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Traveling with a Purpose: Stories of Contradiction and Transformation in International Service-Learning

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TRAVELING WITH A PURPOSE: STORIES OF CONTRADICTION AND TRANSFORMATION IN INTERNATIONAL SERVICE-LEARNING

by

Rebecca A. McNamara

A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
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Advisor: Donna Talbot, Ph.D.

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WE HEREBY APPROVE THE DISSERTATION SUBMITTED BY

Rebecca A. McNamara

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Different conceptualizations of service-learning are found in higher education, ranging from charity to social justice focused. Little is known about the lasting impact of social justice focused service-learning on undergraduate participants, especially in a global education setting. This study examined the experience and meaning making of participants of critical international service-learning (ISL) over time. Nineteen alumni of five ISL courses at three different higher education institutions were interviewed in this phenomenological study. Participants described contrasting experiences of being both stretched and destabilized, friend and foreigner, and finding the service-learning both enjoyable and unsettling. The long term impact of ISL course participation was increased awareness of self, culture, and the world, more complex thinking, and changes in vocation, interpersonal relationships, and lifestyle. Programmatic elements of the course that added to the participants’ experience were identified. Finally, links were made between the findings of this study and transformative learning theory. Ultimately, this study reveals some disparity in critical service-learning in theory and in practice, the importance of connectedness, the challenge of building
reciprocal relationships in global education, and the benefit of examining students’ experience over time.
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Rebecca A. McNamara
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Advocates of service-learning have been touting the transformational potential of this experiential learning pedagogy since its introduction in higher education. Researchers have found that service-learning can have benefits for higher education institutions, their students, and the larger community. As a result of the promised benefits, the practice of service-learning has grown significantly in the past 20 years and higher education has invested time, staffing, and financial resources into developing service-learning as a prominent teaching and learning pedagogy. As the practice of service-learning has become more widely accepted, researchers and practitioners have begun to articulate different, and sometimes conflicting, theoretical models and practice of service-learning (Butin, 2010). Traditional, or charity focused, service-learning is often critiqued due to the potential to reinforce stereotypes, exploit the community, and domesticate students who want to focus on political action (Cipolle, 2010; King, 2004; Pompa, 2002; Robinson, 2000). A small but growing practice of service-learning, critical service-learning, has a social justice focus and is explicit about analyzing social structures and systemic oppression, addressing power imbalances, and building authentic relationships.

This study will describe the experiences of participants in the specific practice of critical service-learning in an international context. International service-learning (ISL) provides a unique opportunity for an intense experience of service-learning where students are immersed in a new culture. This study looks at the...
intersection of service-learning, social justice education, and international education and illuminates new opportunities for service-learning to transform participants’ perspectives and to increase their ability to address issues of injustice.

**Background**

**The impact of service-learning.** Service-learning is traditionally defined as a "course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility" (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995, p. 112). The majority of research in this field has focused on the impact of service-learning on the students, while there is growing research about the impact on institutions and the community. Service-learning research has had a goal of both building the institutional support for and credibility of service-learning and to improve its practice.

As a result of research, we know that service-learning can have a positive impact on the institution, the students, and the community. Practitioners have argued that service-learning is an essential way for higher education to return to its core mission of educating students for a democratic society (Benson, Harkavy, & Hartley, 2005; Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003; Zlotkowski, 2000). Empirical research has thoroughly examined the cognitive, civic, personal, and interpersonal benefits for students (for example: Astin & Sax, 1998; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000). As important, though less researched, is the
claim that service-learning also benefits the community where students work (Vernon & Ward, 1999; Worrall, 2007).

Due to the positive impact of service-learning, this practice has grown significantly in higher education. Campus Compact, a national coalition of higher education institutions dedicated to service-learning, has grown from three member institutions to almost 1,200 in the past 25 years with 33% of students in member institutions participating in service-learning (Campus Compact, 2009). The vast majority of service-learning research has examined the practice in its traditional form. As different models of service-learning are conceptualized and practiced, more empirical research on the experience of students who participate in specialized forms of service-learning is needed. This study will specifically focus on the practice of critical service-learning that is grounded in social justice education.

**Social justice education and service-learning.** Bell (2007) describes the goal of social justice education:

To enable people to develop critical analytical tools necessary to understand oppression and their own socialization within oppressive systems and to develop a sense of agency to change oppressive patterns and behaviors in themselves and in the institutions and communities of which they are a part. (p. 2)

There are important pedagogical decisions to which social justice educators must attend. Adams (2007) outlines five core elements in social justice education practice:
1. balance the emotional and cognitive components of the learning process;
2. support the individual elements of the experience while at the same time analyzing the systemic dimensions;
3. pay attention to the social relations in the classroom;
4. use reflection and experience to support student learning; and
5. reward changes in awareness and efforts toward change which are outcomes of the learning process.

Butin (2007) discusses that there has been minimal overlap between the pedagogies of service-learning and social justice education even though they are grounded in the same values. There are various terms used in literature to describe service-learning that incorporates social justice education. For the context of this study, I will use the term critical service-learning. Mitchell (2007) summarizes the differences between traditional service-learning and critical service-learning as “its attention to social change, its questioning of the distribution of power in society, and its focus on developing authentic relationships between higher education and the community served” (p. 101).

The supporters of alternative forms of service-learning, like critical service-learning, use passionate terms for describing the importance of this practice. It is, thus, a surprise that there is little empirical research about the impact of this practice on students. Only five studies were found which examine this practice. Research has focused on the process of implementing a social justice focused service-learning program (Cuban & Anderson, 2007) and the impact for students
who participate in service-learning that has social justice outcomes (Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Glennon, 2004; Guthrie & McCracken, 2010; Mitchell, 2007; Wang & Rodgers, 2006). As a result of participation in social justice service-learning, students have an increased sense of agency (Einfeld & Collins; Glennon), identify and understand systemic injustice (Glennon; Mitchell), challenge their stereotypes and privilege (Mitchell), and have increased cognitive development (Wang & Rodgers). Given the lack of empirical research in this area, there is much that we do not know about the experience of students who participate in critical service-learning. This is especially significant given the claim that some service-learning practitioners make that all service-learning should move students along a continuum to working for social justice (Cipolle, 2010; Kendal, 1990). This study will continue to add to the literature base in this area by describing the experience of students who have participated in critical service-learning.

International service-learning. International service-learning (ISL) is an umbrella term for a number of higher education activities including: co-curricular mission trips, academic courses with international immersion that include service experiences, study abroad programs with service components, and academic programs in countries outside the U.S. that have service-learning curricula (Crabtree, 2008). The focus of this investigation will be one type of ISL, a course-based credit-bearing experience where U.S. students travel to another country to participate in service-learning.

