Identity Matters in a Short-Term, International Service-Learning Program

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Abstract

This study explores the role that identity and the identity development process play in a short-term, international service-learning experience. Employing narrative inquiry, two of the co-authors, student participants in a 2-week service-learning program in Honduras, describe and interpret their service-learning experience in the context of life experiences that preceded the service-learning program. An emphasis is placed upon the ways that the students’ multiple identities and personal histories interact with the people, places, and ideas they encountered abroad. Findings are interpreted against the research and scholarship on intercultural competency and support the notion that student participants in international service-learning are exposed to experiences that lead to valuable extrospection and introspection and that foster complex understandings of self and ideology.

There is probably no more salient question for young adults in college than “Who am I?” Chickering (1969) described “establishing identity” as the central task for traditional-age college students. Since that time, considerable higher education scholarship has extended our knowledge of the phenomenon of identity development among college-age populations (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Jones & Abes, 2004; Jones & McEwen, 2000).

Postmodern conceptions of identity have emphasized its fluidity (Tierney & Rhoads, 1993), thus challenging Chickering’s (1969) notion that identity is something that is “established.” However, the post-modern perspective lends support to the importance of identity-related questions. In fact, interest in identity is alive and well in the postmodern era (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Gergen, 1991; McAdams, 1993). McAdams (1993) contended that identity is a central task throughout life:

The formation and reformation of identity remains . . . the central psychosocial task of the adult years. From adolescence onward we face this task of creating an integrative life story through which we are able to understand who we are and how we fit into the adult world. As our views of ourselves and our worlds change over time, we revise the story. (p. 92)

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Identity in a Global Context

A postmodern perspective also takes into account the social context in the process of identity formation (Gergen, 1991), noting that identity development is less about discovering a core aspect of oneself than it is about shaping and even creating oneself through experience. In recent years, the growth of international interdependence has moved the context of experience alternatives and, thus, personal development from local to global. Accordingly, Chickering (2009) asserted:

From today and into the future, the horizons for developing identity, for creating a good life, need to be global. They no longer can be local, regional or national, constrained by the prejudices and limitations of our particular familial, community, and religious backgrounds. Our identity formation must be enriched by more wide ranging experiences, knowledge and insights. (p. 3)

The need to competently deal with the central identity question, “Who am I?” is critical today as globalism presents young people with an ever-changing and diverse array of options to integrate into their sense of self (Gergen, 1991, 1999). Gergen (1991) made the case that contemporary technologies (e.g., the Internet) as well as the phenomenon of globalism embody change that “immerses us ever more deeply in the social world, and exposes us more and more to the opinions, values, and lifestyles of others” (p. 49). In an internationally interdependent context, the ways in which we conceive of ourselves are more complex as we are shaped by diverse, often intersecting, and sometimes contradictory realities. These realities present both increased challenges to and opportunities for the young adult in navigating the identity task.

Additionally, global interconnectedness presents immense challenges for managing the widely diverse nature of relationships. Thus, a host of scholars have called for urgent attention to intercultural competence (Brustein, 2007; Deardorff, 2006; Hunter, White, & Godbey, 2006; King & Baxter Magolda, 2005; Landreman, 2003; Plater, 2004). Deirdorff (2006) and Hunter et al. (2006) found that intercultural competence includes a diverse array of skills and characteristics, including openness to new ideas, thought flexibility, and cultural self-awareness. King and Baxter Magolda (2005) emphasized that the capacity to interact effectively across differences involves more than simply possessing a set of skills. Rather, it requires developmental maturity, which includes personal (identity), interpersonal, and cognitive facets. These three facets are closely connected and mutually reinforcing dimensions of development. In the context of interculturalism, King and Baxter Magolda stated:

Less complex levels of cognitive and intrapersonal (identity) development may hinder one’s ability to use one’s intercultural skills. Similarly, having an identity driven primarily by others’ expectations may diminish one’s capacity to apply cognitive and interpersonal attributes in intercultural contexts. (p. 573)

Thus, educators are charged with providing experiences that promote the development of identity within a diverse environment—experiences like those provided through service-learning.

