Developing Leadership Through International Service-Learning

Service-Learning and Leadership: What Research Is Telling Us

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For the past three years, I have been directing a study, funded by the Ford Foundation, of international service-learning as represented over a period of more than twenty years by its principal practitioner the International Partnership for Service-Learning and Leadership (IPSL). The Partnership operates fifteen undergraduate programs in a dozen countries, serving around 120 students a year, most of them American, and also runs additional special programs for students from around the world.

International service-learning intersects with two well documented fields: (1) domestic or local service-learning, in which students work in their local communities (Driscoll and others 2000; Eyler, Giles, Stenson & Gray; Billig & Eyler 2003), and (2) study abroad, in which students study in a different cultural context from the one that they are used to (Burn, Carlson and others; Chao). International service-learning resembles local service-learning in many respects, but it tends to be more intensive; and it resembles study abroad, but it tends to involve a deeper immersion in the host culture. It also involves an important leadership component: students are encouraged to reflect on their assignments and find ways of putting their own learning and expertise at the disposal of their service agencies. They are also encouraged to study patterns and examples of leadership in their host countries, crossing cultural lines and assumptions in order to do so.

Among the most significant arguments for the promotion of service-learning contained in the recommendations of the 1998 Wingspread conference on international service-learning that set a direction for the work of the Partnership in recent years (text in Berry & Chisholm 1999) was the advancement of "the common purpose of building a new generation of leaders through service-learning." This was the first explicit mention in the context of the Partnership of a principle that had been implicit in its work for a number of years. Not only was service-learning dedicated to the principle of service to the community, but increasingly it was seen as a means of community empowerment by encouraging community members to take charge of their lives for the common good, and

by inculcating such principles also in the service-learners themselves. Service-learning, it was felt, was inevitably linked with the development of collective leadership and leadership for change. Here, its ideas intersected with the civic engagement movement (Ehrlich 2000). It was the hope and desire of educators engaged in service-learning that their charges play an active role in the life of the community, not only as followers but also as leaders.

Our research on the Partnership covered four topics:

> 1. A demographic study of IPSL students over a 10-15-year period.

> 2. A study of student response to IPSL programs, qualitative in nature.

> 3. A study of the effects of IPSL students on agencies and their clients – also qualitative in nature and covering two sites, Scotland and Jamaica.

> 4. A series of three site visits to institutions in England, Jamaica, and the Philippines to assess the impact of the Partnership on the development of service-learning programs at those institutions.

(Our report will be published this month. An article by Tonkin and Quiroga on the student study will appear in the journal *Frontiers,* also this month.)

As a piece of research, the study will, we believe, prove extremely useful to the field, but in no sense is it definitive. Indeed, we prefer to see it as simply a first step in a far more comprehensive research agenda. The following comments are intended to present some of our principal findings (shorn of the supporting argument contained in our full report) in the area of leadership. Let us begin with the demographic study, so that we have a sense of context.

The Demographic Survey

The Partnership operates, or has operated, undergraduate programs at locations in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, and Europe, and at two locations in the United States. Over the past fifteen years, some 2000 students have participated in these programs, almost all of them from the United States, with the largest numbers going to Ecuador, England, France, Jamaica, and Mexico. About half of these students are in their third year of college. They come from all parts of the US and several foreign countries.

Female students account for 80.08% of the total – a higher proportion than in study-abroad programs generally and a particularly high proportion for destinations outside Europe. The students are getting younger: the average age of undergraduates participating in Partnership programs has fallen from 21.83 in the early 1990s to 20.69 today. Language, area, and cultural studies constitutes the most popular group of majors, but there are significant numbers of majors in psychology and the cognitive sciences, and in biology and life sciences.

Most Partnership students come from small institutions. Although research universities account for 54.8% of undergraduates from the United States studying abroad, only 35.63% of Partnership students come from such institutions. Most (61.69%) come from small colleges and other primarily undergraduate institutions (nationally, these account for only 40.8% of undergraduates studying abroad). The average Partnership student, then, is female, approaching her 21st birthday, and perhaps studying in Latin America. She probably comes from a liberal-arts college and is in her third year of study.

The Student Study

Our student study involved a series of interviews and focus meetings, organized by four researchers collectively and singly, with seventeen alumni of the program, whose experience ranged over some fifteen years and covered perhaps a half of our sites. The information gathered from this group of seventeen was rich and complex. Qualitative research works best, by definition, where results are not readily quantifiable. Conclusions drawn from qualitative research are accordingly tentative; indeed, reducing qualitative research to a list of neat conclusions tends to compromise its integrity (Glesne 1998). So I present the following observations with a lively sense of their tentativeness.

