

Best Practices in International Service Learning Classes for Social Work

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Abstract

This paper is a culmination of what we have learned about international service learning (ISL) course development and sustainability over the past nine years. The paper describes what we believe to be critical ingredients to planning and delivering an ISL class, and details how the class has changed over time, building global collaborations in order to help students better understand social development in an increasingly diverse global community. We include a case example to build on the current knowledge of best practice and illustrate what we have found to be critical ingredients to organizing an effective, respectful, and sustainable ISL class. The case example, hereafter referred to as the Romania Service-Learning (RSL) class, has been offered to graduate social work students since 2004.

Keywords

service-learning, international education, Romania

Introduction

“Service learning combines community service with academic instruction, focusing on critical, reflective thinking and personal and civic responsibility. Service learning programmes involve students in activities that address community-identified needs, while developing their academic skills and commitment to their community” (American Association of Community Colleges, n.d.).

International service learning (ISL) encompasses the American Association of Community College’s definition of service learning; however the service learning is carried out in an international community often exploring a variety of global issues. In fact, globalization underscores the importance of developing social work programmes that encompass worldwide issues and country-specific interventions for addressing transnational problems (Engstrom and Jones, 2007). Being able to acquire this world view can be complicated when most educational preparation is designed to train practitioners to address specific problems found within their own society or local sphere (Kendall, 1996). ISL promotes community activism (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Raskoff, 1994) and bridges academic learning with applied settings; helping demonstrate the interconnections between theory and practice for many students (Calderon and Farrell, 1996; DeMartini, 1983).

ISL is one way to attend to the growing global field of practice learning in social work. Social work programmes include content relating to human rights, social justice, inequality, oppression,

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racism, and sexism in their curriculum at the micro and macro levels yet more and more, programmes are looking beyond the domestic sphere to global trends and are exploring the connections between social problems at home and abroad. ISL programmes are one way to help the students grasp key concepts of globalization. Research has noted the importance of encouraging students to go beyond personalized thinking by placing themselves within the broader social context at a more aggregate level (Rochelle et.al., 2000). This paper will outline the important components of ISL courses in social work education and provide a case example of the Romania Service-Learning (RSL) class taught at a graduate school of social work in the United States to illustrate how these components may be carried out.

Major Components of Service Learning in Social Work Classes

Developing an ISL programme can be very challenging, as there are many different components to consider. Course development purports integrating sound pedagogical methods with experiential learning in another country, which means developing partnerships abroad. For those schools that are accredited by the US Council of Social Work Education, it also means developing courses that will help social work students meet the Council's identified competencies. Therefore, it is important to ensure academic rigor while developing service learning that is equally meaningful and beneficial to all those involved.

One of the first challenges educators encounter is identifying partners in the locations where they want to conduct service learning. While there has been research on the importance of developing good community partnerships (Jacoby and Associates, 2003), little has been written about how to form international partnerships. Much of the developing stages of any ISL programme should be spent forging contacts in order to form partnerships with an identified university and/or nongovernmental agency (NGO) within the prospective host country, if a pre-existing relationship does not already exist. This in and of itself is challenging as it takes considerable time and effort to cultivate steady, reliable connections in order to begin conversations about ISL. Once both parties reach an agreement about the worth of a partnership, developing what that partnership will look like will take even more time as the benefits must be seen as equitable by both parties.

To the extent possible, visits to NGOs, governmental officials, and universities should represent the best practices in the target country. As the faculty member organizing the visits gains more experience, s/he will be better able to identify those best practices. One reason that we believe ISL classes should be organized by individual faculty members rather than contracted out to private companies that plan study tours is that the faculty members need to take responsibility for evaluating the potential visits, determining what are the best practices, and coordinating visits with the academic portion of the class. While students will come and go, there should be a commitment on the part of the faculty member to maintain the course and the relationship between the university and the service partners over time. Relationships that are developed over the course of the ISL programme must be respected. If people have shared goals and realistic expectations, then the partnership is more likely to be genuine. The faculty member needs to take responsibility for maintaining those relationships during the time between the visits, which typically are annual. This means sharing resources throughout the year and attempting to stay in touch whether via skype, social media, and/or email. ISL projects need to ensure that they reflect the best practices within the country of origin, while continuing to adhere to the National Association of Social Work's and the International Federation of Social Workers' Codes of Ethics by providing in-depth learning experiences for all participants, and not just for the visiting students. This point should be closely tied to the respect for all partners.