Interculturalism, Identity, and Service-Learning

The development of multicultural competency or the capacity to relate to people across differences is a pervasive theme in service-learning literature (Boyle-Baise, 2002; Henry, 2005; Morton, 1995; Monard-Weissman, 2003; O’Grady, 2000; Rhoads, 1997). Because of the prospect of direct exposure to diversity, service-learning programs provide rich opportunities for students to
develop intercultural competencies and maturity. Deep and meaningful interactions across differences, such as those that are core characteristics of effective service-learning programs (Eyler & Giles, 1999), are essential experiences in fostering the developmental capacity to bridge the gaps that separate people, such as race, socioeconomic class, and culture (Daloz, 2000; Mather, 2008; Parks, 2000), and in promoting understanding of structural and systemic dynamics of privilege and oppression (O’Grady, 2000).

While presenting many opportunities for rich interaction, service-learning-based, cross-cultural immersion is often accompanied by personal challenges to the participant. Butin (2005a) pointed out participants in service-learning programs are “constantly encountering the dilemmas and ambiguities of living with and through the complexity of how life works” (p. 98). The complexity encountered by students can be growth producing. On the other hand, service-learning lessons sometimes conflict with students’ previous ways of seeing the world or even with students’ sense of self. Consequently, students may resist learning the lessons that educators hope to convey (Butin, 2005a, 2005b; Jones, Gilbride-Brown, & Gasioraki, 2005).

The scholarship on service-learning and multicultural education has focused primarily on the participation of majority students and thus has addressed the prevalent and daunting phenomenon of resistance to acknowledging one’s positions of privilege (Butin, 2005a, 2005b; Jones et al., 2005). At the same time, a modest collection of service-learning literature (Dacheux, 2005; Henry, 2005; Lee, 2005) has pointed out that many participating students, themselves, represent oppressed groups, including non-White, female, and working class students. A more diverse group of participants suggests a need for a more complex understanding of how student identity and service-learning pedagogy interact.

Dacheux (2005), Henry (2005), and Lee (2005) noted the mediating influence of socioeconomic class on service-learning experiences, suggesting that service-learning participation catalyzes reflection on students’ complex social positions as being privileged college students while also being products of the working class, an oppressed population. For example, as a student from a working class background, Dacheux (2005) pointed out that participation in service-learning prompted her to more clearly understand her identity as both privileged and oppressed.

Although not growing directly out of service-learning, additional scholarship has explored the connection between student identity and other types of cross-cultural experiences. Day-Vines, Barker, and Exum (1998) found that a study abroad experience in Ghana fostered a strengthened sense of ethnic identity for participating African American students. Talburt and Stewart (1999) illustrated the role played by race identity in framing how students interpreted a cultural immersion program in Spain, demonstrating the prominence of race identity in filtering how a participating student of color interpreted the experience differently than did White students.

In studies of gender identity and study abroad, Twombly (1995) noted that cognitive dissonance attributed to cross-cultural challenges produced poignant reflections on gender for female participants. In another exploration of the intersection of gender and study abroad experiences, Jessup-Anger (2008) noted that gender roles among male and female participants in a study abroad program in Australia and New Zealand did not become more salient by virtue of their participation in the program.

Studies of student experiences that focus on single identities, whether gender, race, socioeconomic class, or nationality, represent incomplete versions of students’ stories. Studying women at a West Coast college, Jones and McEwen (2000) found that “identity was defined and understood as having multiple intersecting definitions,” including, “race, culture, gender, family, education, relationships with those different from oneself, and religion” (p. 408). Furthermore, Abes et al. (2007) pointed out the importance of considering identity development in conjunction with the cognitive and interpersonal facets of development. Thus, it is important to examine student experiences in service-learning more holistically, taking into account multiple dimensions of student identity.
to more fully understand the relationship between service-learning experiences and intercultural maturity.

In addition to taking into account the intersections of multiple identities, it is also helpful to consider the temporal context, or to study the service-learning experience in the context of the life experiences that shape students over time. That is, acknowledging past experiences that have shaped students’ lives is helpful for understanding their current constructions of the world and of themselves. Service-learning, like any significant life experience, is narrated through the personal myth of the participant (McAdams, 1993). McAdams (1993) described personal myth as “a psychological structure that evolves slowly over time, infusing life with meaning and purpose” (p. 20). In this context, it is important to understand how students make meaning of service-learning by virtue of the past they carry with them and, particularly, the meaning making they apply to those past experiences.