The study suggested that international service-learning, while it shares some characteristics with study abroad, is generally a more radical educational experience likely to have a long-term impact on those who pass through it. Partnership students experience culture shock as they move into the Partnership experience (as one might expect, particularly given the fact that they are plunged into a new culture not as licensed observers from outside but as full participants), but they display a high level of adaptability to a new culture and tend to be highly motivated, and eager to test theory against practice and practice against theory. The pedagogy of reflection is particularly important to Partnership students and they display optimism and a positive attitude; these are significant factors which help foster success in the international service-learning experience. We were unable to establish whether this strongly independent and adaptive spirit was a consequence of the Partnership experience or a cause. Does international service-learning, involving, as it does, a radical engagement with the host society – indeed with the toughest of environments, such as the slums of Calcutta or the shanty towns of Manila or the squatters' settlements of Guadalajara – *attract* a particularly adaptable and adventurous type of student, or does it *create* such students?

Our study did find that Partnership students undergo transformative intellectual and moral development and that they are remarkably comfortable with ambiguity and necessarily adaptable to the environment and culture (though this does not ease their re-entry to American society, which many find extremely painful). One of our findings stressed the fact that "Partnership students are deeply engaged with the host society." As they involve themselves in the host culture, their views shift from a task orientation to a people orientation and they become actively engaged in the lives of those they work with. Crucially important in this process is a gradual reconceptualization of the nature of

service itself: the concept of service that the Partnership embraces is one of self-help and participation. The goal is to help others help themselves, to build sustainable environments, and to take charge of their lives.

We found, too, that Partnership students develop a pluralistic world view and what our researchers called a "civic-minded personality." They gain a sense of interconnectedness with the world and a nuanced and complex view of America. Finally, and most importantly, the researchers told us that "Partnership students display qualities of leadership."

Margaret Pusch, one of the researchers who worked with the students in the student study, had this to say about the students:

> They clearly exhibited the potential for leadership roles in professional and community work and organizations.... It is clear that service-learning as practiced by the Partnership in a 'foreign' culture context has a significant impact on the lives of its students in terms of personal and professional development and certainly in terms of intercultural competence and learning. While their commitment to service may be what draws them into the program in the beginning, they clearly become more capable of working with a diverse clientele and delivering service under less than ideal conditions during the program. This capability is useful in many situations, both domestic and international, and we have every reason to believe that they have acquired not only intercultural and organizational skills but the ability to be leaders in whatever they choose to do.

Our observations confirm that the Partnership experience develops in students not only an adaptability and resourcefulness, but also ways of looking at old problems with fresh eyes, and recontextualizing familiar issues in the light of broader experience. Such characteristics are fundamental to leadership.

The Agency Study

The agency study was conducted, again by interviews and focus groups, in two locations: Glasgow, Scotland, and Kingston, Jamaica. Some seventeen specific conclusions were contained in the final version of the report, dealing with various aspects of the interactions of students with agencies and their clients. Students displayed a "high degree of commitment," higher than that of run-of-the-mill volunteers, and they were "particularly useful to agencies because they [brought] special skills and experiences." Here, too, students were perceived as displaying "self-assurance and optimism" and they were noted for building "close relationships with service-users," thereby overcoming "skepticism about the value of volunteers." Because of their willingness to participate fully in the lives of the agencies, students had "a long-term effect on agencies and [created] close ties that [were] hard to break.

The Institution Study

The institution study was carried out, under my own direction, at three locations,: Quezon City in the Philippines, Kingston, Jamaica, and London, England. It dealt at considerable length with the role of leadership in innovation (Kanter 1983, Rogers 1995) but here in a very different context, since the study was concerned particularly with the process of institutional change in relation to the acceptance and adoption of the pedagogies and practices of service-learning (Bringle & Hatcher 2000). The report noted, for example, that

> The adoption of service-learning by a given institution works best when certain key ingredients are in place:
> - The institution has a longstanding interest in civic engagement.
> - Service-learning is supported by well-established central coordinating mechanisms (and budgetary commitment) and also diffused among faculty and students.
> - The idea of community service is supported by public policy at the national level and institutions are expected to engage with the community.
> - Community service is part of the larger national culture.
> - The institution has strong leadership.
> - The philosophy of service-learning is presented coherently and well understood.