Those developing partnerships with host countries need to have a sound understanding of the local community's cultural understanding of international service learning (Annette, n.d.) so they

are not applying their own ethnocentric meaning of service learning to understand the meaning of the work they are doing. There is a need to align the goals of the service learning class and local NGOs where the students will be volunteering (DiSpigno et.al., 2001 as cited in Annette, n.d). As mentioned earlier, in order to build collaboration, trust and respect, reciprocal and equitable exchanges are a must (Jacoby, 1996; Stanton, 1990). Students must come to terms with the fact that the host country is the one offering the learning experience, hence key to the service learning approach is dispersing the idea that 'we are going to help' the other or lesser individual/community (Grusky, 2000). Depending on students' prior experiences, they may or may not realize this distinction before they are in the host country. Discussion and readings such as Van Engan's (2000) paper on short-term mission trips or Richter and Norman's (2010) paper on AIDS orphan tourism can provide a context for examining these issues.

As part of a service learning experience, whether national or international, there is often an element of 'doing for' as the students in the ISL course are in positions of privilege. Many students are of the view that they are in the host country to provide services which the host country would otherwise not have; providing services for an oppressed and/or vulnerable group of people. This way of thinking can be problematic as many of the students place unrealistic value on their efforts, exaggerating their importance and, as a result, missing out on the opportunity to learn by 'doing service with' the host agency or country. Such grandiose thoughts need to be dispelled prior to arriving in the host country but need to be continually monitored during the travel portion of the class. If there is a good working relationship between the class and the NGO, then both parties can have a fruitful discussion on what are the student concerns.

When doing service learning in a country that is less developed than their country of origin or one that may have clear cultural boundaries based on the country's traditions and language, students are especially vulnerable to culture shock. In these situations, it is critical that substantial academic work be devoted to preparing students before leaving for the host country, developing class sessions that will help them contextualize and understand the host culture (Crabtree, 2008; Tonkin and Quiroga, 2004). These classes can focus on local history, politics, social welfare policies, different ethnicities within the host country, common social work practices, and local NGOs that are providing these services.

Students bring with them a range of professional and life experiences, as well as varied experiences in traveling or working outside of the US. Before leaving the US, the professor needs to encourage students to be open-minded about what they are going to observe and to stress the importance of not evaluating what they see through the 'US lens.' In other words, what works in one country may not work in another country. For example, students may want to propose 'green' options to NGOs, but these options may not be financially viable or realistic in a developing country where over half of the households lack indoor plumbing. The challenge for the instructor is to take into account the varied experiences of students while also finding ways to facilitate reflection and meaningful discussion of social justice concepts during and after the travel portion of the class. To begin with, the students should be asked to articulate their personal goals for the class, possibly in their application or in another activity, such as writing a letter to themselves before departure, regarding what they hope to achieve. They should be encouraged to review and possibly revise these goals during the course of their travels.

Designing time for reflection before, during and after the ISL experience, is extremely important. The timing of class reflections will vary according to several variables such as the intensity of a given experience and how students respond to an experience. As we have fine-tuned our ISL course, we have found that scheduled reflections should occur weekly in a 3-week class. Often there will be specific experiences that are very intense, such as a visit to an impoverished community, with victims of sex trafficking, or to a prison, which will suggest the need for a more spontaneous and focused group reflection. These may have to occur on a bus

ride or over a lunch break, given the schedule. Instructors need to realize that students also will be engaged in some small group processing with their peers. Staying informed about the content and direction of these more private reflective discussions is a challenge.

Assuming that the class members have completed the academic preparation, reflections can provide space for emotional discussion but also emphasize the learning aspect of the experiences. The first reflection usually involves allotting more time to people's emotional responses to what they are experiencing but should provide a structure for students to begin to evaluate what they are learning. Although they are graduate students, many of them may need to be given time to devote to their reactions to and their understanding of the different living and social conditions that they are observing. On the one hand, students should not romanticize poverty or other challenging social conditions that they might experience. On the other hand, they cannot allow these conditions to overwhelm them. In either case, students have to grow beyond judging what they are seeing from the perspective of a familiar US framework.

What we have found through the development of the RSL class over these past nine years is that ISL projects can and should provide opportunities for students to immerse themselves in the host country's culture. This may mean living or staying with host country families, and sharing in food, culture and traditions. While learning new ways of living and carrying out daily living activities can be stressful, it also can be an enriching experience for the students.

Regardless of the country or the experiences, there is no one uniform explanation or understanding for any given social issue. It is helpful to encourage students to develop hypotheses and then ask the same question in multiple settings and of varied people, and then compare their findings. For example, students often struggle with understanding child abandonment, or discrimination against Roma people, or attitudes toward pre- and post-Communist experiences of people in Romania. While this process of hypothesis testing is explained during the class, it often makes more sense once students are in the country. The first class reflection provides an opportunity to remind students about this practice and subsequent reflections can provide opportunities for a follow-up.

