

## What's Not in the Syllabus: Faculty Transformation, Role Modeling and Role Conflict in Immersion Service-Learning Courses

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Immersion service-learning courses provide increased opportunities for faculty and students to experience the transformational effects of service-learning. This paper focuses on the experiences of faculty and the responses of students who took part in several immersion service-learning courses taught between 2005 and 2007 during the Winter term at Elon University in North Carolina. Four major themes were identified as being significant in these immersion service-learning courses: 1) sharing living space impacts the student-faculty relationship, 2) immersion faculty leaders are placed in multiple roles with multiple opportunities for role modeling, 3) immersion faculty experience their own transformative learning, which often further complicates their roles as leaders, and 4) immersion faculty leaders often experience role conflict in maintaining leadership roles and assessing student work in immersion courses. We conclude that while the role conflicts must be negotiated faculty modeling service behavior may have stronger lessons for students and their future civic engagement than other on-campus service learning courses.

Immersion service-learning describes courses where students and faculty participate together in a service project for an extended period of time, working together, living together and learning together. This experience generally takes place in a location apart from the usual teaching site, such as another country, state, or community. Immersion in a community over a period of time provides a depth of experience that one might not otherwise have in more traditional service-learning courses where the student works a number of hours at the site and then goes home or back to the classroom. Most of the service-learning experiences represented in the literature describe these more traditional courses. This research suggests positive effects on students' personal and social development, moral development, cultural understanding, leadership, and communication skills (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001; Moely, McFarland, Miron, Mercer, & Ilustre, 2002). Immersion service learning provides opportunities for more critical thinking and questioning as the student lives with the experience day and night. Moreover, it carries with it unique roles, responsibilities, and challenges for the faculty leader.

Little attention has been given to the experience of faculty teaching service learning courses (Bulot & Johnson, 2006; Gelmon, Holland, Driscoll, Spring, & Kerrigan, 2001). Yet, the impact of service-learning on faculty and their teaching is an integral factor in the outcome of student engaged learning. Faculty who choose to teach immersion service-learning courses commit to extensive time and effort in order to provide transformative learning experiences and diverse challenges for their students. The satisfaction the faculty leaders gain from observing the transformation that takes place in the students when they are engaged in community work is an important motivating factor for using service-learning in their courses (Abes,

Jackson, & Jones, 2002; Holland, 1999). The unanticipated questions and ideas that arise while serving in the community have been cited as having the potential to transform the roles of faculty and students (Baldwin, Buchanan, & Rudisill, 2007; Berry, 1990; Gelmon et al., 2001; Kiely, 2004; Kraft, 2002). During immersion service-learning, the intensity of the time faculty and students spend together in service to others creates more opportunities for enhanced transformation and satisfaction, while presenting its own set of challenges.

Immersion service learning experiences put faculty leaders into a variety of new roles, many of which are quite different from that of a usual classroom teaching experience. Typical classroom teacher roles in service learning courses include mentor, placement coordinator, community liaison, discussion and reflection facilitator, troubleshooter, evaluator, and advisor. In the immersion service learning experience, the roles multiply to include those listed above, along with the added roles of co-worker, learning partner, substitute parent, and a human being with emotions, flaws, and imperfections.

As faculty, we are accustomed to modeling for our students how to approach and analyze situations, how to reflect on what we read and what we experience, and how to synthesize information. In immersion experiences, the faculty leader is not only leading the course, but also dealing with his or her personal responses to those experiences. This paper focuses on immersion faculty leaders who were exposed to many potentially transformative moments, such as working alongside families in Mississippi who had lost everything in a flood, handing out food and supplies to homeless families in Washington DC, visiting the site of a massacre of innocent minorities in Guatemala, or meeting a family surviving on food and trash from the

Guatemala City Dump. It is impossible not to be personally affected by these realities, regardless of one's role as a leader. Modeling one's own transformative learning and personal growth can be an important contribution to the students' enhanced learning. Yet, this also presents some complications for the faculty as they try to balance their personal needs against the many responsibilities of leading the course.