As with all service-learning, the stated purpose of ISL can differ. Some ISL are focused on a charity model, which emphasizes the provision of labor and talent
to a host-country community agency. Alternatively, some ISL have a social justice focus, where students through their service-learning become aware of their own unacknowledged privilege and power and analyze the social structures that create the need for service. Both types of ISL can be impactful for the student, the community organization, and the local people. Critical ISL will, by its very pedagogy, push students toward analysis of social structures that have caused oppression and towards reflection on their role (active or passive) in the systems of contributed toward oppression.

ISL is a growing practice for colleges. Campus Compact found that in 2009, 56% of their member institutions had ISL opportunities, which is an increase of 24% since 2002 (Campus Compact, 2002, 2009). While not all of these experiences are credit-bearing, which is the focus of this study, it does exemplify that there is a growing interest and demand in higher education for these educational experiences.

Research has explored the experience of students who participate in ISL. Some researchers have explored co-curricular ISL (Gaines-Hanks & Grayman, 2009; Pyle, 1981). Others have explored credit-bearing ISL that did not have a social justice focus (Bentley & Ellison, 2007; Knutson Miller & Gonzalez, 2010; Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005; Parker & Altman Dautoff, 2007; Roberts, 2003; Stachowski, Bodel, & Morrin, 2008; Tonkin & Quiroga, 2004). There are also program descriptions of critical ISL found in the literature (Crabtree, 1998; Jakubowski, 2003).

Very few researches have empirically examined critical ISL (Camacho, 2004; Kiely, 2004, 2005; King, 2004). These studies have examined the experience of
students who traveled in a group to the same international location. From these studies, we know that for students to critically analyze social structures they need to have an experience that exposes them to contradictory information, which creates a sense of dissonance for them (Kiely, 2005; King). Students need to build a caring community with the other student participants as well as build caring relationships among members of the community (King). Students will also have a range of descriptions of their experience of power differences (Camacho).

Critical ISL can be transformational for students. Kiely (2004, 2005) finds that all students in his ISL course with a social justice focus did experience perspective transformation in one or more of six areas: political, moral, intellectual, cultural, personal, and spiritual. Kiely creates a model of emerging global consciousness and a transformational learning model for service-learning. This study will add to the literature by describing the experience of participants with different ISL experiences and then comparing findings to Kiely who used transformational learning theory as his theoretical framework.

**Transformational learning theory.** Practitioners often want service-learning to be transformative for their students so that they see the world more critically. Eyler and Giles (1999) finds that transformational experiences of service-learning are rare, but intense experiences of service-learning may create a dissonance in the student that is hard to ignore. These intense experiences can facilitate a transformation of perspective by prompting a critical reflection on one’s fundamental assumptions. ISL can create the environment for an intense experience of service-learning that creates dissonance for the student.
Mezirow’s (1991, 2000) theory of transformational learning describes the process of how educational experiences for adults can lead to a transformation of perspective and can be a beneficial theoretical lens for analyzing the experiences of students who participate in critical ISL. Transformational learning theory describes the process where adults look at their frame of reference, which has been assimilated from others or society, and transforms it to be more “inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action” (Mezirow, 2000, pp. 7-8).

Researchers have already investigated service-learning in light of transformational learning theory. Hunter (2008) discusses the role of transformational learning in international education and service-learning and cautioned educators not to push students toward transformation, but rather create educational opportunities where transformation is possible. Eyler and Giles (1999) in their multi-institution study uses transformational learning as one of the theoretical lenses for describing where learning occurs in service-learning. On a smaller scale Kiely (2004, 2005) uses transformational learning to articulate the impact for students who participated in service-learning. Kiely’s work is a prominent and often cited study in ISL literature. Due to the similar research methods of these studies, a comparison of the findings of these two studies will deepen the field’s knowledge about the transformative potential of critical ISL.

This study is looking at the intersection of practice of service-learning theory, social justice education, and international education. This very specific practice of
critical ISL, due to its pedagogical structure, has been shown to create an intense experience needed to facilitate a transformation of perspective. My study will describe participants’ experience of critical ISL and how they make meaning of that experience. In addition, I will look for evidence of transformation of perspective in the descriptions provided by the participants.

**Broader Problem/Researchable Problem**

As discussed above, researchers have been exploring the outcomes for students, communities, and institutions participating in service-learning, but the vast majority of this research has focused on traditional or charity models of service-learning. The theoretical model that a practitioner uses will affect the pedagogical choices in and outside the classroom and can affect the impact for students. Traditional service-learning has been critiqued in the literature, and there is growing attention to alternative practices of service-learning, namely critical service-learning. We need to know more about participants’ experience of critical service-learning, especially given the call of some practitioners to move all students towards a service-learning practice that has a social justice focus.

There is even more limited research on participants’ experience of critical ISL. All the research of this narrow topic has been case study research, focusing on describing the experiences of students who travel in a group to one location. There is no research that describes participants’ experience of critical ISL and examines it across international service-learning experiences. This research will focus in this area.
Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the experience of participants in a critical ISL course and how they make meaning of their experience over time. Additionally, this study will describe the elements of the experience that participants indicate as influential. Finally, the purpose of this study is to analyze the experience and meaning making of the participants in light of transformational learning theory.

Research Justification/Significance

The findings of this study could improve the practice of service-learning, specifically critical service-learning. While there is theoretical writing about the need for and benefits of critical service-learning, there is little empirical research which supports this claim. By describing the experience of participants and identifying the elements that were influential in their experiences, this study can improve the practice of service-learning. Since critical service-learning is often critiqued or dismissed as too political, empirical research of this practice could lead to wider institutional support.

There is also extremely limited research on participants’ experience of critical ISL. All of the research in this topic focuses its examination on the experiences of participants on one course. Currently, there is no research that examines the experience of students across international service-learning experiences. This study will allow us to understand the experiences of students and the elements that influence the students’ experience. It will allow for improved practice of critical ISL.
Finally, transformational learning theory is a major theory in adult educational learning and has only rarely been linked with service-learning, social justice focused or otherwise. By linking this theory to the practice of service-learning, there is a new potential for understanding the experience of students.

**Research Questions**

There are three central questions that guide this inquiry. They are as follows:

1. How do participants describe and make meaning of their experience of critical ISL over time?
2. What specific elements of the experience do participants identify as most significant?
3. How do the participants’ experiences link with transformational learning theory?