The final class reflection might occur in the country or back in the US, depending on the travel schedule and other logistical issues. In either case, there should be an emphasis on helping students think about the next steps. These next steps should include discussion of what follow-up efforts we need to address as a class. As an example, when we take photographs of children in communities and NGOs (with their permission), we agree to send copies of the photos. But, we might also have offered to send a social worker some information about a particular social intervention or to send an NGO some ideas about craft activities for their beneficiaries. This is a critical part of the university-NGO relationship. Additionally, upon return from the host country, the students participate in a final course to present their individual projects, summarize what has been learned, and hopefully, initiate the call to action.

Equally important to preparing students prior to going to another country is working with them to gain a meaningful experience while completing service learning project(s) as well as preparing them for re-entry into their home country (Crabtree, 2008). Tonkin and Quiroga (2004) found that students often find re-entry into their home country particularly trying. ISL programmes need to develop ways for students to process their experience as often they are presented with stark differences between their home country and the host country. Students may experience the same or even worse culture shock upon returning home as they did going abroad. In order to help the student readjust to their culture, while concurrently helping them accommodate the new information they gained through their service learning, students should be encouraged to expand on what they learned. To maximize the experience, students need to be guided in exploring how they can expand on what they have learned once the service learning class comes to a close. A final reflection on the experience, whether it occurs at the end of the

travels or when the students have returned home, is critical for helping students integrate their experiences, both professionally and personally.

ISL programmes need to develop effective strategies for sustained impact. This may mean joint efforts to continue to raise awareness via advocacy projects and/or fund raising. Students also may benefit from the opportunity to present what they have learned to the broader campus community. Multimedia interfaces such as Facebook allow people to keep in frequent contact with each other, so partners can continue the service learning work planning and preparation the year round. Forging lasting, meaningful relationships with programme partners needs to be a priority, as this will provide the foundation for the sustaining of a deeper understanding. Students may feel a call to action to build on the work they initiated in the host country once they return home. Indeed, students participating in service-learning experiences may be more likely to commit to future service in both the short- and the long-term at the local, state, country, or global level (Bringle and Steinberg, 2010).

Faculty teaching ISL classes have to consider several issues in addition to the usual educational concerns associated with graduate education. Some of the major issues include student fund raising, selecting students for the class, risk management, group dynamics, and balancing educational and leisure-time activities while traveling.

In addition to tuition for the academic credits, ISL classes involve the expense of travel and possibly supplies for service projects and/or a fee for a major service partner to cover the administrative costs. Fund raising can involve individual efforts to solicit donations, such as writing letters, or using electronic supports such as Facebook or Firstgiving. Sometimes classes also want to engage in group fund raising which might be a bake sale, selling t-shirts or other items, or hosting a bar fundraiser. These group activities can help with team building but also can add to the faculty workload. The faculty member needs to monitor these activities, because they represent the class. Moreover, someone needs to manage the funds, ensure equity, and provide supports for logistical matters. The faculty member also needs to decide how much time to devote to supporting student fund raising.

The number of students who can enroll in an ISL class may need to be less than a typical class for pragmatic reasons. For example, if in-country transportation needs to be a small bus or van, then the number of seats on the bus may pose a restriction. On the other hand, some schools need to require a minimum number of students to offer a class and this number may actually present challenges for the instructor. ISL classes can be very popular and often there are more applicants than slots. Reading and evaluating applications, including essays about the student's learning goals for the class, interviewing applicants, and collecting references all are very time-consuming. Some applicants immediately stand out as good potential class members while many others fall in the gray area. Should you favour students who already have considerable international or service experience, or should you select students who want to gain such experience? What about age and gender considerations in forming a team? We do not really have the answers to these questions, but can say from experience that a good mix of people usually makes for a richer learning experience. On the other hand, if a given student is quite different from the others, say in terms of age, she or he might have difficulty fitting in, especially with regard to leisure-time activities.

Risk management is an ongoing concern in universities, especially when educational activities take students off the campus, as in the case of internships. Obviously, travel to other countries adds another layer of concerns. Faculty offering such courses need to think through what rules they will put in place to keep students safe while still respecting the fact that they are adults and have had varying levels of international travel experience. All decisions regarding the in-country experiences, ranging from what cities to visit, to service opportunities, to choices of transportation or lodging need to take into account issues related to risk.