### Methodology

This research began as a discussion between the two authors when we returned from our own immersion service-learning experiences. We found that we shared many of the same benefits and struggles from our immersion experiences; together, we wondered if our reactions to the immersion experiences were unique, or if they were typical responses to immersion service learning courses. To more closely examine the impact of immersion service-learning on the faculty leaders and students, the authors of this paper interviewed faculty leaders and students who had participated in immersion service learning courses taught during the winter term at Elon University between 2005 and 2007. Elon University is a mid-sized, private university located in North Carolina. Service-learning and civic engagement activities at Elon are highly supported academic and co-curricular programs that take place in a variety of settings. This study focused on experiences that took place through study abroad and domestic travel outside of the local university community.

Because our research was exploratory, we chose to conduct informal interviews with the faculty leaders using a semi-standardized interview guide based on our own observations but allowed interviewees to relate their experiences and expand on those that seemed most important to them. We conducted focus groups with the students using a similar semi-standardized interview guide that was adapted to the student's experiences. The focus groups were led by impartial facilitators unrelated to the courses being examined. Most of the faculty leaders in this study, including the authors, had taught these courses multiple times, thus giving their answers depth of experience. The open-ended questions were developed to examine how the faculty leaders handled their experiences living and working alongside students for extended periods of time, how they managed their relationships with their students, and, given the extended time they spent together, the unique experiences or challenges faculty leaders might have had in maintaining leadership roles and assessing student work. We asked the students to respond to questions about their learning experiences, the types of assignments and assessment in their course, and their relationships with their faculty leaders.

Using grounded theory as a basis for analysis, the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and read for emergent themes and concepts (Berg, 2007). Arising from the data were four major themes that were significant in these immersion service-learning courses: (a) sharing living space impacts the student-faculty relationship, (b) immersion faculty leaders are placed in multiple roles with multiple opportunities for role modeling, (c) immersion faculty experience their own transformative learning, which often further complicates their roles as leaders, and (d) immersion faculty leaders often experience role conflict in maintaining leadership roles and assessing student work in immersion courses.

### Sharing Living Space and the Student-Faculty Relationship

"Maybe it's seeing them in their p.j.'s that really does it." This quote from a student demonstrates the first theme that arose from the interviews: sharing living space impacted the student-faculty relationship. Living together for this period of time gave students and faculty opportunities to see each other live out the routines of daily life, including the common range of emotions that come with the frustrations and joys of everyday life. Both the students and the leaders of all the courses described the faculty-student relationships as crucial to the success of the course experiences. Students began to see instructors as human beings, something they may not consider in the classroom. All of the course leaders experienced an increased ability for communication and understanding between themselves and students. One faculty leader explained the special connection he had with these students: "... you develop trust, they know you genuinely care about their well-being. Now, they come tell me about their lives—unlike [my] having to beg other students to come to office hours."

Sharing living space with those other than family is something college students may be more immediately comfortable with than faculty. For example, where bath and eating facilities were shared, one faculty leader got up earlier than the students each day to shower privately and make a solo trip to the coffee shop to find some personal "down" time. Halfway through the course, a student asked if she could go along to the coffee shop. Before long, there were several students on that morning outing. While the personal down time for the faculty leader was lost, the value of the leisure time spent with students contributed to the relationship building.

Spending so much time together allowed the students to identify the humanness in their faculty leaders and interpret emotions that sometimes led to feelings of vulnerability for the leaders. For example, one student told us that “[the faculty leader] was transparent, she missed her family.” Here, in a situation when the faculty leader is typically giving support to students who are homesick and missing their loved ones, the students saw their leader dealing with the same kinds of emotions. “I (the faculty leader) tried to not let it show that I was missing my family so much; but at the same time, I wanted my students to know that it was all right to be here, do the work and feel good about it, all while missing your loved ones and wanting to go home.”