Educators hope that the service-learning experiences will become a rich part of students’ narratives and will shape their personal myths and affect their lives into the future (Jones & Abes, 2004). When an experience brings greater complexity to a person’s myth, we might say that the “plot thickens” (McAdams, 1993, p. 25). The concept of thickening the plot is a strategy that is consistent with King and Baxter Magolda’s (2005) prescription for boosting development, and reflects a hope that many educators have for students participating in service-learning programs. Through service-learning, it is hoped that students are faced with tensions and ambiguities that challenge previously held conceptions of self and the world. It is important in service-learning, however, to provide students with adequate support to match the high level of challenge, or using Kegan’s (1994) metaphor, to provide a bridge that will meet students where they are, while encouraging them in their own developmental journeys.

This study examined the evolution of two student-participants’ personal myths as they participate in a short-term, international service-learning experience. By highlighting the cases of these two participants and coauthors of this study, we seek to provide a contextualized account of these two students’ personal myths or narratives within a particular service-learning experience. Understanding the role that international service-learning may play in the development of important aspects of development, including intercultural maturity, requires a highly contextualized investigation of the interaction between the student participant and the service-learning experience, in which the text of the program and the text of the students’ lives are both taken into account.

Service-Learning in Honduras: The Program

Service-Learning in Honduras is a 2-week study abroad program set in the third poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. The service component occurred during the first week of the program in a rural area. In June, 2007, nine students participated, coming from master’s degree programs in college student personnel and cultural studies at Ohio University.

The service week included 2 days at a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center, CEREP A, operated by a faith-based (Church of Christ) nongovernmental organization (NGO), where the students primarily facilitated and participated in group initiatives with patients. The next three days were spent volunteering in elementary schools, teaching arts and crafts, and leading group initiatives exercises. The service week included facilitated group discussions among the student participants, presentations by Honduran nationals on social, cultural, and economic issues related to education, and reflective journaling. The following week focused on studies of the pedagogy of service-learning, on-site visits of private and public universities, and guest lectures, as well as faculty- and student-led discussions on issues such as the interaction among the educational and political system and poverty.
Method

This is a jointly-authored article, based on the reflections of two participating students. Makiko, a product of the middle class in Japan, is a graduate student in cultural studies. Makiko’s career interests are in the education of early elementary age children. Megan identifies as a White feminist and lesbian who grew up in a single-parent, working-class home in North Carolina. She is a graduate student in the college student personnel program at Ohio University, and is interested in a career in campus recreation. Megan participated in a service-learning based course prior to the Honduras Project. Makiko and Megan’s narratives, as originally included in their journals, provided the heart of this study. Peter, a White, middle-class faculty member in the higher education program, designed and directed the program.

The methodology is informed by narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry is a qualitative approach to researching human experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). Rather than focusing solely on the study abroad experience itself, narrative inquiry is concerned with “life as it is experienced on a continuum,” as experiences are “contextualized within a longer-term historical narrative” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 19).

Within this study, Megan and Makiko describe how their service-learning experience fits into their respective personal myths or life narratives. Megan and Makiko each maintained journals throughout their experience in Honduras. In the language of narrative inquiry, the journals function as field texts, which Clandinin and Connelly (1994) described as “texts created by participants and researchers to represent aspects of field experience” (p. 419). Based on the field texts, Megan and Makiko drafted thematic summaries of their journals and augmented these with discussions of the aspects of their backgrounds that most poignantly shaped their understanding of the service-learning experience. In the process of drafting their stories, we all engaged in reviewing and discussing Megan and Makiko’s narratives.

Clandinin and Connelly (1994) pointed out that the development of field texts is an interpretive process that is grounded in the relationship between researcher and participants. In this case, these two participants were coresearchers in the fullest sense. The analysis and writing processes also were based on a social constructivist paradigm. Charmaz (2006) asserted that “a constructivist approach places priority on the phenomena of study and sees both data and analysis as created from shared experiences and relationships with participants” (p. 130). In this case, the shared experiences and relationships occurred at several levels. Their original journaling was shaped by the direct interactions with their experience with Honduras, individual Hondurans, fellow class members, and with the course instructor’s project design and participation. Working from Megan and Makiko’s journals and their resulting narratives, we jointly developed themes through a process involving: personal reflection, individual/independent analysis, discussion, and collaborative writing. The discussion and writing processes involved looking for commonalities that emerged from the authors’ individual analyses. Although commonalities often are emphasized in qualitative research methods such as phenomenology and grounded theory, we also were sensitive to the participants’ unique perspectives that were cultivated through their different backgrounds and experiences.

