

## **Introduction to Special Issue: The Practice, Politics and Possibilities for Globally Engaged Experiential Learning in Diverse Contexts**

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**ABSTRACT:** This introduction to the special issue outlines the key debates in literature about globally-engaged learning. Through this analysis of the literature and related terms, we argue that the term "transnational service learning" offers a new way of: 1. framing the diverse forms of learning and volunteering at home and abroad and 2. building relations and learning between people across difference for those who seek to recognize and ameliorate global asymmetries. This special issue provides papers from a range of perspectives that highlight the complexities and possibilities of programs that centre global engagement and action.

### **Introduction**

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This special issue features eight articles all exploring globally engaged experiential learning opportunities available to youth and/or students in diverse contexts such as transnational learning/volunteer abroad programs and locally-based global engagement. The collection brings together academics and practitioners to consider the efficacy, assumptions and stakes of the rise of volunteer abroad programming, as well as the implications for student learning outcomes.

Universities and colleges are increasingly offering opportunities for students to participate in internationalization strategies including study abroad, international experiential learning, community service learning and work-integrated learning.

Universities Canada estimates that 11% of students at Canadian post-secondary institutions participate in what they call “international mobility” programs including exchanges, internships, co-op placements and volunteer opportunities over the course of their degrees. Efforts to increase the number of opportunities and the number of students engaged in these international options are central to internationalization efforts on campuses (Universities Canada, 2014; Tiessen & Huish, 2014; Shultz & Jorgenson, 2012). While many students in programs such as International Development Studies are required to have international experience, volunteer abroad programs also appeal to a wide array of students interested in travelling, volunteering and boosting their resumes. Increasingly, students arrive at university having already participated in “international mobility” through their high schools, mission trips or programs such as Me to We.

As the practice of international mobility and experiences for students grow, so too does the associated academic literature documenting the challenges and opportunities of these initiatives. This literature comes from a range of disciplines—from Sociology to Education to International Development. Additionally, scholarship is produced both by those who take international experiences as their main research focus, and those who participate in and facilitate these experiences—what we might think of as a theory/practice divide (although in practice this is much murkier than a simplistic divide, as this collection demonstrates). Finally, for increasing complication, the literature ranges in the foci of examination. That is, even when looking only to those programs that include service, some programs analyzed include small medical teams that travel abroad for a short time, often to develop professional skills (Huish, 2014). Other programs last for one or two weeks at most with young people who do not have technical skills; still others, such as CUSO, are longer-term projects that involve volunteers with specific skills (Heron, 2007).

## **Diverse Forms of Global-engaged Experiential Learning**

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Students taking part in learning/volunteer abroad programs are motivated largely by desires for cross-cultural understanding, skills development, testing a career choice and a desire to offer (small forms) of assistance or help (Tiessen, 2018). Post-secondary education programs offer diverse forms of student international mobility with specific pedagogical outcomes in mind and with a particular emphasis on the education and learning experience of the students. The rationale for these learning/volunteer abroad programs is generally framed under the guise of improved cross-cultural competency and the creation of global citizens, a focus of many post-secondary institutional international strategies and mandates (Tiessen & Huish, 2014; Jorgenson & Shultz, 2012). The paper by Grantham explores the nature and content of these internationalization strategies in greater detail in this collection.

In addition to faculty-led international mobility options (or field schools), private companies are actively involved in providing educational experiences for students in the Global South (Crabtree, 1998). Students may feel significant pressure to participate in

forms of globally engaged experiential learning as part of their formative education and for meeting basic qualifications when applying for jobs, highlighting the nature of demand for such programs. The large range of options available to students wishing to go abroad means that students are increasingly able to shop for an experience, indicating preferences for length of time abroad, location and nature of volunteer/practicum work. As such, the market-driven nature of these programs means the focus is nearly exclusively centered on the students' desires rather than the needs or requests from host communities.

