing a sense of self-sufficiency and informed leadership.

In the process of looking at the past and at the international service-learning experience in light of their present activities we have seen that most of the alumni interviewed thought of it as an important and fundamental event, one which transformed them in different and significant ways. They asserted that the international service-learning experience shaped or reaffirmed their ideas of what is meaningful and important, and for most it constituted a metaphor that guided their search for graduate education and jobs. As a liminal event, the experience of international service-learning generated reflection on, and interrogation of, some of the most enduring cultural values, such as identity and nationality, conceptions of gender and race, and ideas about time and progress.

As we have noted, the New York sessions were one part – a major part – of our research on students. This research must now be triangulated through conversations with others involved in the process. In turn, the student study is one part of a three-part review that also examines institutions and agencies.[6] Out of this completed tripart research will emerge what we hope will be an instructive and applicable picture of international service-learning in the context of the Partnership, along with a research agenda for the future. The research program has also produced a procedure and set of criteria for the periodic evaluation of Partnership programs, including their academic component. It is essential that the work that students do while they are with the Partnership not only help them assess their place in the world, but also advance their studies (and, in many cases, improve their language skills). The evaluation process will keep this priority prominent in the design and planning of Partnership programs.

Notes

[1] Significant research has been carried out on service-learning and on study abroad, although the two are rarely brought together. Recently *Frontier*s (volume VII Winter 2002), devoted a special issue to international experiential education. On research on service-learning's effects in general, see the comprehensive annotated bibliography by Eyler and others at http://www.compact.org/resource/aag.pdf. See also Driscoll, Holland, Gerlmon & Kerrigan (1996), and several of the essays in Billig & Furco (2002). See Annette (2002) and Kraft (2002). Recent research includes Kathia Monard's University of Pittsburgh dissertation on the Partnership's Ecuador program (Monard, 2002), and the work of Richard Kiely (University of Georgia) on international service-learning in Nicaragua. On the mechanics of setting up international service-learning programs, see Chisholm (2003) and McCarthy (2002).

[2] On the lack of attention to the community impact of service-learning, see Cruz & Giles (2000). Susan J. Deeley, of the University of Glasgow, conducted research for the present study on agencies in Scotland and Jamaica; see her unpublished report "The impact of experience: A comparative study of the effects of International Partnership for Service-Learning students within welfare agencies in Scotland and Jamaica."

[3] The institutions with which the Partnership works are located around the world and vary greatly in size, academic offerings, surrounding communities, etc. Establishing the extent of the influence of Partnership programs and philosophy on individual institutions is difficult, and generalization even more. Furthermore, local cultures, educational priorities and pedagogies inevitably have an effect on how service-learning is perceived and carried out. This part of our study is being conducted by Humphrey Tonkin. On comparative reviews of service-learning in different countries, see Berry & Chisholm (1999), Yamamoto (2002).

[4] Tonkin (2002); available at www.ipsl.org.

[5] We have assigned pseudonyms to the students throughout, to protect their privacy.

[6] As we have noted, in general, international service-learning is still relatively little-studied. At a workshop on research on international service-learning at the Partnership's biennial conference in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in January 2004, Robert G. Bringle and Humphrey Tonkin began the process of compiling a research agenda for international service learning.

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