**Overview of Methodology**

A phenomenological study allows the researcher to describe the experience of individuals who have a common experience of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). In the context of this study, the phenomenon is the participant’s experience of ISL that has been identified by the course instructor as having a critical focus. Participants will not have the same international experience, rather they will have lived and worked in different countries with different community organizations. This will allow me to describe a common phenomenon that is not grounded in a similar international service-learning experience. Data will be collected from interviews with participants. As a researcher that has professional experience facilitating these types of trips, I will need to bracket my own experience when
analyzing the experience of the participants. In data analysis, I will look for and name emergent themes among the participants’ experiences. Additionally, I will compare these themes with Kiely (2004, 2005) to highlight similarities and differences between participants’ experiences.

**Study Delimitations**

Delimitations provide boundaries around the study and clarify what the study examines and what it does not. For this study, I have identified a narrow focus, which will restrict the potential participant pool. I will only be interviewing individuals who have participated in credit-bearing critical ISL when they were or still are an undergraduate student. While there are other forms of ISL including service-learning that is co-curricular, part of a study abroad experience, or has a traditional charity focus, these will not be included in my study. Also, I will not be evaluating the outcomes of participation in critical ISL; instead I will be describing the experience and meaning making from the point of view of the participants. Finally, I have narrowed the focus to only the participants’ experiences, and will not focus on the experience of the faculty member or the community partner. While these are valuable and needed perspectives to investigate, they are not the focus of my study.

**Definitions of Terms**

In the literature review section, I will discuss in more detail the various definitions for social justice focused service-learning found in the literature. For the purposes of this study, I will use the term critical service-learning to describe the experiential learning practice that adheres to best practices of traditional service-
learning and in addition pays attention to social change, questions the distribution of power in society, and focuses on developing authentic relationships. ISL in the context of this study is a course-based credit-bearing experience where U.S. students travel to another country to participate in service-learning.

**Organization of the Dissertation**

In the chapters that follow I will ground the study in relevant literature, outline the research methodology, analyze the findings, and discuss practical and research implications. Chapter two discusses the relevant literature in the field of service-learning, including the benefits of service-learning, the critiques of different conceptualizations of service-learning, the specific practice of international service-learning, and how transformational learning theory has been linked with service-learning in past research. Chapter three explains the methodology for data collection and analysis for this phenomenological study. Chapter four presents narratives of the 19 participants and a composite description of the courses from which they were recruited. Chapter five presents the findings of the study, which will include the common themes found among participants’ experiences of a critical ISL and the program characteristics that influence their experience. Additionally, I will compare findings of this study with Kiely (2004, 2005). Chapter six presents summary findings and a final discussion regarding practical and research implications as a result of this study.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This study will describe the practice of critical ISL, which is the intersection of three different educational activities: (a) service-learning, (b) social justice education, and (c) international education. The review in this chapter will explicate what we know about each of these educational activities, including the history, conceptualizations, and practice of this activity as well as the impact for students, the institution, and the community. After each area is explored, the literature regarding specifically critical ISL will be examined. Finally, since the purpose of this study is also to link the findings to Kiely’s (2004, 2005) study, which is grounded in transformational learning theory, this theory will be examined as well as how service-learning and transformational learning have been previously linked in literature. Ultimately, the purpose of this literature review is to establish the place where this study will be situated in the current literature.

Service-Learning Background and Research

The practice of service-learning is relatively new on higher education campuses, so I will begin by describing its history. I will also discuss the theoretical framework used for service-learning, key elements in service-learning practice, and review significant empirical studies in service-learning research. This foundational information about service-learning will lay the groundwork for the next section of the literature review, which will discuss alternative conceptualizations of service-learning practice.
History of service-learning in higher education. While there is a long history of community service and higher education in the United States, service-learning as a teaching pedagogy and educational philosophy was first recognized in the 1960s (National Service Learning Clearinghouse, 2008). The practice in higher education grew in the 1980s due to the support of national organizations such as the Campus Outreach Opportunity League, which mobilizes service programs in higher education, and Campus Compact, a consortium of university presidents who support civic engagement on their campuses. Campus Compact member institutions have grown from three in 1985 to almost 1,200 in 2009 (Campus Compact, 2009). During the 1990s service-learning advocates worked to create institution-wide credibility of this practice in higher education. The Michigan Journal for Community Service Learning, the field’s national peer reviewed journal was founded in 1994 (MJCSL website). Additionally, researchers and practitioners worked to ground service-learning in a theoretical framework, established principles for best practices, and empirically examined the effects of service-learning for students, institutions, and the community.

Theoretical grounding of service-learning. By the mid 1990s, service-learning was slowly growing in practice and institutional recognition in higher education. In 1994, Giles and Eyler discussed that it was time for service-learning to transition from a social movement to a field. An essential process in that transition was to articulate a conceptual and theoretical framework for service-learning. The works of three theorists are most commonly linked to service-learning pedagogical
practice: John Dewey, Paulo Freire, and David Kolb. I will briefly describe these theorists’ work and their connection to service-learning.

**Dewey's pragmatic experientialism.** While Dewey did not specifically discuss service-learning in his writings (Giles & Eyler, 1994; Saltmarsh, 1996), he is widely seen today as the founding father of the service-learning philosophical and theoretical framework (Deans, 1996). In an effort to position service-learning in a theoretical framework, theorists such as Deans, Giles and Eyler, and Saltmarsh have identified similarities between Dewey’s writings and the current practice of service-learning. These similarities include (a) the link between education and experience, (b) the emphasis on democracy and community, and (c) the importance of combining reflection with action.

In *Experience and Education*, Dewey (1938) discusses that in his vision of progressive education there must be a commitment to experience. “The belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative. Experience and education cannot be directly equated to each other” (p. 25). For an experience to be educative, it must be a quality experience that engages students in the world, allows for their intellectual and moral growth, and arouses curiosity to continue future learning.

Practitioners need to be aware of the conditions of the local community, including the historical and economic conditions (Dewey). Similarity, service-learning practice is based on students’ active involvement in their community. Service-learning practitioners are called to create quality experiences for students that
foster their growth and encourage future involvement, while being rooted in the reality of the community.

Community and democracy were central and intertwined concepts for Dewey’s social philosophy (Giles & Eyler, 1994). Dewey’s understanding of democracy did not emphasize politics; rather, he understood democracy to be based on civic participation, communication, and communal living (Deans, 1999). The goal of education for Dewey was to encourage learners to become active participants in their world and to become good citizens (Deans). Service-learning is similarly focused on getting students engaged in their local, and sometimes global, community. As will be discussed in more detail later in this section, service-learning is seen as a vehicle for renewing higher education’s commitment to graduating students who are educated citizens.

Dewey’s writings also emphasized that reflection and action are inextricably linked (Giles & Eyler, 1994). Dewey urged educators to foster reflective thinking in their students because “without reflection on activity, the connection between thought and action is dissipated, the ability to formulate action is lost” (Saltmarsh, 1996, p. 18). Reflection in service-learning is paramount, often considered the link between the experience of service and the learning (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Without reflection or connection to learning objectives, service in the community is merely volunteerism, not service-learning.