Living and working together also allowed students to see more flaws in the faculty leaders. The irony in this is that while the students seemed to appreciate and even request that their faculty leaders be “real” in their interactions with them, they were quick to criticize when faculty leaders were tired or irritable and might behave in ways the students would consider out of character. As one faculty leader put it after being criticized for making an off-color comment around her students, “The real me may sometimes seem inconsistent with the me I present in class; it’s like we’re not allowed to be human.” Another faculty leader said the students were able to see her “goofy and silly” sides, and the “ugly” side, typically shown if they woke her too early. The faculty leader noted the value of these interactions as integral to the cohesion of the group. “We would get frustrated with each other and take care of each other. I never connected with students [before] the way I connected with those students.”

Some faculty leaders sought out time for themselves to reflect, recharge, or to meet with other faculty leaders and process some of the challenges of leading the course. One faculty leader said, “Sometimes I didn’t handle myself well because I was so tired and emotionally drained.” In this course, faculty leaders said they walked off by themselves to process the events together rather than with students. Leaders from the Guatemala course also noted the importance of time together away from the students to debrief after specific events, plan future outings and process activities, discuss student personal issues, and to just have time to vent. “We would try to go out - just the three of us - and have a glass of wine in the evenings. We never invited the students to go along, and they seemed to understand the boundary that was there.”

Despite the challenges that were presented by living together, the majority of the faculty and students valued the experience of living together as they reflected on their immersion experiences. These relationships, while often strained, intense, and short-

lived, seemed to have a large influence on one’s description of the course.

#### Multiple Faculty Roles and Role Modeling

Regardless of how intense the immersion experience is, or how close the student-faculty relationships are, the course leaders have a responsibility to facilitate the learning process and maintain a level of stability and assurance for students. The partnerships they developed with the students created complications for leadership. The students we interviewed also confirmed this conflict. Several faculty leaders reported that they sometimes felt like they had to take on a parental role. One said she lost her temper, yelled at the students, and felt the stress any parent would feel in trying to keep the students safe at the worksite. Several faculty leaders also reported growing tired of having to serve as the disciplinarian. One of the faculty leaders believed he had prepared his students to be independent and work hard but was surprised and somewhat irritated when they didn’t always listen. He found himself repeating more often than he wished, “When I say go—you go, don’t argue.” Because of the cultural differences in Guatemala, students were told repeatedly to dress more conservatively than they were accustomed to dressing, especially when they planned to go out at night. “I felt like the students’ mom, telling them they couldn’t leave the hotel unless they were dressed appropriately,” one course leader shared. As faculty leaders began to see students as partners in the experience, they often expected the students would also act more like responsible adults. Unfortunately, the students didn’t always respond accordingly.

Taking students outside the local campus area can bring unexpected challenges and safety concerns. Even though students and faculty leaders built a partnership, students expected faculty leaders to provide stability and assurance. Safety was a major concern for all faculty leaders in these immersion courses. For example, when the D.C. group became lost, on foot, in a dangerous part of town, the faculty leader had to demonstrate calm and reassurance as they re-read maps and asked strangers for directions.

A pivotal part of the Guatemala course is a visit to the Guatemala City Dump, where families survive on food and recycled goods from the dump. During the 2006 tour of the dump, the group’s bus driver was robbed at gunpoint. As one of the course leaders recalled,

We chose not to tell the students immediately what had happened, because we didn’t want to alarm them. Later, when we returned safely to our hotel, we decided they had a right to know. I had a hard time with this, because my main concern was

keeping the students safe, but I also didn't want to be overprotective of them. I knew the news of the robbery would scare many of them, but I also didn't want any of them to have a false sense of security. The truth was, we were in a dangerous place.

These examples serve as reminders of who the leaders are, confirming the students' expectations that they will be protected and cared for by their leaders while they're away from home.