With such a large suite of options available to students, it can also be very difficult to know which programs are reputable. This has led to the creation of a Standards of Practice guide (Duarte, 2015); however, this guide remains insufficient for tackling the pro-active and sometimes aggressive marketing strategies employed by for-profit, short-term learning/volunteer abroad programs. Furthermore, the proliferation of learning/volunteer abroad programs has resulted in the creation of associations and organizations, such as the International Volunteer Program Association, which recognizes leading organizations in the field and offers a list of best practices to aid these organizations<sup>1</sup>

Volunteer abroad programs are often celebrated for the ways in which they build skills and empathy in Northern youth and for the contributions that they make in communities (McGehee, 2005; Wearing, Deville, & Lyons, 2008). As Heron (forthcoming) shows, these volunteer abroad programs are increasingly tied to discourses of global citizenship and are seen as a rite of passage. Many of the organizations are developing ways to make these (often expensive) experiences more accessible to those who are unable to afford them. This push for accessibility demonstrates that programs are conceptualized as something all Northerners should have access to, while rarely bringing people “the other way.” Other scholarship has been critical of the ways in which volunteering abroad secures privileged identities and obfuscates inequality (Heron, 2007; Mathers, 2010; Vrasti, 2012; Mostafenezhad, 2015) or is premised on altruistic motivations in spite of highly egocentric rationales for participation (Tiessen, 2012). This important body of scholarship provides the backdrop for an essential analysis of the benefits (and for whom), assumptions and challenges of volunteer abroad programs. These programs are also facing increasing scrutiny in public forums—from blog posts about Instagramming Africa (Humanitarians of Tinder, Humanitarian Barbie, Who wants to be a Volunteer, etc.), to the controversy surrounding the delayed airing of documentary *Volunteers Unleashed* on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). These important evaluations lend support for improved understanding and engaged scholarship about the assumptions, efficacy and stakes of volunteer abroad programs, as well as some of the differences across the range of volunteer abroad options. Many of the papers in this collection are focused on the opportunities and challenges related to the learning/volunteer abroad experiences. Keeping in mind these important critiques, for those who wish to partake in international educational

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<sup>1</sup> <http://volunteerinternational.org/>

opportunities through learning/volunteering abroad, guidelines for considering and addressing the ethical issues associated with such programs are essential. In addition, there is great need for expanding our scope of international experiential learning to better link these programs to local community engagement and thereby to bridge international cross-cultural understanding with intercultural competence ‘at home’.

Some youth are now making decisions about going abroad with these criticisms in mind. For youth who identify as global citizens and/or as individuals actively engaged in global issues, learning/volunteer *abroad* may not be on their radar. Thoughtful consideration of neocolonial continuities in service learning abroad programs, combined with self-awareness of limited skills to offer to host communities is generating a growing cohort of global citizens who have (at least for now) decided not to go abroad as part of their experiential/educational plans. For those youth, there is a demand for globally engaged experiential learning ‘at home’ where the interests and commitments to global understanding, intercultural competence and critical analysis of global issues can be translated into other means of developing skills, networking, experiential learning and (perhaps to a lesser extent), activism.

As these types of programs have increased in popularity, they have shifted from talking about their work as “development work” to framing volunteering abroad as a self-making pedagogical project (Simpson, 2004). Some of the reasons articulated for participation on the part of students include “finding themselves,” “building their resume” or “getting international experience.” In her research, Tiessen (2018) found that volunteers were likely to report reasons of self-making as motivating them to volunteer abroad. The impetus of much of this literature on service experiences is to discern the motivations of participants, perceived impacts and implications of their contributions abroad. For example, drawing on research in Ghana and Guatemala, Vradi (2012) suggests that volunteer abroad is both a neoliberal and a colonial-type project that affirms volunteers’ neocolonial identity and does so on the backs of hosts in the Global South. Similarly, Mathers’ (2010) study of volunteers in South Africa argues that volunteers “become American” in Africa. In this context, she illustrates how encounters secure for volunteers an imperial American identity. This critical body of literature sheds light on some of the structural challenges inherent in North-South programs, pointing to many of the problematic practices and outcomes of volunteer abroad. The critical scholarship is also largely focused on Northern scholars’ analyses and interpretations of international volunteering. More recently scholars have begun to ask about the experiences of partner organizations and host communities. These include Mostafenzhad (2014), Tiessen and Heron (2012), MacDonald and Vorstermans (2015) and a new anthology edited by Marianne Larson (2015) on hosts’ experiences of international service learning. Many of the insights from these collections include the need for a deeper inclusion of hosts in the process of service learning, more learning for students before they depart and longer placements that include longer term relationships between universities and organizations that are sending people to their communities. Studies documenting the experiences of

hosting international volunteers from the perspective of partner organizations highlight important additional insights including agency-oriented analyses of the value and contributions of international volunteering from the perspective of communities receiving volunteers (see Tiessen, Lough, & Cheung, 2018; Lough & Tiessen, 2017). Thus, there are diverse frames of analysis to be employed in the study of international experiential learning and volunteer abroad programs and no one theoretical frame captures the varied models and programs of transnational learning/volunteering opportunities.