Freire’s critical social theory. The work of Paulo Freire provides a theoretical anchor for some service-learning educators (Deans, 1999). Freire, while influenced by the writings of Dewey, grounds his critical social theory in the post-
colonial Brazil and his work of literacy education. Both Dewey and Freire are focused on the centrality of experience in learning, the essential relationship between action, reflection, and learning, an emphasis on dialogue, and a hope for social change (Deans). Freire, however, takes a more political approach to his theory by focusing on radical socio-economic change and critiques the educational system and its role in preserving oppression. He advocates for a problem solving education as opposed to a banking system of education, where teachers deposit knowledge into passive students, because this does not create an environment where student can become critical thinkers. "Whereas banking education anesthetizes and inhibits creative power, problem solving education involves a constant unveiling of reality. The former attempts to maintain the submersion of consciousness; the latter strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality" (Freire, 1970, p. 81, original italics). The goal of education for Freire is political transformation of individuals and society through critical reflection and collective social action (Deans).

As will be discussed later in this literature review, there are varied practices of service-learning. For service-learning that has a social justice focus, Freire’s theory is especially germane. For social justice educators, service alone cannot foster the critical consciousness described in Freire’s writings; students need sustained readings, analysis, dialogue, and radical critique (Deans, 1999). The pedagogy of social justice focused service-learning purposefully engages students in the community where they come to critically know and analyze reality, address
issues of power imbalance, create opportunities for dialogue, and work for more just social structures.

**Kolb’s experiential learning theory.** Dewey also influenced David Kolb’s theory of experiential learning and is the foundation for the pedagogical process found in service-learning (Stanton, 1990). In Kolb’s (1984, as cited in Eyler & Giles, 1999) cycle of learning students have a concrete experience (CO), and then they pull back and describe their experience through reflective observation (RO). Through reflection, students try to make meaning from this experience in the next stage of abstract conceptualization (AC). Finally, students may actively experiment (AE) with their new learning in the community, which leads to another concrete experience. In the stages of learning, students have preferred stages. By guiding students through all four stages, educators allow for the learning styles of all students to be represented in an educational environment.

The practice of service-learning encompasses all the stages of Kolb’s theory. Students have a concrete experience where they move outside the classroom and work in the community. Students then reflect on their experience and try to make meaning of it. Reflection is an essential part of service-learning. The course content provides clear avenues for making meaning from an experience. For many students, service-learning is not a one-time experience, but a semester long activity or throughout their college career, so students have the opportunity to actively experiment through extended and multiple experiences of service-learning. McEwen (1996) discusses that Kolb’s model emphasizes the central role of reflection and the point at which reflection should be introduced to maximize the
learning experience, directly after a concrete experience and prior to abstract conceptualization and generalization.

Eyler and Giles (1999) describe a model of reflection facilitation based on Kolb’s theory that was popularized by the Campus Outreach Opportunity League. After an experience of service-learning, students are asked to write a journal entry about their experience. They are asked to answer the questions What? (RO – describing what happened), So what? (AC – making meaning form the experience) and Now what? (AE – what will students do with this experience).

**Key elements in service-learning practice.** There are multiple definitions for the practice of service-learning. It is not uncommon for practitioners to ask each other what definition of service-learning they are utilizing. Campus Compact’s (2003) publication *Introduction to Service-Learning Toolkit*, a training manual for faculty who want to incorporate service-learning in their course, lists 13 different definitions for service-learning. Some definitions consider both curricular and co-curricular activities as service-learning, while others name that service-learning is strictly a credit-bearing activity. Another striking difference among definitions is that some explicitly name the role of service-learning in addressing social issues in the community. Other definitions focus more on the academic learning outcomes and skill building for the students. The most commonly cited definition of service-learning in the literature is Bringle and Hatcher’s (1995) definition: service-learning is a "course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding
of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility” (p. 112).

While there are differences in philosophical emphasis, there are three key elements that all service-learning definitions seem to have in common. These elements are (a) connection between the service experience and the learning outcomes, (b) reflection as the pedagogical tool for making the connection between service and learning, and (c) a service experience that meets an identified need in the community.

**Connection to learning outcomes.** The focus on learning outcomes differentiates service-learning from community service or volunteerism. In community service or volunteerism, the focus of the activity is on the service and the benefits the service has on the recipient. When students conduct a canned food drive, they focus all their effort on doing something for the hungry families in their community. Service-learning has a different focus. By articulating learning outcomes for the service experience, students both provide a service for the community and enhance their own learning as well. In the example of the canned food drive, if a service-learning practitioner names learning outcomes in conjunction of the service, the learning becomes more focused. For a learning outcome of increasing awareness of issues of hunger in a local community, students would not only conduct a canned food drive, but would interview the food pantry director about the history of the food pantry, the changes in the numbers of people getting food, and the reasons for that change. Students would do research about social and economic reasons for hunger in their community and examine changes in
unemployment, food stamp funding, and poverty in the local area. Students would continue to serve the community, but would also have tangible educational outcomes as well.

Sigmon (1994, as cited in Furco, 2003) creates a typology that illustrates the emphasis of service and learning in this pedagogy (Figure 1). Service-learning must balance both service goals and learning goals if there is to be equitable benefits for both the students and the community.

Service-LEARNING – learning goals primary; service outcomes secondary
SERVICE-learning – service outcomes primary; learning goals secondary
service-learning – service and learning goals completely separate
SERVICE-LEARNING – service and learning goals of equal weight and each enhances the other for all participants

Figure 1. Sigmon Service-Learning Typology. The words in capitals represent the emphasis of the service-learning practice.

**Reflection.** Reflection is defined as a process that helps students connect what they observe and experience in the community with their academic study (Eyler, 2001). It is a critical component in service-learning for a variety reasons. Bringle and Hatcher (1999) states, “reflection activities provide the bridge between the community service activities and the educational content of the course” (para. 4). Reflection can be a vehicle for expressing concerns and for sharing experiences with instructors and fellow service learners (Dunlap, 1998). It can also direct the student’s attention to new interpretations of events and provide a means through which the community service can be studied and interpreted (Bringle & Hatcher),
challenge student’s beliefs and assumptions (Ash & Clayton, 2004) and develop the habit of questioning themselves and others (Eyler). The ultimate goal of reflection in service-learning, according to Ash and Clayton, is to help students explore and express what they are learning through their service-learning experiences so both the learning and the service are enhanced.