ISL classes also differ from many graduate-level courses in that group dynamics come into play. International travel and service are emotionally and physically draining and, from time to time, everyone will need some extra support or to have some down time. The reflections are one venue for helping students deal with individual or group responses to the experience. The instructor needs to find the delicate balance between using group time to deal with these issues versus keeping in mind that this is an academic course. The instructor also needs to have an open door policy whereby students can have personal meetings to talk privately about their emotional and learning challenges. It is essential that the student co-leader, if one exists, and the professor have a good working relationship as the co-leader may be in a strategic position to identify individual or group issues.

It is all too easy for students and others to see an ISL class as a vacation or a trip rather than a class. Nonetheless, in planning the in-country experience, the instructor needs to find a good balance between academic and service activities, also allowing students free time for exploring the host country on their own or as a group. This further allows students to take in other cultural experiences that they might not otherwise experience through the ISL course. If the professor knows the country well, s/he can suggest activities when students have free time, such as a visit to a park or museum. As a general rule, we advise that touring activities involving the entire class be simple and inexpensive.

The Case of the Romanian Service Learning (RSL) Class

The RSL class has worked most closely with two organizations in Romania, Habitat for Humanity and Romanian Children's Relief. The relationships with these organizations happened serendipitously. An advisee of the professor who developed the RSL course wanted to develop a class specific to graduate social work students around Habitat for Humanity's Global Village programme. The Global Village component of Habitat in Romania turned out to be a good fit, because of their ability to host a class every year. Additionally the programme had a history of working with child welfare issues specific to Romania. Meanwhile, the professor organizing the RSL course learned about an NGO, Romanian Children's Relief, that was started by someone in the US and close to her university, making collaborations easier as it was in our home country.

Both Habitat for Humanity Romania and Romanian Children's Relief have a long history of working with and hosting service visits by foreign visitors, which once again helped when developing the course. What this meant for us is that there was a pre-existing infrastructure designed to deal with issues relating to foreign visitors; however, we had to work very closely to develop an actual partnership whereby we were identifying mutually beneficial goals. The benefit from these organizations having already developed policies and procedures for such visits and having staff members with responsibilities for working with volunteers in terms of issues related to logistics, safety, and the like, should not be underestimated. Since they do not typically host a visit by graduate students, however, we needed to supplement the service project with educational material in order to assure that the course was meeting the educational requirements of the MSW (Master of Social Work) curriculum. Academic preparation for the RSL class in the US involves studying poverty and housing, the history of child welfare under the Communist regime, women's issues such as domestic violence, and human trafficking, and then framing the topics in terms of post-Communism and accession to the European Union. When Habitat for Humanity's Europe / Central Asia offices were in Budapest, we also met with their representatives to supplement our academic preparation and provide an up-to-date macro context for our service.

Over the years, our service partnership with Habitat for Humanity and Romanian Children's Relief has strengthened. We have developed a good fit between the needs of each respective NGO and what we as visitors have to offer as well as what we can learn from our hosts. After nine years, we now feel as if there exists a long-term relationship with open communication and

flexibility between the partners. At the same time, we continue to work collaboratively between in-country visits as we have developed some joint projects and shared resources.

In recent years, Habitat for Humanity Romania has less need for teams to build housing so we work together in other ways. We still visit their projects in two cities, but we also support them by sharing some of our connections. For instance, one of Habitat for Humanities' staff members is responsible for building Roma housing and our faculty member provides him with contacts at Roma NGOs in Budapest and Romania and invites him to visit these NGOs with us. In this way, we continue to learn about the latest advances for Habitat programming, while providing needed connections to our hosts. Meanwhile, our relationship with Romanian Children's Relief also has changed. Students have always spent time working with some of the children who the NGO supports. More recently, depending on the makeup of the class, we have been able to offer a workshop of interest to their social work staff which helps them with their need for continuing education, demonstrating the importance of reciprocal benefits for both partners. We have, for example, provided training on case management techniques, advocacy in sexual assault cases, and child behaviour management. In addition to these service projects, students shadow hospital or child welfare social workers or the physical therapist, depending on the students' interests. This allows us to better understand current practices with children who have been removed from their families or who have been left orphaned. In the RSL class, students learn about such things as service provision with limited resources, innovative ways to use agency space for multiple purposes, sustainable methods of community organization, non-profit management and administration skills, and strategies for engaging clients of different cultures.

