

Service Learning and Solidarity: Politics, Possibilities and Challenges of Experiential Learning

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ABSTRACT: International volunteering and experiential learning programs provide important opportunities for personal and academic growth for students, universities and communities. However, they also have the potential of reinforcing neocolonial frameworks of power and privilege. Furthermore, these programs occur more and more in an academic context where short-term experiences are promoted, and long-term programs abandoned in the wake of neoliberal university policies. This paper is a reflection on the politics, possibilities and challenges of starting a new experiential learning endeavour through the Service Learning Program at St. Francis Xavier (StFX) University from a critical standpoint by exploring tensions and power dynamics of such programs whilst working from a decolonizing and solidarity-based pedagogy of development.

Introduction

International volunteering and experiential learning programs provide important opportunities for personal and academic growth for students, universities and communities; however, they also have the potential of reinforcing neocolonial frameworks of power and

privilege. Unless the development and ongoing evaluation of such programs includes intentional critical analysis to challenge such frameworks, these programs do not provide meaningful decolonizing learning or critical development practice. At the same time, these programs occur more and more in an academic context where short-term experiences are promoted, and long-term programs abandoned in the wake of neoliberal university policies (Chapman, 2016; Georgeou, 2012; Grantham, 2018; Jorgenson & Shultz, 2012; Rennick & Desjardins, 2013).

Given this new reality, this paper is a reflection on the politics, possibilities and challenges of starting a new experiential learning endeavor through the Service Learning Program at St. Francis Xavier (StFX) University from a critical standpoint. By exploring tensions and power dynamics in leadership, structure, length of program, status-quo challenging focus, student support and community projects this paper will outline key learnings, processes and approaches derived from reflections on the development of a new short-term experiential learning course. With objectives that contest the aforementioned critiques and structures, this course was envisioned and designed to instead build solidarity and conscientize students for an embodiment of ideas of shared struggles and enduring relationships and impacts with community partners engaged in challenging the development, as well as socio-economic status quo. This paper presents these reflections and hopes to provide our learnings as a possible reflection on what worked, did not work, was undermined and was supported for those who are searching for and designing meaningful international experiential learning programs.

International Service Learning

One of the long-standing international experiential learning frameworks within universities in Canada is service learning, “a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development.” (Jacoby, 1996 cited in Rosenberg, 2012, p.5). Key concepts of service learning include reflection and reciprocity (Jacoby, 1996 cited in Rosenberg, 2012). Rhoads (1997) used the concept of mutuality to embrace a duality of reciprocity within service learning; “that service should be a two-way relationship in that both parties receive benefits; and that both parties should be involved in the development and structuring of the service project” (p. 150 cited in Rosenberg, 2012). Additionally, as Rennick (2013) reminds us, “service learning in Canada is strongly tied to values based on historical Christian principles of service, responsibility, social justice and accountability,” influences which still resonate today in university programming, even if they go unacknowledged (p. 36). Within Development Studies, international service learning (ISL) “has come to be accepted as a means to enhance student learning, while contributing to development initiatives and promoting global citizenship” as a pedagogical development practice (Chapman, 2016 p. 1). However, neo-colonial power relations are “inherent in ISL as a practice” recognizing the historically missionary and “civilizing” roles of Christianity as

well as asymmetrical power relations in terms of conceptions of superior knowledge of people of European descent and from the Global North and towards indigenous peoples and communities in the Global South (Chapman, 2016, p. 2; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). In recent years, “ISL has expanded and spread under a neoliberal development model” filling gaps of disappearing welfare provision of nation-states through universities in partnership with non-governmental organization (NGOs) and student volunteers (Chapman, 2016, p. 2). Despite its more than twenty years of existence in this country, “in institutions of higher education across Canada both the justification for, and the activities that qualify as, legitimate service-learning experiences are varied” (Chapman, 2016, p. 2). Chapman (2016) cautions that focusing solely on benefits or consequences for students or universities minimizes the complexity of ISL’s effects on host communities (p.3).

Critical Service Learning Pedagogy

For any service learning program to be effective, whether Canadian-based or international, a critical pedagogy must be undertaken to transform the students’ understanding and experience of a particular place and the corresponding issues from historical, cultural, social, political and economic standpoints through supportive reflective processes (Rennick & Desjardins, 2013, p. 11). Rhoads (1997) crafts “a concept of critical community service” by calling on teachers and students “to develop a critical consciousness that transforms their understanding of the social order” to engage in the “larger struggle to improve social conditions” (p. 221 cited in Rosenberg, 2012, p.27). Furthermore, “students should have opportunities to participate in development programs in their own communities in Canada, to learn that conditions of injustice and inequality are everywhere” (Rennick & Desjardins, 2013, p. 11). Anderson and Krathwohl (2000) elaborate:

To deeply learn through ISL, students must become aware of this heterogeneity within communities and the global scope within local contexts. They must be able to see their own cultures in the foreign and the foreign in themselves. More so, they must attain an awareness that implicates their own values, biases, senses of entitlement, and previous training and upbringings in the entire educational process itself. ISL, as a collaborative form of educational and cultural verite, leads to this type of metacognitive knowledge of self that creates the opportunity for a true international education (cited in Kahn, 2011, p. 120).