Reflection can take many forms in the context of a service-learning course. Students can individually respond to structured or unstructured journal assignments. In-class discussions can be a helpful method of relating service-learning experiences with course concepts. Students can receive feedback from both the instructor on their reflections as well as from the supervisor of the community service placement. Other class assignments, such as experiential research papers, class presentations, directed readings, or ethical case studies, will facilitate reflection as well.

Creating community partnerships. Service learners are not doing service just for the sake of serving; they must be responding to an identified need in the community. Reciprocity is a key element in the relationship between the student and the community partner. Reciprocity means that both the community partner and the student have assets to offer each other. The student has time, energy, and educational background to offer the community to fill a need. The community partner offers training and real-world experience to the student, which can expand the student’s resume and perspective. A reciprocal relationship encourages students to work with the community partner, rather than for the community partner (Jacoby, 2003).
Campus Compact created benchmarks which represent the eight essential features of genuine democratic partnerships between campuses and community agencies (Jacoby, 2003). In addition, this document outlines guidelines for designing, building, and sustaining collaborative partnerships that benefit all parties (Campus Compact, 2008). The essential features for designing, building, and sustaining democratic partnerships between campus and community are listed below. Torres (2000, as cited in Jacoby, 2003) described these partnerships as:

1. founded on a shared vision and clearly articulated values;
2. beneficial to partnering institutions;
3. composed of interpersonal relationships based on trust and mutual respect;
4. multi-dimensional and involving the participation of multiple sectors that act in service of a complex problem;
5. clearly organized and led with dynamism;
6. integrated into the mission and support systems of the partnering institutions;
7. sustained by a “partnering process” for communication, decision making, and the initiation of change; and
8. evaluated regularly with a focus on both methods and outcomes.

The key elements of service-learning: connection to learning outcomes, reflection and creating community partnership, have guided practitioners to improve service-learning on campuses. Researchers have also examined this practice, as is discussed in the next section.
Research on the impact of service-learning. Research in this field has focused on examining the impact of service-learning. The most prominent area of research has been the impact of service-learning on the student participants. Researchers were able to empirically discuss the positive changes in students personally, academically, and civically. Less researched, but equally important, has been the role of service-learning in creating a civically engaged campus and the impact of service-learning for the community partners.

Benefits for the students. The impact of service-learning on students has been examined extensively. As service-learning was becoming a prominent teaching pedagogy, researchers were interested in giving the field credibility through examining the benefits for students. I will focus on discussing the results of the two largest studies that both included multiple institutions. These comprehensive studies were conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute (Astin & Sax, 1998; Denson, Vogelgesang, & Saenz, 2005; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000) and by Eyler and Giles (1999).

From the Higher Education Research Institute’s work, we know service participation has a positive impact, that service-learning has more of an impact than community service, and that the impact of service-learning continues after students graduate. As service-learning was becoming a recognized teaching and learning pedagogy, researchers first analyzed the benefits for students who participated in service (not necessarily service-learning) as part of their college career as compared to students were not involved with service. Astin and Sax (1998) finds that students' academic development, civic responsibility, and life skills are all positively
influenced by service participation in college. A second study (Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000) directly compares service-learning and co-curricular community service to identify the unique contributions of course-based service beyond those of community service. In addition to positive academic and leadership outcomes, this study found that service-learning positively affects three affective measures more than generic service: commitment to activism, promoting racial understanding, and self-efficacy. This led the researchers to conclude that “service-learning provides a concrete means by which institutions of higher education can educate students to become concerned and involved citizens” (Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000, p. 30).

Denson, Vogelgesang, and Saenz (2005) completed a follow-up study and surveyed participants again regarding forms of political and civic participation since leaving college and finds that, compared to generic volunteerism, service-learning has a stronger positive effect on post-college civic and political engagement.

Eyler and Giles (1999), in their seminal work, Where’s the Learning in Service-Learning?, finds that students who participate in service-learning have increased personal and interpersonal development, understanding of course content, engagement in community issues, and critical thinking skills. Eyler and Giles also focus on program characteristics that made a difference for students’ learning. Placement quality (where students can take initiative and work as peers with community members), application to course content, reflection activities, interaction with diversity, and meeting an identified need in the community were all program characteristics that significantly predicted the outcomes for students. This study examines both the learning for students and the program characteristics that
will lead to that learning. In doing so, they identify what characterizes a well integrated service-learning program.

There has been extensive research on the impact of service-learning for students. The two studies I discussed were the largest and most comprehensive studies to date about the benefits of this practice for students. They leave little doubt that service-learning benefits students personally, academically, and civically and that practitioners must pay attention to the program characteristics of this practice. These studies, among others, examined a traditional practice of service-learning. There was no differentiation or discussion of alternative forms of service-learning practice.

**Benefits for the institution.** Higher education is being challenged to educate students who will graduate and contribute positively to their local, national, and global communities. Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, and Stevens (2003) states that students graduating from college today need more than knowledge and skills; they need to see themselves as members of a community, to be willing to act for the common good and to be able to effectively do so. In addition, students need to expand beyond their role as responsible community members to an active role of public problem solvers and co-producers of public works to fully live out their citizenship (Boyte & Kari, 2000).

There is also growing awareness that the institution is a member of a neighborhood and a society, and thus has responsibility to that community. The significant resources of the institution, such as student time, faculty expertise, facilities, and convening power, need to be used in service of the community. There
is an interdependent nature to the relationship between the university and the community. The institutional engagement cannot be a one-way problem solving approach (Thomas, 2000; Walshok, 1999). The engaged campus, in partnership with the community, can be responsive to the community’s identified needs, opportunities, and goals (Ramaley, 2005) and create ongoing relationships to exchange knowledge (as opposed to solely transfer knowledge) and to work together on a shared agenda (Walshok).

Service-learning is one of the avenues through which higher education is making a recommitment to its civic responsibility. Service-learning provides opportunities for students to interact with diverse people, viewpoints, and life experiences. Students who participate in service-learning work in diverse communities and will be better able to enter a diverse society upon graduation (Ehrlich, 2000). Engaged pedagogies, such as service-learning, prepare students to live and work in a diverse multicultural world.

**Benefits for the community.** There has been significantly less research regarding the impact of service-learning on the community. Vernon and Ward (1999) criticize this lack of research regarding the impact of service-learning on the community and on the agencies with which students work. They stated, “if service-learning researchers continue to ignore the community perspective, then we are perpetuating the hierarchical and potentially destructive relationships between campuses and their surrounding communities that service-learning implicitly seeks to remedy” (p. 30).
There are benefits for the community partner in establishing a service-learning relationship with a higher education institution. Primarily, the community agency needs more volunteers to provide services to their constituents. Vernon and Ward (1999) specifically identify that community agencies are able to provide individualized services (like individualized tutoring sessions for school age children) that they would not have been able to afford without a consistent group of service learners. Worrall (2007) also find that community agencies are able to expand the reach of their programs due to a reliable pool of volunteers. While in both studies (Vernon & Ward; Worrall) the community agencies initiated the relationship with the higher education institution because of a perceived opportunity to access a resource (students), Worrall found that over time community agencies grew into seeing themselves as educational partners.