Another important role is to try to keep students focused on a task. One faculty leader described this leadership responsibility as being "in charge of the syllabus and plan for the day." He continued, "[you] help people prepare for what they will see and experience. In setting the context for each visit you reassert your faculty role." Sometimes facilitating learning means that faculty leaders must interrupt moments of light-hearted fun to refocus the students. "I make them face out of the bus, get outside their comfort zone and protective group. Interact with the environment, instead of being just observers. I'm not just the pal or buddy when I have to insist on capturing a moment for learning." There are frequent reminders that these experiences are far outside what most of the students have ever known.

In spite of needing to refocus students, the course structure can often be less hierarchical and more of a shared experience. A student described her experience as working "with someone who you think of as your superior and they come down to our level. We are all on the same page experiencing things at the same time." Especially in the service activities, course leaders reported acting as team members rather than leaders. One course leader explained the group's work at a Habitat for Humanity site in Guatemala:

We relied on each other and allowed each other's strengths to emerge. The leadership was shared, depending on the task at hand. Sometimes the students were leaders depending on their skills, and sometimes I took the lead. I worked just as hard as they did, and the students seemed to appreciate that at the end of the day.

Mutual respect may be the guide toward finding the balance between asserting the needed leadership role and allowing students to develop self discipline and become active participants in their learning. One student noted, "they would step up and guide us when they needed to." Students also described the difficulty in finding that balance: "In very adult situations she would treat us like adults and then back up and treat us like we were much younger and that built a wall sometimes. By the end we could speak to each other on

an appropriate level." Students expressed the importance they gave to being treated with respect and recognized as adults, but also knowing that the faculty leaders were, in fact, in charge of the experience.

#### Faculty Transformative Learning

"Everybody cried at some point. It's the human factor." Regardless of how much experience and preparation the faculty leaders had, they still experienced emotions, personal change, and growth alongside students. Connecting to the humanness in others resulted in emotional responses that were spontaneous and more freely expressed than they might otherwise be in the classroom. Some of the faculty leaders reported feeling vulnerable because of these reactions, but students responded positively, especially to the idea that the students and faculty leaders were learning and growing together.

Students described their faculty leaders' experiences: "I think my course leaders were personally affected in the same ways that we students were. Going into a situation like that, your eyes are opened and you experience things you have never seen before." "[The faculty leader] had done this before but she experienced it differently this time, with us. During reflections and poetry writing we posed questions back to her too—she obviously came out of it differently." One faculty leader recalled that nightly sharing was deeply spiritual. "We were open about indicating when our own consciences had been challenged, deepened, and broadened."

A faculty leader of the course in post-Katrina Mississippi reported her own personal transformation. "The experiences woke me up." She explained that she knew there was poverty and racism in the United States, but this experience made it come alive. Additionally, sharing this experience with students led to more thoughtful discussions so that the whole group shared the transformation. Another faculty leader in the same course, believing he was well informed about conditions at the site, was surprised by how the experience affected him. He explained that he left with profound questions of his own that still "boggle his mind." In Mississippi, "the Rolls Royce guy lines up with everyone else to get food." It was impossible, he said, not to see "the power of the human spirit and the sameness of all human need." He didn't try to hide his reactions: "We were real in front of the students; you can't help it."

Similarly, another faculty leader reported how difficult it was to ignore the social reality in Washington, D.C. "Students see the contradictions to our nation's ideals first hand. They can't help but ask questions about how their society is structured." This same faculty leader described how she cried at the sight

of so many homeless people in yet another soup kitchen. That evening during reflection time, the faculty leader shared her feelings of frustration at the magnitude of the problem to students who now had a deeper understanding of the issues of homelessness. The students responded to her feelings and discussed being partners in the effort for change. Transformation, in this experience took place together, as learning partners.

Students spoke about their leaders' reactions and seemed to benefit from the learning that their leaders modeled during immersion service-learning. In addition, the students reported seeing that the course leaders, even through their frustration and fatigue, didn't quit, but remained committed to helping and serving others. Students said they believed that their faculty leaders benefited from seeing them learn and grow too. They saw themselves as partners in learning instead of passive recipients of knowledge.