It should be noted that as the faculty member and the designer of the service-learning program, Peter’s perspective and meaning making was part of the socially constructed meaning presented in this paper. Peter developed the project based on his previous experience in Honduras and was guided by Eyler and Giles’s (1999) framework for effective service-learning programs. He also incorporated a social justice paradigm (Marullo & Edwards, 2000; Monard-Weissman, 2003) by incorporating a critical perspective that involved testing assumptions about the meaning of “service” and studying social conditions systemically. Peter was also deeply involved in the analytic and writing process, convening meetings of the coresearchers and offering questions and interpretations as the findings developed.
Findings

The first section, Foundations, introduces the background and perspectives Megan and Makiko brought with them into the service-learning experience. Later sections detail themes that grow out of these foundations and describe variations on these common themes.

Foundations

“I had become a traitor to my working class background.” The social construction of identity had been an area of investigation for Megan for the past few years—both academically and personally. Megan recalled beginning college so focused on finding social belonging that she desperately strove to position herself as a product and member of the middle-class. In doing so, she lost sight of where she had come from: a single-parent, working-class family. While in college, however, a community service experience awakened her to her roots. This undergraduate service project in a low-income housing project was pivotal in Megan’s journey. One day at the housing project, Megan met a woman who was struggling to make ends meet. The woman told Megan about her need to work multiple jobs and to live in government housing in order to provide a decent life for her family. Driving home after the service-learning project that day, Megan was overcome with an awareness that this woman’s life situation rang familiar—that Megan’s own upbringing was similar to the person’s she had been serving. Megan realized the interaction she had with the woman at the site was not separated by their roles as server and recipient; instead, they shared experiences layered with similar struggles. This recognition had a profound effect on her understanding of herself as being different from many of her college peers. She began to identify more clearly with her working class background. This acknowledgement was at first painful, but was also liberating and energizing.

This experience catalyzed Megan’s interest in the academic study of identity and social construction. Feminist critical theorists such as hooks (1990) and Harstock (1983) and social constructivists such as Gergen (1991; 1999) provided her a framework for understanding her own identities as working class, lesbian, and feminist. She brought this lens into her experience in the Honduras service-learning program and was, again, confronted with an opportunity to negotiate the Hondurans’ perceptions of her identity as a wealthy, White, educated woman.

“I realized how ignorant my thoughts about and behaviors toward foreigners were.” As with Megan, this was Makiko’s first visit to a developing country. She noted that, in contrast to life in Honduras, the two countries with which she had direct experience—Japan and the United States—provide reasonable access to quality education through their public school systems. At [Name] University, Makiko enrolled in a course on poverty, which provoked a combination of excitement and discomfort. Many of her classmates were from developing countries and were able to draw from personal experiences in class discussions. Makiko, however, was out of her comfort zone in this class as she realized that she was unable to relate to the experience of many of her classmates. She became increasingly aware of her privileged background, and her interest was piqued through hearing about the experiences of classmates from poorer areas of the world.

Recognition of internalized prejudice also contributed to Makiko’s decision to participate in the program. Growing up in rural Japan, she had not been exposed to other races or ethnicities until she left home to go to college. Interaction with international students in college opened her eyes. She discovered her interest in different cultures, languages, and thoughts and recognized that her prejudices were based in ignorance.

In order to stretch herself and to pursue her interest in early childhood education, Makiko enrolled in a cultural studies graduate program in the United States. Upon coming to the United States, she found herself on the other side of prejudice. Her first American roommate rejected her...
because she did not want to live with a foreigner. Makiko sometimes faced rude behavior on the part of people in the community due to challenges with her English language skills.

Experiencing both privilege and oppression, Makiko wanted to broaden her experience and to stretch her understanding of herself in relationship to others. She reflected in her journal: “Through the Honduras program, I want to gain new perspectives about cultures, people, countries and everything. I want to think about others and myself from a new perspective.”

Reflections on Self and Other: Identity and Privilege

Prior to traveling to Honduras, students were assigned course readings, which provided participants with information on the social, economic, and educational circumstances faced by many Hondurans. One of these readings (Benjamin, 1989) was the first-person story of Elvia Alvarado, a Honduran Campesina woman, and provided students with a window into the life of a Honduran living in poverty.