In addition to these ongoing service relationships, we also have smaller service projects which change from year to year and, as mentioned above, vary according to the needs of the NGOs and what we have to offer as a class. We have been able to forge these new relationships and create smaller projects because of the connections that we have developed over the past nine years. It has taken time and a considerable amount of learning about the needs of our host country and sharing with them our needs. Additionally, over time we have been able to gain a better understanding of what each of us has to offer and how we can build on our respective strengths so that both parties are learning new perspectives and models of delivering services. Most importantly, we have built trust between our hosts which has been paramount to the RSL course's success.

One popular service project involves visiting a community-based mental health programme that provides a range of activities for their beneficiaries. In some years we have led musical, dance, or craft activities, which provides a great opportunity for students to enter the lives of both staff and beneficiaries. This visit also provides important learning, as the clinic has a strong consumer-led component, encouraging client voice and empowerment. Students are able to witness this important model and potentially integrate it into their own practice back home. As another example, we often visit a public nursing home. In one year, a student who specialized in work with older adults suggested that we could offer hand massages for the female residents. This was an unusual activity—we combined hand massages with music, and the residents loved it. While at first it seemed out-of-the-ordinary to them, the women quickly were rolling up their sleeves and asking for their massages. It offered another way to communicate with residents and provides students with the opportunity to learn alternative intervention methods that are often not taught in social work schools but are supported by the literature (Remington, 2002). While these projects are very small examples of service, they do offer ways for students and our hosts to get to know each other. Obviously, we do not undertake any of these projects unless we have a clear understanding with our NGO partner. Again, such projects are best developed when there is a longstanding relationship between the partners.

In Romania, students are offered the chance to engage in home stays with the foster parents

at Romanian Children's Relief. The students sleep and eat in the foster parents' home, getting to know their lifestyle and meeting the children for whom they care. Students may socialize with NGO staff possibly going for bowling, out to lunch, folk dancing, or hiking. Furthermore, communal experiences alongside Romanians, such as the Habitat for Humanity build, allow for a feeling of equality and companionship between the students and those living in the host country. For example, in describing his Habitat for Humanity experience, one student stated, "One lesson from that experience that continues to stand out for me is the value of manual labour, and how it can transcend social, political, and cultural boundaries. Despite the large gaps between us and our Romanian colleagues, we found common ground in the labour we performed together. Our experience in Beius speaks of larger issues of self-sufficiency, and how shared, goal-directed labour can lead to immensely positive outcomes." During all of these interactions, it is important that the leader provide continual guidance to the students on cultural competence and the importance of not exploiting or offending the hosts. Service learning creates a plethora of teachable moments (Grusky, 2000), as students are often forced to confront differing governmental structures, overwhelming poverty and gross inequalities within the host country, just to name a few examples (Kiely, 2004; Tonkin and Quiroga, 2004).

In the RSL class, one of our rest and relaxation activities often involves a visit to a small village in a beautiful setting. We have a traditional lunch on the porch of an inn and then have time to explore the village. The village is not on the typical tourist itinerary and allows students to experience a different part of the country. More elaborate rest and relaxation activities that involve travel to a major tourist destination can be attractive but one has to balance the cost in terms of money and time versus the experience in terms of providing a deeper understanding of the country. These experiences also allow for students to reflect on the local customs and norms of their host country allowing them further insight into human behaviours in the local environment.

Following the RSL class, students have felt compelled to contribute in various ways to the NGOs. Students have organized fund raising initiatives that included making knitted items, greeting cards, jewelry, and matted photos to sell with all proceeds donated to Romanian Children's Relief. One student encouraged her wedding guests to donate to the organization in lieu of wedding favours and another student solicited donations from church groups. Many students participated in reporting back to the social work community, particularly at the school the students attended. This included poster presentations, sharing Romanian foods in an international cooking celebration, and presenting their experiences to other students who are considering attending the course in the future. These fund raising and reporting back activities provide an opportunity for students to synthesize what they have learned from the ISL trip, stay involved with the host country in some way, and allows for other students and faculty and the university to learn from the ISL trip as well.

This paper has covered what we believe are the best practices in offering rigorous and educationally challenging ISL courses. Obviously, the class has changed over the past nine years in response to previous experiences, new possibilities, and changing political, social, and economic trends. Instructors of ISL courses need to strive for flexibility while traveling in-country and in planning the next year's course syllabus and itinerary. As demonstrated though our class example, almost every encounter is a teachable moment when considered in an ISL context. Through their experiences abroad students learn more about global issues, social justice and human rights, as well as social development and the best practices in an international context. When done well, students will complete the class with an increased familiarity with new models of practice, a different sense of themselves as citizens of their country of origin, and a newfound sense of civic responsibility in a larger social context.

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