The collection in this Special Issue adds to this growing body of literature on transnational service, volunteering and globally engaged learning by bringing in diverse case studies and analyses, drawing on examples of varied practices and employing different theoretical frames. What the papers have in common is their emphasis on the need for greater contextual understanding of programming models and impacts, with a particular lens on the ethical implications of problematic practices.

### **A Note on Terminology**

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Working across boundaries (disciplinary, theoretical and professional) creates difficulties in language. Indeed, terms are often used to encapsulate a variety of programming and a brief summary of the key differences in the terms employed to describe diverse transnational experiential learning or globally engaged activities is provided here.

International volunteering is a broad and encompassing term that includes a range of options for participating in unremunerated work. Students may participate in international volunteering as part of their studies or work-integrated learning (examples include Students without Borders, Engineers without Borders, Canada World Youth, etc.) for which they may receive academic credit upon completion of course materials, readings and assignments. Others pursue volunteer abroad options as an extension of their academic learning to prepare themselves for securing employment by acquiring practical skills linked to their program of study. Voluntourism options (short-term volunteer opportunities combined with a vacation or cultural immersion lasting approximately one-to-two weeks) are increasingly popular options for youth who wish to gain international experience during short time frames abroad.

Programs more closely linked to academic credits are often referred to as service learning – a learning model often traced to the work of Paulo Freire (1970), John Dewey (1910, 1938) and David Kolb (1984). These three educational theorists argued for the connection between education, the student and the world around them. For Freire (1970) this was primarily understood as a pedagogical practice dedicated to social justice—his work was with Brazilian peasants and literacy brigades where the social world becomes the text from which learning emerges. For Dewey (1938), learning is an exchange between the learner and the environment outside of traditional classroom dynamics and particularly

occurs with experiential learning and reflection. Kolb (1984) built on the work of Dewey to examine the role and responsibilities of students in their own learning through observation, reflection and analysis.

However, as many have pointed out, this history of service learning elides the roots of service learning in ethnic studies programs, black colleges and universities and the leadership of people of colour (Stevens, 2003; Garcia, 2007; Evans, Taylor, Dunlop, & Miller, 2009; Yeh, 2011). Bocci (2015) demonstrates how histories of service learning replicate white normativity, maintaining the imagery that service learning students and faculty are, and have been, white people “doing service” for people of colour. This assumption is heightened as service learning moves across borders—white students from the Western world are pictured volunteering and living with people of colour somewhere in the Global South.

Importantly, “white” here is understood as a social category rather than biological fact. Although race is not a biological fact, it does result in “objective, measurable differences in the life circumstances of different racial groups” (Lewis, 2003, p.6). Following critical race theorists and scholarship on whiteness, we understand “white” not only as an identity category but also as “a collection of everyday strategies characterized by the unwillingness to name the contours of racism, the avoidance of identifying with a racial experience or group, the minimization of racist legacy and other similar evasions (Leonardo, 2002, p. 32). Whiteness is thus a process that is (re)made through interactions between people, systems and structures that perpetuate white supremacy.

In service learning literature, International Service Learning (ISL) has been used to indicate learning through service as it moves across national borders. ISL has been defined by Hatcher (2011) as:

*A structured academic experience in another country in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that addresses identified community needs; (b) learn from direct interaction and cross-cultural dialogue with others; and (c) reflect on the experiences in such a way as to gain a deeper understanding of global and intercultural issues, a broader appreciation of the host country and the discipline, and an enhanced sense of their own responsibilities as citizens, globally* (p. 19).

Global Service Learning (GSL) has been more recently adopted as a term to resist the focus on nations in the ISL framework and to instead highlight a focus on interconnections around the globe. Stearns (2009) argues for the use of the term “global” in that it additionally involves an “appreciation of the kinds of forces that bear on societies around the world—including the United States, and how these forces have emerged” (p.15). Garcia and Longo (2013) argue for a global ecology of education which would recognize

that “education takes place in multiple, interconnected settings” (p. 115). For Garcia and Longo, this ecology extends global thinking to both local and international placements.