The report goes on to note that "strong leadership has been a fundamental ingredient of success in maintaining and expanding service-learning at the institutions studied. The most effective leaders are those who lead through structural change – by putting the right administrative structures in place."

The report was also concerned with the collective leadership exercised by the Partnership in introducing institutions to service-learning – a history of remarkable successes in many locations. The report noted that "the Partnership has had a decisive influence when its perhaps deeper and more comprehensive philosophy has given shape and direction to activities already in place, giving them a sense of purpose and coherence," in other words, in an environment where civic-engagement and community involvement were already regarded as appropriate institutional activities. It noted that "Colleges and universities less responsive to the presence of the Partnership tend to be larger institutions in industrialized countries with a less firm tradition of community involvement by institutions or individuals but with a stronger received sense of traditional academic procedures and modes of pedagogy." By contrast, "The Partnership has been most successful where its philosophy and pedagogy have addressed a specific problem or institutional opportunity, and where institutional leaders have been seeking new approaches to old problems. Where the arrival of the Partnership has coincided with new leadership, the results have in some cases proved remarkably impressive."

Leadership and Service-Learning

In 2003, the International Partnership for Service-Learning became the International Partnership for Service-Learning and Leadership. The change in title, approved by an

enthusiastic board, came about only after a good deal of soul-searching. Americans, belonging to a nation which, some would say, has more answers looking for questions than it has questions looking for answers, and which, under the guise of leadership of the free world has contributed in about equal parts to its progress and its confusion, may be the worst people to lay claim to the truth about how to lead.

But it is precisely because of the American preoccupation with leadership that the Partnership should be concerned with it, by offering an alternative to the go-it-alone, culturally disengaged style of leadership. Leadership for what, we may ask? And leadership of whom? Partnership board member Adel Safty, in his recent book on leadership and democracy (Safty 2004), explains that leadership is essential to the building of democratic and participatory institutions:

> Democratic governance manages better than other alternatives to guarantee individual liberties and humanitarian equality ... there is a positive correlation between democratic governance and human development ... democratic governance within nations helps produce a democratic culture *between* nations that promotes peace and development... [Therefore] to advance and promote the principles underlying these propositions, there is a need for leadership in the public and private sectors, in governmental and nongovernmental organizations, in national and international institutions, in the academy, and in citizen movements.

But while "leadership is a crucial factor of change and empowerment necessary to bring about the emergence and consolidation of democracy... leadership must, or at least ought to be, positively related to the higher achievements of the human spirit for the benefit of humanity. Leadership ought to be normatively apprehended as a set of values that promote human development... Value leadership ... necessarily promotes democracy."

Such a recognition caused Linda Chisholm to raise many questions about leadership as the team set about its work in the Partnership's student study. Her vision of leadership included observation of leaders and how they "recognized a problem, conceived of ways of addressing it, were able to communicate a vision to others, built community support, and developed organizational structures to sustain their efforts." Margaret Pusch suggested, in her contribution to our research, that many of the students who participated in the student study "exhibited the ability to take charge of their own experience, find ways to fit into the agencies they served, and develop patterns of service that demonstrated leadership qualities," and Diego Quiroga pointed out that the process of coming to understand how agencies operated developed "leadership and initiative" in the students and "forced them to be more organized." Some tried to introduce changes and reforms in their agencies, and discovered that the process required "not just good ideas but also negotiating skills in a different culture."

Leadership manifests itself in the Partnership context above all in the capability of working across cultures. Implied in such leadership is an ability to mediate between cultures, finding values or ideas in one culture that are transferable to another, and working with others to apply them effectively -- but doing so in a spirit of reciprocity and tolerance. Chisholm and Berry (2002), in their book on study abroad, write of acquiring

the skills to "work out a negotiated settlement so that everyone benefits." The Partnership experience develops in the students not only an adaptability and resourcefulness, but also ways of looking at old problems with fresh eyes, and recontextualizing familiar issues in the light of broader experience. The goal in adding leadership education to the Partnership's mission is to make explicit certain implicit characteristics of the Partnership experience.

Recently we asked fourteen members of the Partnership board and administration to write a brief and spontaneous answer to the question, "What do we mean by leadership in the context of service-learning?" One respondent, a member of the staff, referred to the notion of "servant-leadership," "the concept that a leader who has experienced service-learning will know how to *empower* others to engage in efforts to improve the world and fully discover and use their own talents in doing so." Leadership, in other words, implies the discovery of talents in others and empowering them to apply them. The point goes back to an observation that Diego Quiroga, one of our researchers, makes about the distinction between service-learning and other types of "charitable" activities. His interviewees, he explained, told him that "their service helped them understand the difference between help on the one hand and social development on the other.... The combination of service and learning allowed them to contextualize good service as related to development and empowerment." Help, charity, the dispensing of largesse, is essentially static: self-help is dynamic and stimulates positive change.