Identifying and confronting political-economic power dynamics that create these unequal social conditions through praxis is also central to a critical service learning pedagogy. Morton (1995) recognized that “an action/reflection dynamic that contributes to social change is...political because it questions how power is distributed and the connection between power and economics” (p.201 cited in Rosenberg, 2012, p. 26). However, in traditional service learning literature and frameworks, “it is rare that social change, power,

and economic structures are mentioned,” reinforcing “helping” and service provision instead of social change (Rosenberg, 2012, p. 26). Advocating for critical service learning, Rosenberg (2012) explains, “As educators, we need to create service learning experiences that extend beyond empathy and “helping others.” Important as these, service learning must be an avenue of education that enlarges students’ critical consciousness and contributes to the transformation of society” (p. 42).

Within a critical service learning pedagogy, as educators, we must also “constantly seek to understand the implications of our praxis and the responsibilities we have to all stakeholders,” ensuring, in particular, that community partners are included in decision-making, implementation and evaluation (Rennick & Desjardins, 2013, p. 8-9; Rosenberg, 2012, p. 43). We also need to acknowledge and confront “the fine line between supporting narrow institutional goals and exploiting global partners” as well as remain vigilant about addressing power dynamics embedded in university-community relations (Rennick & Desjardins, 2013, p. 8). Rennick and Desjardins (2013) emphasize that “without ongoing reflection and debate on the ethical implications of sending students abroad [or into any community], we run the risk of establishing a new form of structural violence” (p. 9).

Neoliberal Influence within the University

Many scholars have shed light on the growing neoliberal environments of Canadian universities linking the increase in internationalization and experiential learning programs that develop global citizens to maintaining a competitive edge for recruitment and creating workers for the labour market within an atmosphere of decreased funding and corporatization (Chapman, 2016; Georgeou, 2012; Grantham, 2018; Huish & Tiessen, 2014; Jorgenson & Shultz, 2012; Rennick & Desjardins, 2013). Chapman (2016) explains that “the Northern university is already a neoliberal institution...the corporate [or neoliberal] university is run like a corporation because it has become a corporation” (p. 8). Desjardins (2013) asserts that the evolution of the university mission has reached a period of internationalization (p. 218).

In a study featured in another paper of this Special Issue, Grantham evaluates the strategic commitments of Canadian universities for North-South mobility programs and “transformational” approaches, noting the overwhelming linkage of “internationalization” to neoliberalism. One of the significant findings is that “current approaches are shown to be highly instrumentalist, used mainly by universities for strategic purposes to enhance branding and generate increased student enrollment and revenue” (Grantham, 2018, p. 20). Acknowledging the driving forces of “internationalization” approaches as economic to generate student enrollment and revenue, it is frequently used within university strategic planning and mission statements and “is reflective of broader trends in academia resulting from the increasingly globalized and competitive neoliberal environment of higher education” (Grantham, 2018, p. 15). Grantham (2018) also points out it “demonstrates that there is a neoliberal focus on the development of Canadian students through international experiences to be good, competent citizens and workers” (p. 15).

Chapman (2016) notes that “post-secondary education institutions have been hit particularly hard by neoliberal policies” and “ISL is reflective of this trend” as it is “a consumer good designed to draw students into a model which will give them the skills sought by corporations, while providing services to people and communities in need” (p. 6). Jorgenson and Shultz (2012) explain, “experiential learning, in the forms of community service learning and cross-cultural exchanges are featured consistently in the literature as a way to develop global citizenship” in an environment of internationalization and corporatization that is linked to the intensifying neoliberal climate in higher education as branding and for recruitment within an increasingly “competitive environment” to act as a “competitive advantage” to attract students (p. 9, 12). Not surprising, “when applied to commitments around student mobility, instrumental approaches contribute to poorly designed and executed programs that prioritize institutional benefits over the goals of sustainability, reciprocity and global social justice” (Grantham, 2018, p. 5). This also supports Desjardins’ (2013) statements that university “mission statements rarely reflect existing resources and programs” (p. 219).

For international service learning, there seems to be a “confusion of values and meanings in the interchange that occurs between institutional goals to target new student markets while also toeing the economic bottom line and avoiding liabilities, along with student objectives to participate in a service learning experience” that makes a difference (Rennick, 2013, p. 24). Rennick (2013) explains that service learning is “caught between the quasi-religious aims of “doing good” and “making a difference,” and the corporate-style institutional goal of the internationalization of education, the national aim of promoting Canada in the world, and the personal objectives of students” (p. 37). As noted above, the neoliberal Canadian student is made into a good global citizen and worker through “internationalization programs” whereby “university administrations create opportunities for students to include volunteerism within their academic record... The danger here is that the pursuit to meet this demand comes without careful consideration of the community partners, the vulnerability of the students, or the long-term impacts in the community” (Huish & Tiessen, 2014, p. 281).

Furthermore, it raises “questions about whether university administrators would praise or scorn such initiatives that “conjoin progressive change, partnership, and solidarity” (Huish & Tiessen, 2014, p. 284). Neoliberalism and the corporate university structures reflective within service learning programs have resulted in top-down managerial approaches that reinforce neo-colonial neo-imperial asymmetrical power relationships which makes reciprocity with community partners impossible (Chapman, 2016, p. 7-8, p. 16; Georgeou, 2012, p. 51). Grantham (2018) noticed that universities’ interest in these types of international learning programs “is geared toward generating benefits for students and for universities themselves, with little attention paid to the impacts (positive or negative) for host partners and communities (p. 16).