What is lost in these formulations of service learning is a critical interrogation of positionality and relationality. As Butin (2006), Mitchell, Donahue and Young-Law (2012), and Bocci (2015) argue, the framing and practice of service learning is a white enterprise—what Butin suggests could be the “Whitest of the White” (p. 482). Important to understanding this reproduction of whiteness is an understanding of the ways in which whiteness is not simply about the racial identity of participants, but is also coded into the very framing of service learning. As Bocci (2015) points out, service-learning documents refer to minorities (often code for people of colour) as the recipients of service learning, rather than founders, practitioners or students. While little research has been done on the experiences of racialized participants, recent scholarship suggest that the whiteness of service learning make it an uneasy fit for many participants of colour (Razack, 2001; Angod, 2014; Mitchell & Donahue, 2000).

Critiques of the term “global” often center on the ways in which specificities of experience are lost and that difference (which has real, material impacts on people’s lives) is ignored in favour of highlighting shared humanity. This is emphasized in global service learning where outcomes include understanding “interconnectedness of the world,” a grandiose idea that is also generalized (Garcia & Longo, 2013, p. 118). The emphasis on the need to see the world as interconnected also imagines a white, middle-class student for whom these connections have supposedly not been apparent, reinforcing the white normativity of service learning. The competencies imagined as gained (for example experiences in cross-cultural living) are competencies that many students of colour may already have. Even the assumption that travel will be easy during service-learning sojourns assumes the ease with which Canadian or American passports permit entry into other countries.

As Mitchell, Donahue and Young-Law (2012) argue, service learning can be imagined as a pedagogy of whiteness. They describe this as “strategies of instruction that consciously or unconsciously reinforce norms and privileges developed by, and for the benefit of, white people in the United States” (p. 613). This has been emphasized in much of the critical literature in service learning for the ways in which host communities are left out of programming (MacDonald & Vorstermans, 2015), racialized students are made to do more service in the classroom than in placement (Mitchell & Donahue, 2000), and in the reproduction of leadership skills in the white student rather than within communities receiving volunteers (Vrasti 2012). White supremacy operates in ways that create spaces unwilling to discuss racism or to see racism as a systemic process rather than the acts of abhorrent individuals (Frankenberg, 1993; Tatum, 2008). It is not that service learning is inherently a pedagogy of whiteness, but rather that through the focus on the global, sameness and shared humanity, difference is lost. This difference, which often feels

divisive for white people, is a difference that has material effects on lives, livelihoods and survival.

It is here that we suggest the adoption of “transnational service learning.” Drawing from the work of feminist scholars, the transnational is used to signal the interconnections between the lives of others, conversations about difference and an attention to social justice (Mohanty, 1984; Lazreg, 1988; Trinh, 1989; Fernandes, 2013). Emerging as a pushback against ideas of “global sisterhood” where women around the world are imagined to have a shared experience of oppression and thus be in solidarity with one another, transnational feminism employs an intersectional lens to inequalities and the connections between sites, what Mohanty (2003) calls “co-implication.”

The use of the word transnational is neither to reify the nation-state, nor to stop at simply an articulation of difference, but rather to attend to the “asymmetries of globalization” (Nagar & Swarr, 2010, p.3). In the adoption of the word “transnational” to describe the approaches to programming in this collection, we signal the attention authors have paid to the unequal effects of globalization, the assumptions embedded in service learning as a practice and the necessity of reflection in service learning that takes serious positionality, inequality and how all participants are imbricated in these processes. The uniqueness of this collection is the attention paid to the ways in which service learning, in its many forms, can be transnational in scope. This does not require the movement of bodies across borders (in fact, it may resist this movement), but does involve participants engaging in an analysis of not only inequity, but also their role in it and how their lives are linked to the lives of others. We suggest that this collection begins to articulate how a practice of transnational service learning may look that takes seriously the relationality of those involved, and the move towards coalition.

In a time of increased attention—both scholarly and popular—to transnational service learning and globally engaged ‘at home’, this collection brings together a group of experienced and engaged writers to consider the practice, politics and possibilities for improving options for globally engaged experiential learning.

## **The Collection**

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Through a wide disciplinary engagement, this issue engages in a thoughtful analysis of transnational service learning and globally engaged experiential learning by bringing together authors who have been examining this topic across a range of fields and experiences. Each contributor has been involved in student-centered learning in multiple ways—as professors, facilitators, researchers, critics and participants—and thus the engagement is informed by hands-on experience in the field.