An Asian board member expressed similar sentiments about empowerment when he suggested that leadership is a "process of facilitating, not indoctrination" that involves "understanding the context and approach," and a European board member added that the Partnership should seek "to encourage and promote a style of leadership which is collaborative and which empowers individuals and communities to envision and realize new futures."

What this implies, an American board member remarked, is "understanding the cultural dimensions of leadership: that direct confrontation, individual recognition, etc. may be seen as elements of leadership in one context, whereas triangulation, face-giving, etc. show a mature awareness of *context* that defines leadership in other cultures." This view goes beyond those already recorded because it suggests that styles of leadership, while they should all demonstrate a sensitivity to cultural difference and a spirit of empowerment, vary from culture to culture: leadership is not just an awareness of cultural difference and a sensitivity to it, but also a willingness to work differently in different contexts, where the cultural norms are different.

This flexibility of approach, remarked another board member, is facilitated by international service of the kind offered by the Partnership. Certain qualities of effective leadership are developed particularly well in an international, cross-cultural setting: "1. understanding contexts, 2. identifying problems/opportunities, 3. conveying a view of reality to others, 4. developing group decisions, reaching consensus and shared goals, 5. envisioning change, 6. developing action plans, 7. recognizing resources, 8. mobilizing resources." Another board member added to this list by stressing "self-confidence as a

result of [a] wider cultural world view" that comes with living in another country, coupled with the "task orientation" and "goal orientation" that comes with service. An additional quality of such service, according to another board member, is "teaching by doing," and thus serving as an example to others.

In the practical terms of the Partnership experience, another board member suggested, "Leadership occurs on several levels – directing agencies and taking personal responsibility for one's contributions. In both, leadership is about accountability, commitment, service to clients, and the ability to comprehend the context for the service and the flexibility and capability to direct its delivery in an appropriate manner." She added "three important phrases:" "cognitive flexibility, compassion, behavioral capability." A staff member suggested that the Partnership experience helps build leaders because they are able to recognize "problems in community, nation or world," to "have a vision or goal for a better society," and to "know how to work with a community to develop and realize the mission." These qualities create "a cascade effect, so more and more people share the vision and will work towards the goal."

What is striking about most of these definitions is that they stress cooperation, self-effacement, negotiating skills – and empowerment. While a few members of the group present a vision of the leader as somehow fundamentally different and apart from the community (the Henry V model), most stress the way in which the leader is a part of the community, and often not a particularly visible part. Furthermore, nobody suggests that leadership is *simply* self-sacrifice, or indeed self-sacrifice at all. Words like "help" or "charity" are entirely absent from the definitions.

At about the same time as we polled the Partnership board on definitions of leadership, a working group composed of members of the board, adapting a definition of leadership used by the Global Leadership Forum, the extension of the UN Leadership Conference of the 1990s, singled out the following qualities as defining the Partnership's idea of leadership:

- ethical and humane governance
- social responsibility
- multilateral and multicultural cooperation for capacity building and human development.

"Leadership is the shared vision for a better society," the working group declared. It is also a process "that is genuinely democratic, relational, and interactive, that serves the people and promotes responsible citizenship and engagement in a globally interdependent world."

While such concepts might underpin the Partnership's approach to leadership, the major question confronting the organization is operationalizing grand concepts in the context of an approach to service that has always stressed reciprocity and self-effacement. All too often, discussions of leadership seek to impose external values on the internal workings of the human psyche: the Partnership has a history of avoiding such impositions in favor

of a process of self-discovery, in which values are teased out of practice. Can these grand concepts be made to emerge from the process of service itself? One reality favoring such an emergence is the Partnership's interest in the utility and effectiveness of the service it delivers: the Partnership's pedagogy does indeed see agencies as extensions of classrooms, but it also sees classrooms as extensions of agencies and seeks to blend the two in a reciprocity whose outcomes should be both student learning and social utility.

It is clear that the Partnership is embarked on a course of action that will emphasize leadership and its development, with a view to embedding it both in the instruction that students receive and in the action/reflection process that accompanies such instruction. Our researches indicate that the philosophy of leadership is embedded in our very principles, but that it is combined with a philosophy of humility and service, and an understanding that these two philosophies are not only not in conflict but actually reciprocally reinforcing.

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