The first person perspective was intended, by the instructor, to humanize Hondurans, particularly those living in poverty, and to reduce the inevitable treatment of “others” as objects in the service-learning program. That is, through reading through the “voice” of a Campesina, students would be able to see the Hondurans beyond the recipients of service work or as objects to be studied. Particularly during the first day in country, adopting a humanizing lens was difficult for both Megan and Makiko because there was little opportunity for direct interaction with individuals outside of the service-learning team. Viewing the country primarily through the window of a van during the first day, Megan noted that she found herself judging Honduras as “primitive and impoverished” and that individual Hondurans appeared “genderless” and “dirty.” Makiko shared Megan’s early impressions, as she referred to her perception of Honduras as replete with “poverty” and “filth.” Despite these initial impressions, both participants found that the service work provided a rich context to move beyond these more superficial judgments.

“I recognized that drugs know no language or borders. Automatically, I felt connected to many of the residents of CEREP A.” Engaging in the service projects provided Megan with a mechanism to make connections she hoped for. At CEREP A, the student participants had opportunities to interact with patients through planned group initiatives exercises, personal interviews, and informal conversations. A particular poignant interaction occurred with a young female patient, Anna, who shared her story with Megan in an interview. As Megan had dealt with the effects of drug abuse within her own family prior to the service-learning trip, Anna’s story provided Megan an opportunity not to see her as a patient, but as a person whose life resonated with Megan’s own life. That is, in contrast to her earlier reflections through the window of the van, Megan experienced a rich connection with Anna and other CEREP A patients.

Although Megan had found a place where she connected and shared experiences with Hondurans whom she had gotten to know on a deeper level, she was simultaneously troubled with her recognition of the privilege that was, at times, shaping her perspective. As Megan reflected on her initial perception of Honduras as a “genderless” and “dirty” place, she recognized that this perception came from a position of privilege as a White, North American, university student. This recognition was in marked contrast to her identity as a marginalized, oppressed, working class person, as she had so strongly come to identify herself in college. This notion of being privileged and, especially, being seen as privileged by the Hondurans was difficult for Megan to accept. At one level, Megan felt that she identified more with the Hondurans she was meeting than with her service-learning team.

After working with the CEREP A patients, work began at the elementary schools. Megan described her personal struggle with wearing the cloak of privilege while working with Honduran children.
I caught myself being consumed with desire to set myself apart from the rest of the group in the eyes of the children we worked with in rural Honduras. Stopping myself, I again realized that my desire for individuality was merely another illustration of my American culture.

Megan was drawn to feeling connected with the oppressed but had difficulty with the idea of being connected with the privileged, which ostensibly represented her peer group and the social class she felt would become even more a part of her identity upon completing her graduate work. Megan struggled to negotiate the emerging belief that having voice as an educated woman would mute her voice as a product of the working class.

“\textit{I saw similarities that they all shared, such as lovely smiles, beautiful hearts and infinite potential.}” Makiko’s studies were focused mostly on early elementary grades; thus, experiences in the Honduran schools were particularly significant for her. Upon going onto the school grounds, Makiko initially focused on the deprived condition of the schools; she was shocked by the lack of resources and wide age range in crowded classrooms. Makiko wondered how students could learn in this environment.

Within a few hours, however, Makiko no longer focused on the schools’ deficiencies, as she found herself drawn to the children. She reported in her journal that she found them to be “curious, energetic, and smart.” She recalled that, during a game that she facilitated with her classmates, winners were provided with a prize of candy. Makiko was surprised that these children, who possessed so few things, sometimes declined candy because they were concerned that they were getting more than their fair share. Furthermore, some of the children presented her with gifts. Although the children had few things, they wanted to give Makiko something to remember them by. These gestures touched her deeply. She wrote:

I was impressed and touched by their honest and pure hearts. These children grew up surrounded by a totally different environment than Japanese and American children. However, I saw similarities that they all shared, such as lovely smiles, beautiful hearts and infinite potential.

Following this experience with the generosity of these school children, Makiko was reminded that humanity has multiple dimensions, and that, within this high poverty country, it was important not to idealize those one was “serving.” For instance, at one school, some of the students were “lying” to Makiko to obtain more candy, and some were even attempting to steal her bag of candy. This disappointed Makiko, but reminded her of the importance of not idealizing people in poverty. Indeed, idealizing people, even the oppressed, can be a form of objectification, perhaps no less insidious than the initial perceptions formed by looking through the window of the van.