The community agencies also experienced difficulties with the service-learning relationship. Vernon and Ward (1999) and Worrall (2007) both discuss the challenges of the short academic term and of the limited student schedule. Community agencies have to invest resources (time and energy) into training students to be ready to work with their clients. By the time the student has become proficient in their role, the academic term is over and the agency has to start again with a new batch of students. Additionally, due to class and work commitments, the student has limited time to volunteer; the agency has to work around the student’s schedule. School holidays and exams further complicate the scheduling process. Worrall also identifies other challenges for the community agency as well: students have varying degrees of interest in service-learning which affects their commitment
to the agency and the faculty member may lack knowledge or interest in the work of the community agency or the activity of their students. Finally, all the community agencies in Worrall’s study needed to have some process of adaptation to integrate service learners into the daily work of their organization.

The field of service-learning has a solid research base. We have a much clearer understanding of how service-learning affects students, institutions, and the community. However, in this body of knowledge, there is little emphasis on the different conceptualizations of service-learning and how different philosophical practices may affect the impact of service-learning. The vast majority of service-learning research examines the practice in a generic or traditional sense. Only recently have researchers begun to differentiate between traditional service-learning and service-learning that has a specific social justice focus. The next section of this literature review will examine different conceptualizations of service-learning practice and will examine a much narrower body of research, social justice focused service-learning.

**Critical Service-Learning**

As the field of service-learning has developed, researchers and practitioners have begun to differentiate between models of service-learning practice. The most common distinctions are service-learning that is charity focused, which is often called traditional service-learning, and service-learning that is social justice or *critical service-learning*. Mitchell (2008) describes that there is an unspoken debate between the two camps of service-learning practitioners. The traditional approach emphasizes the service to the community without paying attention to the cause of
the inequality and "assumes that community service linked to classroom learning is inherently connected to concerns of social justice" (Mitchell, p. 50). Alternatively, a growing body of literature is critical of traditional service-learning and is "unapologetic in its aim to dismantle structures of injustice" (Mitchell, p. 50). In this section, I will define and describe the different models of service-learning and discuss how these distinctions have created new research opportunities in this field.

Traditional service-learning. Morton (1995) defines charity focused service-learning as “the provision of direct service where the control of the service (resources and decisions affecting their distribution) remains with the provider” (p. 21). Much of service-learning takes this form. There are many examples of this type of service-learning: education students who provide after-school tutoring for children at a local community center or accounting students who assist with income tax preparation. The college students have the knowledge and the time to share with the community. Through the service, the students can gain benefits discussed in the previous section of this review such as greater awareness of the community and its needs, professional development, and a greater understanding of course materials. Additionally, the community receives a direct benefit (children learn math or income tax forms are completed) but once the students have completed their required hours, often the benefits leave with them or local community agencies have to pick up the slack left behind.

For practitioners and scholars who are trying to differentiate service-learning practices, there is much critique of the charity model of service-learning. Service-learning in its most traditional form does not normally pay specific
attention to the power differential between the student and the service recipient (King, 2004; O'Grady, 2000). The student has the knowledge, the time, or the resources the community agency needs. This is an uneven relationship based on different levels of power. The student has potentially unacknowledged privilege exemplified by the ability to walk away from the service-learning experience at any time. This is a power that the service recipient does not have. King found that when service-learning relationships are not based on mutual investment and vulnerability the discrepancy can be exploitative. Pompa (2002) summarizes the concerns about unequal power in service-learning:

I must admit I have never been comfortable with the phrase “service-learning.” Unless facilitated with great care and consciousness, “service” can unwittingly become an exercise in patronization. In a society replete with hierarchical structures and patriarchal philosophies, service-learning’s potential danger is for it to become the very thing it seeks to eschew. And it can happen in subtle ways. The crux of the problem revolves around power issues. If I “do for” you, “serve” you, “give to” you – that creates a connection in which I have the resources, the abilities, and the power, and you are on the receiving end. It can be – while benign in intent – ironically disempowering to the receiver, granting full power to the giver. Without meaning to, this process replicates the “have-have not” paradigm that underlies many social problems. (p. 68)

The beneficial outcomes of service-learning for the students can also be compromised. Cipolle (2010) discusses that students cannot just be dropped into a
service-learning experience without first learning about the population they will serve along with the political and social contexts. Additionally, students need to increase their understanding of discrimination, racism, and classism. Without an understanding of the social and political structures at work, an experience of service-learning can “reinforce stereotypes and promote a paternalistic attitude toward those they are serving” (Cipolle, p. 45). The majority of students who participate in service-learning are White middle or upper income students; it is especially critical when these students work in communities of color that they understand the social dynamics of poverty and racism that are at play (O’Grady, 2000). In addition, if one of the goals of service-learning is for the student’s own personal growth and professional development, this can again create a dynamic where the student and the university are exploiting the community for their own gain instead of truly serving the community’s needs.

Robinson (2000) is forceful with his critique of the charity model of service-learning and especially of placing students in traditional nonprofit or government sponsored agencies. He argues that nonprofits often put their organizational survival over the true needs of their clients and that they often do very little to challenge the social or political structures that have caused the need for their service. By placing students to work within “the system” instead of actively challenging it, traditional service-learning can domesticate students who may have been drawn to service-learning because of the potential for social transformation. While he concedes that traditional service-learning can have its place, he advocates
for exposing students to a wide variety of political stances and social change opportunities.

Morton (1995) is one of the few authors who distinguishes different models of service-learning and does not disparage the charity model. He discusses that each model of service-learning has a range of thin to thick versions, from those “which lack integrity or depth to those which have integrity and depth” (p. 21). At its best, or thickest, charity focused service-learning can be grounded in individuals who recognize that they are part of a community and have responsibilities in that community. The act of direct service can be a stance of recognizing the inherent worth of every person. From this viewpoint, “charity may be an act of faith, or more radically and simply an ideal way of being in the world” (p. 26).

**Critical service-learning.** Alternative to a charity model, some researchers and practitioners advocate for service-learning that is grounded in social justice education. The term social justice itself can be difficult to define, and some authors talk about using a social justice approach without actually defining what that means. For example, Glennon (2004) talks about exposing students to injustice as a way to helping students understand justice, while never defining what the term social justice means. Blundo (2010) discusses social justice as a complex concept that has multiple definitions depending on one’s social, personal, and political contexts. “Definitions include actions which promote and establish equal rights, opportunities, and liberties within a society and its institutions. Inherent within these definitions is the right to have a voice in society. That is, to have one’s
perspectives, ideas, wishes, and experiences heard, respected and given credence” (p. 92).