#### Faculty Role Conflict in Student Assessment

Maintaining balance between this partnership and authority in the daily routine created challenges, but equally difficult were the challenges that the relationships and the service experience posed for assessment of student achievement. It was sometimes difficult for faculty leaders to separate what they saw and heard from students during the service portion of the course from the quality of the academic assignments completed.

Students also had difficulty separating their personal experience from their academic work and reacted with great disappointment when they received lower grades than they expected. "I had such a good experience, how did I get a B or a B+?" Still, some students seemed to recognize the dilemma. "I feel everyone should have done well because everyone participated. If we had a student who didn't try, I don't know how they would have been graded." One student asked, "All of us gained a lot from the experiences—should I have gotten an A from the change in me?"

Some students also recognized that their writing ability affected their grade. "If your experience was so great, how can they grade you on your lack of articulation of the experience?" Upset at getting a lower grade, another student complained, "just because I'm not good at writing, I can't put it down on paper." "All of us felt like we had done a lot of service and could reflect on it critically in our papers...but, it took a couple of papers for most of us to get a handle on how to write about the experiences."

The ability to reflect critically and to write about it is an advanced skill. This ability varied among individual students and also by class rank. One

faculty leader said, "It's true that folks really engaged and thinking seriously about it can come up with very different outcomes—it's not as if there can be a uniform result. [The grade] does fall a lot on the capacity of a student to write well. I don't know how to avoid that." Most faculty believed that the difference in the quality of thinking for students showed up more frequently during the group's evening reflection rather than on written on paper. One faculty leader explained his approach to grading:

If what you write is—'this morning for breakfast we had this and that', its not reflection, its notes on your menu. But if you were to say something about having coffee and link it to the visit to the coffee plantation, and the discovery that the farmer gets 3% of what the coffee is finally sold for in Starbucks in America and see their food intake in relation to the economic system the coffee farm is a part of, in other words, reflect in a deep way how it fits into the economic system, then you are thinking critically. Writing must include engagement, analysis, and passion for what they've experienced.

Embedded in his point is the recognition that it is the experience in service-learning, along with the academic content and ability to link them critically, that leads to transformative learning for students. Consequently, the experience cannot be disregarded in assessing students.

The students expected to learn from experience and some students were frustrated by the amount and types of academic work associated with the course. Students felt more comfortable, in their role as partners, to ask course leaders to eliminate academic requirements by appealing to the newly formed familiarity or their obvious dedication to the service work. One student explained that she "didn't expect rigorous academic learning—I don't think it's really about that. Education before hand is key, but learning from experience is really more about the experience. Learning from experience is way more powerful than learning from books." A student from another course said, "We expected to learn a lot from being immersed in a culture. Social interactions with people there and with peers led to the most learning."

The faculty interviewed took different approaches to addressing the rigor and fairness of grading in their courses. One faculty leader's approach was to start by recognizing that each of his students would have a different and unique experience and focus on what each individual was getting out of the class. No one in his class complained about grades and all the students received high grades. This faculty leader admitted that although students were assigned

academic writing, much of the assessment came from watching them work.

While there are some very useful grading rubrics and reflection models designed to assess student learning in service learning (Ash & Clayton, 2004; Kiser, 2007), it is difficult to separate a student's personal growth and intensity of experience from the academic learning that takes place. Adding the personal relationship that develops during immersion service-learning compounds the problem. Two faculty leaders from the Guatemala course questioned whether they may have exercised a grade bias in favor of those students with whom they worked more closely. When they met to assign final grades to their students, "it was clear that we were advocating for those students with whom we had spent the most time. The quality of those relationships definitely impacted our assessment of their growth and learning."