\textbf{Discussing religion: Poignant moments.} Having grown up in a country where religious ideas were not as publicly expressed, Makiko was struck by the omnipresence of Christian symbolism in Honduras. Both Roman Catholic and evangelical forms of Christianity were evident in Honduras. The symbols appeared in the form of churches, street signs, and jewelry. Counter-symbols were also evident as graffiti seen at a local university reflected the saying by Marx, “Religion is the opiate of the people.” Just as the host country seemed to bear some ambivalence about religion, so did Makiko. She was curious and sometimes impressed with the depth of the faith of the Hondurans, but was simultaneously skeptical. In the pre-trip reading described earlier (Benjamin, 1989), Alvarado, a Campesina, described a deep belief in God; on the other hand, she challenged the institutional church as suppressing the will of the people. Also, she noted that strong opposition to birth control had an insidious effect on social progress in Honduras. This analysis resonated with Makiko, and she indicated similar ambivalence, especially concerned with the apparent obstructions to progress that were connected to the belief systems.
Midway through the first week in the country, the service-learning class was invited to have dinner at the home of one of the program staff members at the church-based NGO, Jose, along with his wife, Liliana, and their two sons. After dinner with the family, Makiko, Megan, and one other student found themselves in a discussion with Liliana, separated from the rest of the group. Throughout the evening, the study abroad participants had been aware of the strong Christian evangelical narrative that was part of the family’s life. Jose and Liliana frequently referenced God in statements such as, “God told me to learn English,” and “We pray all the time that God will protect our daughter.” Being from the southern United States, Megan, unlike Makiko, was familiar with the language of evangelical Christianity, and, further, was circumspect in respect to what Jose, Liliana, and their children might think if they knew that she was a lesbian. Furthermore, she had determined that, when faced with religious beliefs that were different from her own, being silent was a judicious course of action.

In contrast to Megan, Makiko found Liliana’s narrative to be novel, and it gave her an opportunity to extend her understanding of the phenomenon of religion in Honduras. As Liliana described her ongoing conversation with Jesus through prayer, Makiko asked, “How do you talk to Jesus? And how does he talk to you?” Megan, who was involved in the conversation, was startled because it was a question that she would not consider asking. Growing up in the midst of the “culture wars” between the religious right and left in the United States, Megan found herself closing down to Liliana’s narrative. But, she also recognized the beauty of Makiko’s question. It was curious and innocent. Could Megan have asked the same question with the same openness? She asked herself, “Wouldn’t it be good if we could approach our interpersonal differences in such an open, nonjudgmental way?”

Makiko and Megan discussed this experience with one another. Makiko pointed out that she had learned—studying abroad in the United States—that she needed to push herself to ask questions about people and customs in order to survive her cultural exchange. This interaction with Liliana probably would not have happened had she not developed a sense of personal agency through her extended experience of living in a foreign culture. For Megan, witnessing Makiko’s openness was one of the most poignant moments of her Honduras experience. For Makiko and Megan, this was an example of how our social context shapes reality. For those experiencing a “culture war” in the United States, discourse around issues of religion can be sensitive. Makiko, however, was less drawn into herself and, thus, less likely to withdraw from this conversation. The exchange, itself, could seem uneventful for many onlookers. For Megan, it was a moment of epiphany.

This experience also reminded the participants that learning occurred not only in the interactions with the Hondurans, but also through engagement with a diverse class of students—students who look at their experiences through different lenses.

Discussion: Sustained Learning in a Short-Term Study Abroad Program

Although it makes for good legend, it is rare that a single life event spontaneously catalyzes dramatic learning (Daloz, 2000). However, by viewing this short-term study abroad experience in the context of Megan’s and Makiko’s larger narratives, one can see a demonstration of how these participants’ reflections on a relatively brief program are shaped by their pasts and how the service abroad experience might provide an important shaping influence as students move into their respective futures. We acknowledge that we are presenting only two participants’ experiences and do not claim that these experiences are generalizable to others participating in such programs. However, we believe that these students’ experiences may sensitize practitioners and researchers to other phenomena occurring with other service-learning participants and settings.
“Moving Out” to a Shared “We”

The service-learning experience in Honduras has extended Makiko’s process of “moving out” from a tribal lens on the world to a more global one. Beginning life in a homogeneous town in Japan and then going to university and on to the United States, each step of her journey has broadened her perspective and equipped her with new skills for confronting the complexities of life. The Honduras program continued that pattern and shaped Makiko’s perspective in important ways. She was able to see, first hand, a culture that seemed dramatically different from what she had experienced before. In contrast to what she had observed in Japan and the United States, Makiko made contact with poverty that she had only previously read about or heard about from her classmates. While Makiko was introduced to differences, she was also struck by the familiar. This is most notable in her experience with children in the schools, where she saw “lovely smiles, beautiful hearts and infinite potential,” which demonstrated a connection with children in Japan and the United States.