Bell (2007) has an often-cited definition of social justice. She describes social justice as both a process and a goal.

The goal of social justice is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure. We envision a society in which individuals are self-determined (able to develop their full capacities) and interdependent (capable of interacting democratically with others). Social justice involves social actors who have a sense of their own agency as well as sense of social responsibility toward and with others, their society and the broader world in which we live. (p. 1-2)

The process of attaining social justice “should be democratic and participatory, inclusive and affirming of human agency and human capacity for working collaboratively to create change” (Bell, p. 2).

**Social justice education and service-learning.** Social justice education has its origins in the U.S. civil rights era (Butin, 2007). The goal of social justice education, according to Westheimer and Kahne (2007), is to prepare students to use their knowledge and skills to create societies and institutions that treat people more fairly and humanely. Through developing analytical skills and reflecting on individual and societal forms of injustice, students are able to critically look at individual and systemic forms of power, privilege, and inequity (Bell, 2007; Boyle-
Baise & Langford, 2004; Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Glennon, 2004; Mayhew & Fernández, 2007; Warren, 1998). Analyzing and reflecting is not enough; social justice educators must guide students to action (Einfeld & Collins; Warren) so that they develop a sense of agency to change oppressive patterns and behaviors in themselves and in their communities (Bell, 2007).

Social justice education has specific pedagogical techniques. Social justice educators need to simultaneously acknowledge individual dimensions of the experience while making connections to systemic dimensions of oppression. They use reflection and experience as tools for student-centered learning and establish equilibrium between emotional and cognitive components of the learning process (Adams, 2007). Wade (2004) and Warren (1998) discuss that it is important to create a supportive student-centered classroom to discuss issues of social justice. Students can experience angst, doubt, and discomfort (Warren) and need a place to share feelings and experiences honestly and listen compassionately to people who have different feelings and experiences. Additionally, social justice educators need to pay attention to negative interactions between students. Mayhew and Fernández (2007) find that when social justice educators do not create a space for students with differing social identities to have healthy and positive interactions with each other, they might reinforce existing forms of prejudice and discrimination.

There are specific pedagogical choices that educators utilize in social justice service-learning. There is a focus on analyzing social structures to become aware of the complex underlying issues of oppression (Boyle-Basie & Langford, 2004; Cuban & Anderson, 2007; Mayhew & Fernández, 2007; Mitchell, 2007; Westheimer &
Kahne, 2004). Educators also pay attention to issues of power both between the instructor and the students and between the university and the community (Mitchell, 2007; Warren, 1998). Building authentic relationships within the class and with the community partner is also essential (Cuban & Anderson, 2007; Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Mitchell, 2008). Critical reflection techniques are utilized to illuminate systemic oppression (Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Wade & Raba, 2003).

Finally, through social justice focused service-learning, the students develop social change strategies that they can continue to use after the course is completed (Cuban & Anderson, 2007; Mitchell, 2008; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

While traditional service-learning is certainly the majority of the practice, it is unknown what percentage of service-learning would be considered social justice service-learning. Boyle-Baise, et al. (2007), Cuban & Anderson (2007), and Robinson (2000) all cite a HUD (1999) study that attempted to categorize 599 college service-learning programs. Of the programs they surveyed, only 1% included any form of social change action. In the past 10 years, writing and research about social justice service-learning has increased, so it may be reasonable to assume that it is more common than in 1999, but still in the minority of service-learning experiences.

**Defining critical service-learning.** When social justice and service-learning are discussed together in the literature, authors use different terms to describe and define this alternative practice of service-learning. It is essential to examine the range of practices that are considered different than traditional service-learning and
to define my understanding of social justice focused service-learning for the context of this study.

Morton (1995) compares three different paradigms of service-learning practice: the charity model, the project model, and the social change model. He uses the term social change model of service-learning to describe a practice that emerges out of developing relationships with stakeholder groups, learning about the root causes of community issues, and empowering the systematically disenfranchised.

Butin (2010) creates four conceptualizations of service-learning. The technical and the cultural conceptualizations fall on the charity side of the continuum. Technical service-learning focuses on service for the purpose of increasing students’ content knowledge, while cultural service-learning focuses on increasing students’ sense of civic engagement and cultural competency. On the social justice side of the continuum are political and anti-foundational conceptualizations of service-learning. In the political conceptualization of service-learning students address both surface and underlying societal problems through correcting power imbalances, taking the perspective of and advocating for marginalized groups, and harnessing the resources of the university to create social change. Cuban and Anderson (2007) also use the term political service-learning to describe service-learning, which combines analyzing social issues with action on a systemic level. Butin’s (2007, 2010) fourth conceptualization is antifoundational service-learning, which he describes as having the best potential for justice-learning. In service-learning experiences where students confront their own unacknowledged privileges, understand the difficulty of changing unjust social structures, or come to
learn both the faults and strengths of community leaders, students experience doubt and ambiguity that can create cognitive dissonance. In antifoundational service-learning, the experience of cognitive dissonance is used to “deepen one’s understanding of and commitment to future justice-oriented endeavors” (Butin, 2007, p. 180). Instead of service-learning being the end goal, it becomes the springboard for students’ engagement in the world and makes visible the complexity of the process and the goal of social justice (Butin).

Mitchell (2007, 2008) distinguishes between traditional service-learning and critical service-learning. In traditional service-learning, the service-learning experience is a means to make a difference in the community and to apply academic course concepts. Critical service-learning pays attention to social change, questions the distribution of power in society, and focuses on developing authentic relationships between higher education institutions and the community that is served. In critical service-learning, the service-learning experience also provides opportunities to question the impact of privilege and power on life circumstances and to challenge stereotypes and the systemic nature of oppression (Mitchell, 2007, 2008).

The term critical service-learning has been found in other service-learning literature. Rhoads (1997) was the first to use the concept of critical community service, according to Mitchell (2008). Rhoads outlined eight principles of critical community service which included mutuality, community building, reflective action linked to broader social problems, and the goal of developing critical consciousness and social change. Rosenberger (2000) and Rice and Pollack (2000) use the term
critical service-learning to describe a practice of becoming aware of issues of power in service-learning and developing a critical consciousness to create a just and equitable society.

For the purposes of this study and literature review, I will use the term *critical service-learning* to describe service-learning that has a social justice orientation or focus. Critical service-learning differs from traditional service-learning in three ways (a) a social change orientation which develops a critical consciousness in students so that they can reflect, analyze, and act to change social inequities, (b) questioning of the distribution of power in society, and (c) development of authentic relationships in the community and in the classroom (Mitchell, 2008). I have selected this definition among others that are used in the literature, because it has a history of use in the literature, it has been empirically tested (Mitchell, 2007, 2008), and it includes the key elements of Bell's (2007) definition of social justice that was discussed earlier.