#### Coming Home: The Faculty-Student Relationship and Future Civic Engagement

In spite of the role conflicts that lead to vulnerability and challenge, the relationships discussed in this study seem to have several benefits for both the students and faculty. A notable benefit was the development of an enhanced mentoring relationship between the student and faculty, which not only contributed to the transformative learning during immersion, but also continued back at the home institution.

Students noticed the difference in the relationships. "It was a very different relationship before and after. We went from being professors and [students] talking *at* each other to people talking *to* each other." One student reflected, "Since you experience such life changing events together, you have a stronger bond and connection. I would say that I feel closer to a leader from the trip than any other professor on campus." Several students discussed the plans they had to work with their faculty leaders in the future.

Faculty modeling service behavior may have stronger lessons for students and their future civic engagement than other on-campus service learning courses. In particular, students reported believing that they could make a difference and had already begun to integrate service into their lives. Upon their return to campus, many continued their work in the local area or began new service projects. Students from one of the Guatemala groups continued their relationships with some of the nongovernmental organizations they had worked with during immersion. They held a screening of the documentary film *Recycled Life* (about the Guatemala City Dump) on campus and continued to raise funds for the organization Safe Passage, long after the event was over. Students from the Mississippi

courses have kept in touch with families they worked with and have continued to raise money and collect needed items. Several of the students have returned to the area during breaks. Students from one of the Washington D.C. courses developed and implemented a homelessness awareness campaign on campus inviting homeless people to talk to students about their lives. One student participated in the Oxfam Change summer training workshop and continues to lead the campus in social justice efforts. These are only a few examples of students' continued action on campus and demonstrate not only their expectation that they will continue to serve, but their follow-through on that expectation.

#### Conclusion

While the evidence of student transformative learning is anecdotal, the effect on students is undeniable to the faculty leaders of immersion service-learning courses. Students reported that they experienced learning differently because they worked alongside faculty. And, faculty reported *seeing* the effects, something that does not happen as easily when students go into the field alone. In the immersion service-learning courses described here, students reported that their learning was not confined to the academic content of the courses, but also influenced by the experiential and relational aspects of immersion. This may not be a surprise to those who use service-learning in their courses, but it may point to the inadequacies of our assessment of student learning.

Assessments in most of these courses were focused on the quality of students' writing and their ability to make meaningful connections between their experiences and the course material. We had not considered a method for assessing their personal and relational learning and how our multiple roles as course leaders might have influenced this learning. The students tried to tell us how much they had learned and changed, and we saw these changes as well; yet our traditional methods of assessment did not adequately reflect this change. Although the goals and objectives of the courses may not have been, and perhaps should not be to "change" the student, separating the emotional and relational experience from the academic learning may be a false dichotomy. For students who may not have mastered the ability to articulate learning through their writing, the emotional experience could also be an expression of learning. The faculty leader who said he "watched" the students' work in the field and incorporated his observations into their grade, may have been more on target with assessment than the faculty leaders who tried to separate the academic learning from the emotional and relational experience. The confusion students felt about their grades could, perhaps, have been avoided if students were given

assignments that allowed them to work through the interpretation of their emotions and if the assessment process of their learning was made more transparent to them. This clearly indicates a need for including alternative learning goals and methods of assessment in addition to the typical learning goals related to specific course content.

The report of increased transformational effects of immersion service-learning and the subsequent relationships and service activities lend support to our assertion that this is an important pedagogical method for engendering a dedication to life-long civic engagement. When the context of the service takes place outside the students' typical range of experience, students often experience conflicting beliefs and behaviors that lead to greater problem-solving and critical thinking opportunities (Berry, 1990; Kiely, 2004; Kraft, 2002). Our experiences suggest students also benefit from seeing the humanness of their faculty leaders through both their experience of living together and their reactions to the service they are doing together and that these seem to contribute to transformative learning process. In spite of the challenges inherent in living together, faculty and students reported positive experiences. Each course has continued to be a popular choice for students and a coveted leadership position for faculty with new immersion service-learning courses being added each year.

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