

## *Book Review / Recension d'ouvrage*

### **International Service Learning: Engaging host communities**

by Marianne A. Larsen

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### **Reviewed by / Revu par**

Catherine Broom

University of British Columbia Okanagan

Service learning is a growing field of study and practice in a number of Canadian universities. It involves the concept of combining travel with some sort of community project, usually in a “majority world” nation. The use of the terms “minority world” for Western nations and “majority world” for those nations that are usually called “developing nations” by Western nations is one of the strongest points made in the text to address how language and theory foster and maintain positions of privilege. Service learning has traditionally aimed to develop “minority world” youth’s skills and empathy as they “help” a community improve. However, as a number of edited chapters in Larsen’s book illustrate, service learning is problematic. We can connect its desire for “service” in the interests of helping those “poor others” with colonial legacies of “white Europeans” going to other nations to help “develop” them.

Many of the chapter authors describe a number of shortcomings with service learning projects including building community infrastructures, such as libraries, that the local communities do not want or cannot use, taking jobs away from locals, exposing locals to “privileged white kids” whose attitudes and actions can damage locals’ self-esteem, and increasing community dependence and beliefs that the West is the right model of development for other nations to follow. Larsen et al. (2016) demonstrate awareness

of these shortcomings and thus aim to write the book from the perspectives of those who are the recipients of projects. Most of the chapters present research carried out with local community people in “majority nations” such as Ghana, Uganda, Jamaica, or Nicaragua, or they describe the perspectives of bridging agencies who help to facilitate projects.

The concerns raised in this book’s chapters can be summed up by chapter author Jessica Arends’ comment that, “the data reveals that international service learning interactions occur at a complex nexus of expectations regarding race, gender and privilege, leading to feelings of exploitation, entitlement and stereotyping” (p. 109–110). This book should be required reading for any university administrator, counselor, or individual who engages in service learning. It turns much needed attention on how the receivers of service learning projects perceive them. Even though some of the interviewees may give overly positive answers due to their fear of losing program benefits and money, it is clear that there are number of significant issues with these projects.

My largest criticism of the book centres on the authors’ use of Said’s “Other” theory. This theory argues that powerful Westerners construct “Others.” The authors argue that they take a critical, de-colonial stance to exploring service learning and attempt to use Said’s “Other” perspective to highlight economic and power differentials. However, by using this framework, the authors have trouble escaping elitism and colonial thinking. They distinguish between the “north” and “global south” and present a view of the “north” going to the “south.” While they recognize the problems with this (power inequities that are historical and contemporary), the book presents a tension between attempting to address issues with service learning and its framing theory. For example, the authors argue for an “ethical discussion” space of engagement, reciprocity, partnership and thoughtful critical engagement without recognizing that all individuals involved will not be able to enter this space equally when viewed from the lens of “others.” By this framing, it is difficult to escape colonial or Christian missionary thinking in the desire to help the “poor other.”

The book does advance the field by highlighting service learning’s significant issues. If the authors can move away from “othering” project participants and instead adopt another theory or lens, the authors will be able to open the field to their excellent recommendations of reciprocity, partnership, and authentic relationship. For example, Positive Youth Development Theory (Overton, 2010; Sherrod, 2007) sees youth as being asset-based youth and not problem teens. Thinking about the assets and benefits that both

parties bring to the experience and recognizing that “Western” ways are not necessarily the best (greed, capitalism, environmental damage, and entitlement being only a few brief examples) is a far more positive way to frame service learning theory and thinking.

### References

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