The paradox of finding deep similarities in the context of differences is described by Daloz (2000) as a feature of transformative learning. In today’s interconnected world, the roads that converge on the individual are more diverse and extend further from “home” and from simple formulas for living defined earlier in life. Daloz illustrated the concept of transformational learning through the life of Nelson Mandela, whose life began with identification with a literal tribe and, as life presented opportunities to enlarge his education and diversify his social network, extended to a sense of the interconnection and universality of life. In this regard, Mandela came to understand that the “enemy,” his oppressor, possessed “a core of decency” (Mandela, 1994, p. 462). Similarly, Makiko’s reflections on the children she saw in Honduras were humanizing and redemptive, and this kind of narrative builds a foundation for hopeful cross-cultural work. As Daloz stated, “It is the conviction of the essential humanity of the other that turns a former ‘us’ and ‘them’ into a shared ‘we,’ making possible work for the common good” (p. 109).

“Moving In” to Self Awareness

In contrast to Makiko’s experience, Megan’s reflections highlight the journey inward. Through her experience in Honduras, Megan has explored more deeply her inner terrain, her identity. Since the pivotal experience in college when she was confronted with a self she had buried, she has been engaged in exploring the meaning of oppression as it relates to her social class. She came to find strength in the truth of the identities as working class, woman, and lesbian. The Honduras experience has moved her into a place of more complexity and ambiguity. The service-learning project has made it clearer that her life, and indeed that she, is a blend of privilege and oppression. Dealing with this ambiguity requires maturity. In seeing oneself as a mixture of oppressed and privileged, Megan found connections to others, both to Hondurans with whom she interacted and with members of her service-learning group. Still, owning privilege was particularly challenging for Megan and requires ongoing personal work. Both Megan and Makiko were also faced with the ambiguity of the “helper” and the “helped,” as they both acted as server and simultaneously recognized that they, themselves, were served as they participated in this work.

Internationalism and Intercultural Development

McAdams (1993) pointed out that the adolescent’s personal myth is sometimes too clean and forced. Indeed, we all find some comfort and meaning in an idea of self that is coherent and unified; however, as McAdams said, “A good life story is one that tolerates ambiguity” (p. 111). Both Megan and Makiko were confronted with such ambiguity in Honduras. For Megan, the ambiguity
was encountered in her exposure to herself as being both privileged and oppressed. The challenge of holding those two realities simultaneously was palpable. In a more subtle way, Makiko was exposing herself to what she saw as the redemptive and destructive features of religion. The extent to which she saw this tension as a tension within herself was not as explicit as in Megan’s case. Still, it is clear that by expanding herself through ever widening circles, she was in the process of redefining her view of not only the world but of herself and continuing to shape herself into a more complex self.

King and Baxter Magolda (2005) referred to the importance of tolerating ambiguity for differing worldviews as a characteristic of the cognitive dimension of intercultural maturity. Megan’s story, in particular, suggests that tolerance for ambiguity also applies to the intrapersonal dimension of intercultural maturity. The many people from marginalized or oppressed populations in the United States who travel into the developing world may indeed be confronted with aspects of themselves that appear privileged in a new context. Being faced with privilege while one has been deeply anchored to an oppressed identity may be disorienting and may, in fact, lead to resistance. The developmental goal, as illustrated by Megan’s experience, will be to hold both realities simultaneously. Love and Estanek (2004) discussed the importance of “valuing dualism” (p. 13), which, in this context, translates to acknowledging that one is simultaneously privileged and oppressed and, further, that these seemingly opposing realities may someday find themselves to be in a peaceful relationship within the same person. The degree to which this peaceful coexistence is fully formed for Megan is not clear at this time. However, the recognition of these phenomena in relationship to her identity presents a valuable growth opportunity. Similarly for Makiko, her involvement with the apparent countervailing ideals of religion as help and hindrance may find a new resolution as she continues to live in the tension of this dualism.