Managerialism as Neoliberal Model

Within an increasingly neoliberal climate, universities, public services and other community service organizations are subject to a more “managerial” or top-down approach that attempts to resolve social, economic and political issues through management (Georgeou, 2012, p. 51). Management systems or “managerialisms” focus on economic efficiencies and measurable outcomes, examined for “procedural efficiency”, cost reduction and services rendered rather than evaluating the change or difference actually made for population groups, participants or communities (Georgeou, 2012, p. 51). Georgeou (2012) explains that a major problem with managerialism is that, although allegedly neutral, its systems and approaches “carry cultural values, definitions and understandings of the process of “change” and the relative skills and capacities held in the North and the South that serve to perpetuate new and existing power dynamics within communities” (p. 51). Therefore, managerialism reinforces the agendas of the Global North and their control over activities as a form of neoliberal neocolonialism.

To this end, we must confront the ongoing educational neocolonialism that international experiential learning programs embody through neoliberalism that is based on financial self-interest, a reproduction of relationships that re-inscribe inequities and a lack of reciprocity and that retain outsiders as the program architects, facilitators and primary beneficiaries (Chapman, 2016; Luker, 2008 cited in Jorgenson & Shultz, 2012, p. 5). The case study that will now be presented attempted to resist this neoliberal agenda of internationalization and economic globalization at the institutional and structural level.

Curriculum-based International Service Learning

In the spring of 2014, a number of interested faculty and Service Learning staff at StFX initiated a committee to set up a new kind of international service learning experience that embedded a course grounded in critical service learning and decolonizing pedagogy within an 8-week service learning program in Ghana, taught by local instructors and including 4-week community-based placements. This was driven by the desire to develop a transformative experience for students that would deepen learning and relationships with communities in the Global South. The committee that was assembled to undertake the development of this course also felt that given the long history and commitment to community and social justice of StFX and of the Service Learning program, it was the right time to embed International Service Learning into a course that explored the local dynamics of change in communities set within a global context.

The eleven person committee was comprised of Service Learning staff and faculty from a variety of disciplines and community partners, and included feedback from students. The faculty involved had an interest in this endeavour, had integrated service learning into their courses for local experiences and had previously acted as faculty leaders on short one- or two-week immersion service learning experiences to the Global South.

Over the next two years, from 2014 to 2016, this committee envisioned, developed and piloted the experience to Ghana as an Interdisciplinary Studies (IDS) course, titled Contemporary Issues and Service Learning in Ghana, which eventually came to fruition in May 2016, with eight students participating in the first year of the 8-week program. We had a number of ideals in mind and we worked through these as a committee. Some of these were successfully implemented and some were not. The next focus of this paper is to examine the process of designing and launching this international service learning course and to explore its successes and challenges. This section is a reflection of our thoughts, as three people on the committee, positioned with different insights on what transpired, to explore why we met the challenges we did. As this process is ongoing, this is merely a snapshot of the reflections and learning that have emerged thus far.

As members of this committee, the authors of this paper played an integral role in this process by spearheading the work. However, each of the authors provide a different perspective of their experience developing the course, depending on their positionality, further illustrating the nuances of this effort, even as committee members. Dr. Jonathan Langdon is a professor in the Development Studies program at StFX and the Canada Research Chair in Sustainability and Social Change Leadership. His insights include comparing the teaching of this offering to other forms of teaching at StFX. While this course was being developed, Sheena Cameron worked at StFX University as a coordinator of the Service Learning program, an experiential learning program that offers curricular placements locally in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, as well as curricular or co-curricular placements internationally. Her insights explore how the course was incorporated administratively into StFX Service Learning offerings.

Upon deciding to offer the experience in Ghana, in part due to the combined experience of Jon and Sheena working in Ghana and the pre-existing relationships with communities, the committee brought Coleman Agyeyomah into the group in the fall of 2014. Coleman, a colleague and instructor in the Trent in Ghana year abroad program since its inception in 1998, is a development consultant and practitioner with over 30 years of experience in Northern Ghana. His insights draw on his extensive experience with the local dynamics of hosting such experiences with years of teaching Trent University students in Northern Ghana contexts. All three authors provide insight into participating, offering and supporting similar programs for Canadian students in Ghana either through Trent University or StFX. From a relational perspective, it also made a significant difference in the development of this course and in reflecting on the process, that the three authors have a long time collaborative working relationship.

For over twenty years StFX has been offering international/immersion service learning programs over the reading week in February to a number of different places in Canada and the Americas; however, with this program we hoped to create an experiential learning program that was very new and unique to what had been done in the past. We felt this course would push StFX boundaries regarding geographical programming and build an affordable option in a non-Americas context. While recognizing the shortness of the stay,

we thought it was a good chance to bring critical experiential learning or critical service learning to StFX, to develop a set of relationships that this program could nurture over time, and to link students to the amazing activism and critical development work that many of our partners are doing in Ghana—challenging the development hegemony in ongoing ways under difficult circumstances. Through the committee, we had discussions about best practices, especially using the model that Trent University had been using but at a smaller scale and timeframe. We also hoped to perhaps dovetail with partners that Trent and the StFX Coady International Institute work with in Ghana (e.g. Venceremos Development, Center for Indigenous Knowledge and Organizational Development) to synergize with and complement what partners wanted. As opposed to competing between what could become two very powerful long-term relationships between Canadian universities and Northern Ghana, we believed that working together would better support both programs and partners.