The contributions all have in common an interest in facilitating learning across difference. The included pieces range from re-thinking what international service learning

could look like such as Robert Huish’s article on a course that didn’t “go” international to “facilitate” international service learning, to Jessica Vorsterman’s article that considers international service learning through a lens of critical disability studies (a much needed intervention in the literature), to a gendered political economy of host families by Ashley Rerrie and Xochilt Fernandez. Each paper, although written in different voices in different contexts, using different methodologies, and engaging with different theories and frameworks, shares a commitment to the need for a more just world and a consideration of how globally engaged experiential learning helps to achieve these ends.

This collection offers a wide-ranging conversation on diverse forms of transnational service learning and innovative insights into key considerations for examining and improving global engagement. It is our hope that these articles will further our understanding and practice of globally engaged experiential learning, to consider the opportunities and challenges of international experiences and the possibilities afforded through locally engaged global activism; thereby opening up new conversations and questions for improving student learning outcomes.

This collection opens by providing an overview of the post-secondary institutional context in which global citizenship and North-South student mobility are promoted through strategic commitments and internationalization strategies prepared by Canadian universities and colleges. Grantham argues through her textual analysis of strategic plans that the commitments to providing international opportunities to students are often instrumental and articulated without clear measures or goals. The second paper by Cameron, Langdon and Ageyomah is a reflection on the practice of trying to create a critical international service learning opportunity at a Canadian university. This paper includes a critical engagement with the politics, possibilities and limitations of having international service learning *through* an institution such as a university.

While the first section of papers considers the creation and ethics of international service learning, the second section engages with understanding what experiences are produced in these programs and what happens on the ground. Vorsterman’s paper provides an important contribution to the literature in the textual analysis of a volunteer sending organization that engages in the field of disability. Through this analysis of the website, information about the organization and past participant testimonials, Vorsterman argues that programs which focus on the field of disability do so in ways which close off the possibilities for engaging in an analysis of the production of impairment and disability, limiting the analysis offered to volunteers for understanding disability not as a natural or unfortunate condition. Smaller and O’Sullivan’s research in Nicaragua draws on interviews with local coordinators and communities to understand their experiences of international service learning. They conclude that there is a need for the inclusion of history of both the place of learning and the place from which volunteers have come to engage through the use of Althusser’s idea of an epistemological rupture. It is this rupture, they suggest informed by their participants, that is important—to challenge what volunteers might understand as

“common sense” views. This article is followed by a critical engagement with host families in Nicaragua to consider the gendered relations of service learning, particularly through the work of the host mother. Hernandez and Rerrie suggest that the labour of the host mother is imagined as care labour assumed to be done by women acting as mothers to the volunteers living with them. Larkin’s analysis of fair trade learning considers the erasure of systems of inequality. These systems, under global capitalism, seek to commoditize volunteer programs rather than to engage with them as alternative modes of organizing and promoting recognition of the connection between the lives of volunteers and those with whom they volunteer.

The ethical issues identified in the above papers serve as part of the core issues that require careful analysis and attention in all transnational service and globally engaged learning programs. In the paper by Tiessen, Roy, Karim-Haji and Gough, the authors highlight ten main ethical considerations that need to be identified and then addressed to ensure programs minimize harm and improve meaningful partnership-formation between institutions and communities involved in international service learning. The authors analyze the international service learning literature, programming materials and interviews to consider the best ways to build partnership across difference. These ethical challenges are understood in the context of international development literature including considerations of dependency, agency and power. Finally, the collection closes with an example of globally engaged learning at home—with Huish’s reflections on a course he taught which engaged students in learning about North Korea, and through that learning take up activism and advocacy on as a global issue. Huish suggests that activist pedagogies may be what are needed as a critical intervention into international service learning.

Together, these papers bring a variety of important dimensions and frames of analysis to our understanding of the complex, sometimes problematic, nature of diverse transnational service/globally engaged experiential learning options available to students in post-secondary institutions. The papers highlight original research, emerging questions, new and problematic practices, and a comprehensive framework of the ethical considerations requiring greater attention for ensuring transnational service/globally-engaged experiential learning to do less harm and promote informed learning in line with critical analysis of difference and inequality and spaces for solidarity.

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