It is undoubtedly true that multicultural experiences of many kinds produce challenge and, thus, facilitate growth among those exposed to them. However, the stories of these members of the Honduras Service-Learning Program suggest that participants in an international service-learning program may indeed be particularly vulnerable to self-contesting ambiguities. The cultural novelties inherent in international experiences are less commonly encountered, viewed in the media, and discussed than are issues of domestic diversity. So, students may be more likely to be immersed in complex, unforeseen circumstances or dilemmas than if they were to be in many high poverty environments within the United States. This, again, may be particularly true for members of oppressed populations within the United States—populations who have not been faced as directly with their privileged identities as they are in an international context.

In addition to challenging one’s view of self, previously held understandings of external realities may also be contested in service-learning experiences. Perhaps one of the most important virtues of international service-learning programs is the opportunity for participants to let go of the need for secure answers to vexing problems—a process that is at work in both Megan and Makiko’s stories. Wheatley and Frieze (2011) poignantly noted:

When we enter a new culture, we can expect to feel surprised, confused, disrupted. These are promising feelings, because they offer us a choice. Either we can retreat to the safety of our familiar opinions, or we can become curious. If we’re willing to be disturbed, we can try to let go of our judgments and confess that we don’t understand what we’re seeing. (p. 15)

Service-learning literature is replete with the argument that resting on simple understandings emerging from a “charity” paradigm is insufficient and unhelpful—useful for little more than to assuage guilt without remedying fundamental injustices (Monard-Weissman, 2003; Morton, 2005; O’Grady, 2000). To replace a charity perspective with adherence to a shallow understanding of multiculturalism (Butin, 2005b; Fish, 1999) is also problematic. Educators should hope for more—that is, that these rich boundary crossing experiences provided by service-learning pedagogy may result in an upending of common clichés and dismantling of simplistic narratives that students often
carry into these experiences. Indeed, service-learning educators hope for transformative learning, which Brookfield (2000) referred to as “an epiphanic, or apocalyptic, cognitive event—a shift in the tectonic plates of one’s assumptive clusters” (p. 139). This kind of dramatic cognitive event includes the reality of some measure of loss. If it is truly transformative, the loss is of something near and dear, something precious: one’s own narrative construction of self, along with one’s accompanying ideology. In cases such as this, leaders of service-learning programs are presented with the challenge and opportunity to make available opportunities for students to discover what richer realities can be gained to replace what is lost—a formidable task indeed.

Service-Learning in the Context of Life Journey

The temporal aspect of the narrative approach used in this study can be instructive for intercultural and service-learning educators. In acknowledging that service-learning participation is part of a larger life journey, educators can put issues of student resistance in perspective. That is, evidence of resistance to accepting positions of privilege may be seen not as an educational failure, but as a response to the challenges imposed by service-learning experiences on students’ current ways of making meaning of their lives. Students’ previous experiences shape the way that they see things in the present. The daunting nature of the work associated with acknowledging privilege and interacting effectively across differences, and indeed all of the formidable tasks associated with interculturalism, constitute “life-long work” (Jones et al., 2005, p. 20). Students’ approaches to making meaning of their experiences are tied closely to their assumptions about knowing (cognitive), their understanding of themselves (intrapersonal), and their orientation to relationships (interpersonal). Each student participant brings in a rich and intricate life history that becomes part of the particular service-learning text.

Butin (2005a) provocatively challenged educators to think less about the apparent, material outcome of service-learning (i.e., are students “getting it” or are they “resisting”?). Rather, it is helpful to see the service-learning experience as a “self-consuming text” (p. 101) wherein the text of the student’s life interacts with the text of the service-learning experience and continues to percolate within the student. So, for instance, the resistance that perhaps all students (and faculty) experience to some degree in a meaningful and intimate service-learning project is not a place of closure but a catalyst for ongoing reflection. A powerful service-learning experience is not likely to be left behind. Rather, it becomes integrated into students’ personal myths as they move forward in their lives.

In the context of the Honduras program, the service-learning experience did not end for any of us at the end of the 2 weeks in Honduras. The ongoing process of discussing and writing about our experiences has ensured that our interaction with the service-learning, self-consuming pedagogy continues. As we complete this project, we all pick up our lives and continue not the same as we were before experiencing Honduras nor are we as we were before writing together. Whether we like it or not, all of this has shaped us and continues to shape who we are. The same, we believe, will be true of participants in other rich, self-contesting experiences.

References