Critical Hyper-Reflexivity

Processes of self-reflection on practice are not new to the authors. For instance, Langdon and Agyeyomah's (2014) previous piece on Critical Hyper-reflexivity, where we shared using a prompt-based, multiple reflection model for deepening reflection, helped to frame the conversations leading to this contribution. We emphasized the importance of relationships, equal partnerships and the intentionality of the experience to avoid voluntourism and neocolonialism. We also emphasized different forms of reflection from the private/individual, dialogue with instructor through prompts, to the collective through open discussion spaces, and theme based conversations (once every week). At the same time, we recognized the need to critique global citizenship in the way that it could still be colonialism by another name by assuming the right to interfere, the privilege that comes from access to finances and mobility for global travel and what citizenship implies (Grantham, 2018; Huish & Tiessen, 2014; Rennick & Desjardins, 2013).

Key priorities that emerged in the early conversations concerning this course were for it to challenge the status quo for service learning and experiential learning at StFX and in general, move beyond the 1-week short term stays, tourist destinations and service projects to create an 8-week stay. Another key priority was for it to expose students to teaching from Ghanaian resource people, including core instructors of the course. By including 2 weeks of in-class time with intentional experiential learning and development studies pedagogy taught by experienced Ghanaian practitioners and instructors, the course was envisioned to challenge historical constructs and dominant narratives about Ghana. This supports Chapman's (2016) suggestions that "students could be taught by their host communities how to examine the political-economic circumstances of said communities, thereby gaining an understanding of them as a lived reality and putting the students in a position to take such learning back to their home societies" (p. 5). A final priority of the committee was to include a 1-month intensive community-based placement with partners (discussed later) with whom we had historical and ongoing relationships and who were

doing activist and critical development work to create social change in their communities from a social justice standpoint.

This program was therefore considered innovative at StFX because it has broken the model of the vast majority of voluntourism programs available at the university. However, it is also innovative from the perspective of broader discussion of such experiential learning in an international development context, where the industry, and safe options in international NGOs are eschewed for placements with organizations pushing back on the status quo, challenging who gets to define development and how (Langdon & Agyeyomah, 2014). As Chapman (2016) asserts, within international service learning programs “it is unfortunate that far too often there is little or no regard for already existing activist groups that are fighting to improve their people’s lives” (p. 17). Furthermore, as per the findings in Grantham (2018), although “commitments around social justice and social equity” were raised in 67 percent of the strategic plans of Canadian universities, none of these were in the context of discussing North-South student mobility options—a clear gap in the intentions of universities in combination with international service learning (p. 16). The committee also felt that critical hyper-reflectivity was key to grounding work in social justice and social change so we set out to ensure that decolonizing pedagogy was at the heart of the program.

Employing a Critical Decolonizing Pedagogy

Within all aspects of the program, whether in the relationships that we developed and maintained, our ways of working together between a university in the Global North and partners in the Global South, the development, content and methods of the course and experiences, the advertising, pre-departure training and decision-making, we wanted to include a decolonizing pedagogy as an ongoing relational process. Based on the work of Freire (2000), “this is a different type of pedagogy. It demands deep, ongoing time commitments on the part of both students and their teachers. It cherishes messiness, it relaxes control, and it prioritizes relationships over efficiencies” (Desjardins, 2013, p. 228).

In situating our attempts to enact a decolonizing pedagogy, it must first be acknowledged that we agree with Tuck and Yang (2012) who emphasize that decolonization is not a metaphor and who explain that decolonization means first and foremost repatriating land, and not just symbolically (p. 7). Furthermore, in *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Tuhiwai Smith (2012) explains that imperialism acts as a system of extraction and claiming of territory but also as a system of distribution of ideas and knowledge that follows Said’s notions of “positional superiority” in his work on Orientalism. This represents and reproduces ways of knowing and thinking about ‘the other’ that supports the logic of domination model. The “knowledge gained through our colonization has been used”, in turn, as Ngugi wa Thiong’o says, “to colonize the mind” (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, p. 62). Contesting colonialism and imperialism is an ongoing process that requires vigilance because, “[i]mperialism still hurts, still destroys and is reforming itself constantly” and because “[d]ecolonization is a process which engages with

imperialism and colonialism at multiple levels” (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, p.20-21). This pertains to the importance of confronting moves to innocence that Tuck and Yang (2012) outline that re-center the white settler as superior, rightful inhabitants and the ‘normal’ subject by which everyone else is ‘othered’.

Although speaking more specifically about research, Tuhiwai Smith’s (2012) decolonizing methodologies pertain to all forms of experiential learning programs as well. Kahn (2011) explains that ISL is not exempt or innocent from the process of decolonization:

Because ISL brings together various frameworks where colonialistic ideologies still linger, such as community service, international development, study abroad, and academic definitions and paradigms of observation, it is vital that all participants acknowledge and work through and against these imperialistic ideas and actions.... it is no understatement that many contemporary development programs and the institutions that support them are still in need of decolonization (p. 115).

The ways in which we position ourselves in relation to others can either reinforce or challenge coloniality. International experiential learning programs, without employing critical self-reflexivity or confronting dominant ideologies, are inherently colonial with their “impetus to know and encounter difference” and to “experience the other” (MacDonald, 2014, p. 216).

Just as Wolfe (1999) emphasizes that settler colonialism is a structure and not an event, decolonizing pedagogies are a process that, as MacDonald (2014) reminds us, “perhaps cannot, be completed while working with privileged students in a system that remains colonial” requiring that we remain vigilant to challenge institutions, structures and relationships that reinforce inequities (p. 209; cited in Tuck and Yang, 2012). Challenging neoliberalism and neocolonialism characteristic of international experiential learning programs through a decolonizing pedagogy means destabilizing their historical foundations and ongoing principles and approaches. According to MacDonald (2014), “this pedagogy moves towards making international experiences less about the student’s learning through an experience with marginalized others and engages a pedagogy that does not guarantee a kind of learning, or a kind of citizen but rather resists answers and embraces questions” (p. 210). This is a pedagogy committed to social justice and solidarity.

Prior to, and throughout the process, the committee considered a number of questions and issues that directed our decisions, which were also consistent with suggestions from Kahn (2011, p. 115-117). These included the importance of true collaboration with our partners in Ghana, balancing or even privileging community partner desires over student learning or program concerns, the importance of listening and responding to a multiplicity of perspectives, the inclusion of local people as instructors, organizers, and resource people, the consideration of culturally appropriate projects and interactions, the inclusion

of community partner program evaluation feedback, the financial viability and sustainability of programs for students, communities and the institution, and finally, as discussed above, an ongoing challenging of neocolonial models of development and engagement.

Finally, in adopting a decolonizing pedagogy, the committee wanted students to go beyond analyzing their own positions and privilege, of critical self-reflexivity, to go deeper into the history, politics and connections that, as Canadians, we have to Ghana, both in the historical and current colonial project. This corresponds with MacDonald (2014) who contends, “(de)colonizing international experiential learning pedagogy seeks to cultivate citizens who, rather than simply claiming their globality, recognize their rootedness and citizenship and the legacies they inherit” (p. 218).

Particularities for Ghana

There was also a deliberate focus on the North of Ghana for two reasons: 1) to concentrate on a region of the country that had been historically marginalized and deliberately underdeveloped regarding infrastructure and social programming in the colonial period, and where this legacy continues in contemporary times; and 2) to challenge the dominant tourist narratives of Ghana that place emphasis on Southern Ghanaian sites, such as the slave castles near Cape Coast.

As a committee, we also wanted to ensure that the program was connecting the local and the global issues through a structural framework to recognize the systemic issues that impact communities and individuals everywhere, so that they could act as change agents upon returning to their own communities (Huish & Tiessen, 2014; Rennick & Desjardins, 2013). We paid close attention to the ethics of sending students from other contexts into local organizations and communities in Ghana and the kind of training, background and mindset they were bringing with them. We created a structure of the program based on best practices and our own experiences with pre-departure trainings, multiple reflections before, during and after, connection with course work and a re-entry training, all key variables recognized to uphold strong principles of international experiential learning programs (Rennick & Desjardins, 2013, p. 11). We also made sure to draw as many Ghanaian, and Northern Ghanaian voices in particular, into the classroom portion of the course, with both Bismark Ayorogu and Fr. Dr. Gariba leading discussions and with students reading Abugre (2000) and Apusigah (2009), for instance. This was all taken into consideration to create a meaningful program with enduring effects that would conscientize students, initiate and deepen solidarity relationships between students, faculty, staff, community partners and the university as well as challenge structures of power.

A final priority held by the committee was to develop relationships with the partners and communities with whom the university and students would be working. We were dedicated to challenging traditional imbalances of power, hierarchical relationships and charity models to instead create equal spaces for dialogue that would allow for a

decolonizing of this process and of the course. As mentioned earlier, the authors have a long time collaborative working relationship in Ghana and in supporting similar programs which meant that there was an extensive knowledge-base and familiarity of context available to draw on as well as the pre-existing relationships necessary to develop trusting partnerships with community. The authors also held prior relationships with other community partners who would play significant roles in the program as orientation facilitators, guest speakers and community organizations where students would undertake their placements. The committee recognized this knowledge and relationships as invaluable to the process as it served to enhance and facilitate the development of the course and drew on them as a resource. Throughout this process, the authors also found that their pre-existing relationships were integral to their own learning and reflections.

The System Intercedes

As with all of the best-laid plans, there were a number of things that did not go as our committee expected or intended. An important element for international service learning programs are specific policies that are needed to govern their management and to keep students and communities safe. However, what became apparent throughout this process were the tensions that exist between system-oriented decision-making and relationship-oriented decision-making in creating and managing this type of program. A system-oriented decision making model is driven by mechanisms, risk management and efficiency, which can be at odds with a relationship-oriented decision-making model which seeks to prioritize building trust through transparency and inclusive participatory decision-making. Yet a balance of these must be reached in order to successfully develop this type of program within a community-university partnership.

The deep commitment of committee members to ensure relationships with community partners was at the heart of this partnership and led to some relationship-oriented concessions being made. Nonetheless, system-oriented decision-making ended up being the dominant force in this process. This meant that there were times when decisions were made that did not encourage dialogue and partnership-building to equalize power between university program staff in the Global North and partners in the Global South. Instead of challenging positionality to build transparency and relationships, the emphasis was on the legal requirements and release of liability forms of the program, without full community partner involvement. Unfortunately, in the months leading up to the launch, the focus on legal considerations and waivers became a central priority. Consequently, pre-departure preparation, critical reflection and course content became secondary. More importantly, the focus on developing relationships with the community partners with whom students would work and the focus on challenging traditional power dynamics took a back seat. Although the committee anticipated that we would encounter challenges that would require us to resist traditional and conservative ways of engaging with community partners in the Global South (and in Ghana in particular), we felt we were well positioned to confront and overcome them. Indeed, in most instances we did. This tension reveals the contradictions

within ISL programs in university settings that purport to be committed to social justice and community relationships but are ultimately forced to succumb to the neoliberal university system requirements.

As was mentioned previously, the committee believed that the development of relationships was crucial to the success of such an endeavor and as such, throughout the process we kept returning to this. While the Service Learning program prides itself on the centrality of relationship-building with communities, there were significant tensions that arose including system-oriented decision-making. The result of this was a perceived lack of inclusion or trust in the knowledge and relationships of those familiar with the Ghanaian context in decision-making when in actuality it was due to the legal responsibilities and timelines of the university system that restricted full participation and transparency. Interestingly, the committee was developing this course while the university was simultaneously establishing a relationship with a Canadian for-profit, voluntourist-sending organization that has been criticized for reinforcing values contrary to those of the Ghana program. The efforts to promote solidarity and mutual learning through the Ghana program were considered, by the members of the committee, to be undermined by the university's willingness to promote voluntourism that privileges the experiences and benefits of Canadian youth over those of the partner country (Jefferess, 2012).

This system-oriented decision-making also dominated conversations within the committee. At times, instead of utilizing the extensive knowledge and experience that the authors each brought to informing the development of the program, it was challenged and often excluded from consultation. On many occasions the suggestion of having a qualified Ghanaian teach the course was dismissed by some members of the committee. Although this decision was justified by system-oriented thinking as a process that was too arduous, this reason was contradicted by the Dean of Arts and others on the committee, especially given the candidate's background and education. This example could be understood as institutional racism, at worst, and, at best, as risk aversion or an act that undermined the knowledge of a highly qualified Ghanaian, reinforcing a superiority of knowledge of Westerners over local people with accredited education and valid lived experience.

Something that heavily impacted this process is the pervasive neoliberal corporatization of the university system with an increase in the business model of operations and increasingly managerial/top-down and litigation-focused/risk averse approaches to decision-making as was discussed earlier (Georgeou, 2012; Jorgenson & Shultz, 2012). Although this has resulted in austerity measures for many programs, at the same time, within this business model of universities, there is a readiness of administration to provide financial support for this kind of program, albeit to increase recruitment to set itself apart from other institutions, instead of other purely academic-based programs in the collegial system (Chapman, 2016; Grantham, 2018; Huish & Tiessen, 2014; Jorgenson & Shultz, 2012). As the impact of this model became evident for our process, a few examples of how this system-oriented approach also intervened to derail some of what we intended

to happen is outlined below, including “top-down hierarchical arrangements and unequal partnerships typical in the neoliberal paradigm” (Georgeou, 2012, p. 68).

The normal collegial course development process at StFX is by committee, however, since this was a new model whereby a course was embedded within an international service learning program, the mechanisms of enacting this program did not unfold within the normal structure. Although the initial framework of this course was set up by committee, once the course began to be implemented, the Service Learning program began to make decisions outside of the committee and without proper consultation with community partners, where power was concentrated in the hands of one or two people. The transition away from the committee did not happen in an inclusive or democratically determined manner; instead the committee was merely not consulted on many decisions. This change in decision-making was justifiably conceived as streamlining service learning-related matters, even though the course and the service learning components of the program were intertwined. This meant that many of the committee members felt excluded and uninformed regarding the direction of the course and powerless to stop the derailment of relationships within the committee and with community partners. Instead of an organic manifestation of the dialogue that had gone on up to the point of managerial insertion, the actual administration of the program became didactic, top down and authoritative.

This seemed contrary to our intentions, given the necessity for relationships to be developed and maintained for the creation and sustainability of the program and for supporting Canadian students in Ghana. For example, when developing the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for the program, the university program managers and lawyers insisted on including a clause that our partners in Ghana would have to comply with Nova Scotia laws even though the program was operating in Ghana and without familiarity with or being beholden to Nova Scotia laws. Additionally, when developing a budget for the program our Ghanaian partners were asked to provide their costs and expenses of running the program in country and then were promptly told that this cost was too high and that they would need to cut essential elements of the program that had been included for pedagogical purposes. This was done in a very unequal balance of power in a way that resulted in tensions, rifts and distrust in relationships. These rifts were no less with us, and between us. Those of us at StFX felt embarrassed by this behavior, and called it out in committee meetings. This did not change the approach of the program; however when the course actually ran, many of the budgetary constraints placed on the program were identified as major problems by student and community partner participants alike. For instance, the fact that a budget line for Coleman and Jon to monitor the student placement was replaced with only one for Jon. This meant Coleman’s usual practice of dropping in on students and community partners to offer support was denied to them. However, the impacts of this type of managerialism have been acknowledged by the current administration of Service Learning, which speaks to the potential of change if the pressure is kept up, and mistakes are clearly pointed out. This demonstrates the role of people

working across difference and in solidarity to challenge these behaviours and attitudes from various angles.

The latest manifestation of the university's neoliberal corporatization project has been the process of "internationalization" at StFX. Similar to the findings within university strategic missions of Grantham (2018), "members of the academic staff are encouraged to re-examine their curricula to identify ways in which departments can incorporate a focus on global issues and global thinking in the classroom" (p. 7). In this way, "strategic plans are framed as being instructive documents, used to guide the actions of university faculty, staff members and students and bring them in line with broader institutional mandates" (p. 3). Anything considered to have an international focus is now directed through the office of internationalization, to be reviewed under universal policies that consider liabilities to the university and risk management.

However, this also means that people without on-the-ground experience could inadvertently reinforce stereotypes through policy and liability decisions and, in an effort to reduce institutional or student risk, transfer liability from the university to community partners. Our program experienced this type of system-oriented managerial decision-making of university corporatization with miscommunication and risk aversion in the weeks leading up to the date of commencement, in light of perceived security risks after attacks in countries neighboring Ghana. In an effort to create efficiency and universal institutional policy, a managerial approach by-stepped those who were most familiar with the realities driving a wedge into already tenuous community-university relationships. Although, understandably, decisions must reflect university policy, by utilizing a critical decolonizing pedagogy and relationship-oriented approach to decision-making in this situation unnecessary confusion would have been avoided.

Resistance that Persists

Despite the challenges and the derailing of a ground-breaking program during its development process by system-oriented decision-making, students who participated in the experience in Ghana have taken up important critical analyses. The structure and content of the course have incited important transformative learning trajectories. Disorienting dilemmas have surfaced over Canada's connection to the colonial project in Ghana. For instance, the students read of Canada's role in training the 1966 coup-makers who overthrew Nkrumah; and read, but also heard from Northern and Southern Ghanaians about Governor Guggisberg, a Canadian colonial administrator from Galt, Ontario, who was the person most single-handedly responsible for Northern Ghana's educational gap (Engler, 2015; Lecture by Rev. Gariba, May 13, 2016). Canada's continued legacy of colonialism through foreign direct investment, the mining industry and aid tied to trade was also shared with them, not only as readings, but by discussions of implications of these exploitative investments by Coleman. Community partners also shared their own work at making change. Northern Patriots in Research and Advocacy (NORPRA) presented on the problems with Ghana's Savannah Accelerated Development Authority (SADA) program—

including the activism they have been engaging in to change it to support local economies. This was felt to be important to our partners, as they wanted to ensure those present left with a sense of how Ghanaians were taking their destiny into their own hands and not waiting for development agencies to “save the day.”

As Rennick and Desjardins (2013) explain, the experience is the catalyst that is the beginning of an ongoing journey. Questions that students are now contemplating are: if Canadians have made negative impacts on this country, is there not room for Canadians to make positive impacts? Students have learned of pro-poor policies that are the result of Northern Ghanaian activism, and that this activism is still hard at work to make sure SADA actually benefits ordinary Ghanaians. This has led to a number of students doing their placements associated with this effort, to learn about Ghanaians taking their destiny into their own hands, rather than witnessing the roll out of yet another international development trend.

Students worked with community partners in Ghana who are painting a very different picture of Ghanaians as active agents of change despite challenging circumstances. This is challenging the “single story” of Ghana and development that so frequently emerges with service trips of the “white saviour complex”, a belief in the responsibility and capability of white people to “save” people of colour, and a dominant discourse of poor people, dependency and charity (Adichie, 2009). Some of the partners students worked with include SADA (mentioned above) in the area of long-term development and citizen mobilization in the ecological development of the savannah region. Another worked with Northern Patriots in Research and Advocacy which focuses on equity and social justice, accountable governance, mining and fair distribution of resources. And yet another worked with Radio Gurune, a community radio station focused on providing a space for broadcasting in the local language. Finally, in order to maintain the integrity of the program and the pedagogy, Jon, Coleman and his associates volunteered some of the labour and costs that the university said were too much, however, in their view essential to the program, with the hope that the importance of these would be recognized in future planning.

Throughout the course of the planning process, Coleman and Jon had ongoing communication with community partners in Ghana to determine their interest in participating in the program and the projects where they thought students may be able to become involved. These options were then communicated to the planning committee and presented to students who were interested in the program and who were eventually selected. Although student interests were also taken into consideration for their final placements, attempts were made to ensure that community partner desires were prioritized and honoured and that placements upheld activist and social justice ideals. Coleman and Jon acted as a bridge to this process between the community partners and StFX; however, it is hoped that community partners will be more involved in future program planning through evaluations of their experience regarding their satisfaction, the structure of the program, student engagement and community perceptions as well as through direct

feedback of project options, support and criteria for potential students. Unfortunately, a formal evaluation with participating community partners has not yet occurred to determine their level of satisfaction in the program and their experience with students; however, there are plans for this in the near future.

A major strength of this program and it being situated at StFX is that this experience does not happen in isolation. Many programs at the university have local service learning opportunities where students can layer what they learn in Ghana, on this experience, with local opportunities which provide spaces for the critical hyper-reflectivity that was mentioned earlier, “pairing the local with the global” (Rennick & Desjardins, 2013, p. 12). This form of critical Service Learning that Mitchell (2008) speaks of “encourage(s) students to see themselves as agents of social change and use the experience of service to address and respond to injustice in their communities” (p. 51). This is also documented in research undertaken by Foroughi, Langdon and Abdou (2014) conducted on the way that layering experiences impacts the depth of reflexivity and criticality achieved by students in experiential learning opportunities. A high percentage of students, especially those in Development Studies, are encouraged, and are choosing, to make these connections and juxtaposing their experiences using a critical systems approach to understand the structural inequalities that exist everywhere and their corresponding roles.

Lastly, regardless of the challenges faced in this program, those involved in developing it have still been successful in acting as a wedge to create and hold space to push back on traditional voluntourism or service trips in a decolonizing way. Beyond this it goes even farther to develop a program that challenges power and privilege and creates linkages to the Canadian context to create more active change agents when students, upon return to Canada, act in solidarity and with an increased analysis of critical pedagogy. The work that has been done over the last twenty years at StFX with the Service Learning program began to carve out this space but this process and course took it a step further. However, this work is ongoing as it requires a constant and active resistance to the conservative creeping that occurs if people do not hold similar commitments to equalizing power, to ensuring that such programs are relationship driven and that the “single story” is not that of the dominant narrative (Adichie, 2009). To address the neoliberal tendency towards these programs, Desjardins (2013) explains, “international learning experiences are much more valuable to all concerned...when institutions invest sufficiently in them and when students are adequately supported not only before and during but especially after their experiences” (p. 225). Furthermore, “they must also be done properly if they are to be sustainable and if we are to take seriously our multiple responsibilities to students, to ourselves, to our institutions, to our global partners, and to the new types of global relationships we are seeking to model” (Desjardins, 2012, p. 225).

Dirik (2016) describes solidarity relationships as “a horizontal, multidimensional, educational and multidirectional process that contributes to the emancipation of everyone involved. Solidarity means to be on an eye-to-eye level with one another, to stand shoulder to shoulder. It means to share skills, experience, knowledge and ideas without perpetuating

relations based on power.” Rennick (2013) proposes “global solidarity” instead of “global citizenship” “as a more appropriate term for the objective behind service learning programs in Canada” (p. 37). By “global solidarity,” Rennick (2013) means “a reclaiming of the objectives of mutual responsibility and interrelatedness of purpose on a global scale, but with the acknowledgement and acceptance of difference and diversity” (p. 37). Those of us who are most committed to this kind of experience and work are committed to the solidarity-based spaces and relationships. Yet there is always space for challenging our own perceptions, ideologies and approaches, acknowledging that, as a committee, our own actions have contributed to both the successes and challenges that arose through developing this course.

Simultaneously, as solidarity requires a decolonizing pedagogy, we must acknowledge the tensions of these concepts, as delineated by Tuck and Yang (2012). Tuck and Yang (2012) explain that there are “limitations to solidarity” and that solidarity is incommensurable with decolonization (p. 26). Instead Tuck and Yang (2012) offer that it should be a particular, strategic and contingent collaboration recognizing that portions cannot be aligned or allied, believing that lasting solidarities are elusive or undesirable (p.28). This inherent temporality is obvious considering that solidarity is based on relationships and situations that change over time. Therefore, constant reflection, reconceptualizing and revisiting the necessity and usefulness of solidarity is important. Reflexivity of one’s positionality and purpose within a solidarity relationship and the openness to acknowledge and evaluate power differentials and shared assumptions and understandings encourages a dynamic solidarity but accepts that in achieving the goals the solidarity may no longer be required or may run its course. Within solidarity, futures are unwritten, uncertain and incommensurable and must be dismantled because any proscribed future is written within circumstances that are currently colonizing. Gaztambide-Fernandez (2012) emphasizes the importance of decolonizing the pedagogy of solidarity through relational, transitive and creative solidarity modes. This is a recognition that requires humility, self-reflection and openness to learning and criticism to constantly improve on our efforts to create and hold space for change.

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Sheena Cameron has been engaged in community development, solidarity and experiential learning in Canada, and Guatemala for the last 15 years. She was both a student and coordinator of the Trent in Ghana program, providing her with unique perspectives regarding international experiential learning programs. She worked with the Service Learning program at St. Francis Xavier University from 2013 to 2016, coordinating local community curricular projects for students. She holds a Masters in Communication and Social Justice from the University of Windsor focusing on media representation of the Canadian mining industry's activities abroad and community resistance. She is currently pursuing her PhD in Social Justice Education at OISE, University of Toronto focusing on Indigenous and non-Indigenous partnerships within the climate/environmental justice movement. She has also been a part-time lecturer in the Development Studies program at St. Francis Xavier University since 2014.

Jonathan Langdon is an Associate Professor in Development Studies and Adult Education at St. Francis Xavier University, and is Canada Research Chair in Sustainability and Social Change Leadership. He has 20 years of involvement in activism and activist research in West African and Canadian contexts. Langdon has received three successive Social Science and Humanities Research Council grants to study social movement activism and learning in Ghana. This work has also included the role of community radio/media as well as creativity in this learning. This research has won two international awards. Langdon, with Ghanaian colleague Coleman Agyeyomah, has published several chapters and articles on linking activism with experiential learning in Development Studies pedagogy. He has also published on decolonizing Development Studies. Since joining STFX, Langdon has worked with students to found Social Justice Radio, a weekly campus radio magazine show that deals with local, national and international social justice issues, as well as the annual Youth Activism Conference at STFX. His most recent work has been focused on First Nations and Settler solidarity activism in Mi'kma'ki (Canadian Maritimes) around water protection, anti-fossil fuel protests, and transitions to sustainable mutual existence founded in the 1752 Peace and Friendship Treaty between the Mi'kmaq and British crown.

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