**Programmatic examples of critical service-learning.** Since critical service-learning is not the norm, I would like to provide two examples from the literature, which exemplify the practice of critical service-learning. Blundo (2010) provides one example of critical service-learning, which he describes as a “social justice course” (p. 90). He wrote about social work and communications students who created a documentary with African American and Native American Southern community members who lived through the educational desegregation process in the 1950s. The participants shared their experiences of witnessing their high schools being closed, the high schools that generations of their family had attended,
where they had strengthened their pride in their heritage and history, and they had access to mentors. The students, through social justice readings and their service-learning experience, grew to understand how they had “been socialized and had internalized the social perspectives of dominant White power structures through their school’s American history textbooks” (p. 95). What had been written about as integration of students was actually a reluctant assimilation as African American and Native American students had to leave their community and fit into the White school system. The documentary videos ultimately gave voice to a story of injustice that had not been previously told and created action for social change. This example has all the elements of critical service-learning: analysis and reflection of individual and social structures, awareness of the power of history to tell only one version of the story, and significant development of relationships in the community where the community members became the teachers and text for the course.

Robinson (2000) details a very different example of critical service-learning, one with a specific political action focus. At the University of Colorado Denver (UCD), political science students worked in partnership with a tenant organizing campaign to bring the lack of low income housing to the front of the city's agenda. Students worked with housing activists to mobilize low income residents to attend and often disrupt city council meetings so that this issue would be addressed. As a result, the city created an affordable housing task force, whose progress was monitored and challenged by the housing activists and UCD students. This example of service-learning has a clear social change action focus. The students learned about structural injustices in the community as well as community organizing
strategies. They were actively challenging the power differences between the elected officials and the community members. They listened to the needs of the community and worked with them to address the systemic injustice.

Both Blundo (2010) and Robinson (2000) differentiate their practice of service-learning from traditional service-learning, though neither uses the term critical service-learning to describe their practice. The essential components of critical service-learning are present: (a) attention to social change, (b) questioning the distribution of power, and (c) developing authentic relationships. Critical service-learning can be radical political action, but it also can be giving voice to stories that have not been heard. There is an internal aspect to critical service-learning where students, as in Blundo (2010), come to realize their own implicit involvement in unjust structures. There is also an action component, where students are acting to address social inequity.

**Debate about the appropriateness of critical service-learning.** In service-learning research, there is a debate about the value of different models of service-learning. Some find that service-learning with a social justice focus has a place on campus, but not the only place. Other groups advocate for all service-learning to move toward a critical orientation. Still others question whether higher education should be involved in any form of critical service-learning due to the seemingly political nature of the practice.

Some service-learning advocates see the value in multiple and equally appropriate forms of practice. Morton (1995) argues that there are multiple paradigms that can be utilized for service-learning courses, for example a charity or
a social justice paradigm. Educators can select which paradigm is most appropriate for their discipline and course outcomes and challenge students to work more effectively and deeply in that paradigm. Thus, Morton, while not discounting the value of the social justice paradigm, is saying that one paradigm is not preferable to another.

Westheimer and Kahne (2004) also developed a framework of three different, though not mutually exclusive, visions of citizenship and described service-learning programs for each of the paradigms of citizenship. The *personally responsible citizen* has good character and is honest, responsible, and law abiding member of the community. If an instructor wanted to develop personally responsible citizens, students could be encouraged to contribute to a food bank as their service activity. The *participatory citizen* is an active member of community organizations, organizes community efforts to care for those in need, and solves social problems through taking leadership positions within established systems and community structures. The service-learning activity in this type of citizenship training would be to organize a food drive on campus. The *justice-oriented citizen* critically assesses social, political, and economic structures to see beyond surface causes, seeks out and addresses areas of injustice, and knows how to affect systemic change. If an instructor wanted to develop justice-oriented citizens, students would explore why people are hungry and their service-learning experience would act to solve root causes. Prentice (2007) echoes the importance of defining the outcomes for the students ahead of time and not critiquing service-learning that is designed to meet that goal. “If developing justice orientated citizens is not a goal of a particular
service-learning experience or program, then that program should not be criticized for the lack of social justice citizens. Service-learning need not transform every student into a social reformer for it to be deemed successful or valuable” (p. 143-144).

There are researchers who see models of service-learning on a continuum. The traditional charity focused conceptualizations are on one side of the continuum and the critical conceptualizations are on the opposite end. Most of these practitioners advocate for moving all service-learning toward the critical end of the spectrum. Wang and Rodgers (2006) states that, through service-learning, students often provide help to social service agencies, which meet social needs created by social inequities. Students should analyze the root causes for the social inequities and, at least, plan action steps to respond to the causes. Kendall (1990) also argues that all service-learning experiences should have a specific goal of moving students along a continuum from providing service toward promoting social justice. Cipolle (2010) outlines a process for moving students from a charity model to a social justice model through developing critical consciousness.

There is some debate regarding the appropriateness of incorporating social justice education into service-learning courses at all. Theorists such as Leeds (1999) believe that service-learning courses should not promote one philosophy or one set of values over another. Leeds is openly critical of the promise of social change through service-learning. He finds that the goal of service-learning to create social change is fuzzy and unspecific. He also discusses that there is no evidence to support that service-learning can actually achieve this goal. Additionally, social
change is identified as the purview of political parties and movements and not an educational goal.

Educators who favor critical service-learning have to adequately address the challenge that education should stay out of politics. Often they point out that all education is value laden and has political implications (Cipolle, 2010; Glennon, 2004; O’Grady, 2000). Administration and faculty decisions about the choice of and delivery of curriculum all have political implications. Texts selected for a course implies a value over others that are not selected. While Robinson (2000) finds that it is appropriate for an instructor utilizing justice oriented service-learning to provide alternatives for students who do not want to participate in service-learning which is counter to their political views, he also cites that this type of service-learning preserves neutrality on campus by creating more options for students to discover their political views and identity. All faculty have an agenda in their teaching, that which they believe are the most significant elements of their field or most important outcomes for their students. Cipolle urges educators to walk the fine line of having an agenda without pushing their agenda on their students.

Given the passionate terms advocates use for the role of social justice focused service-learning, it is surprising that there is little empirical research on the experience of students who participate in this form of service-learning. The next section of this literature review will examine the published research on this type of practice.

Critical service-learning research. There is very little empirical research, which specifically explores social justice focused or critical service-learning. Thus
there are many opportunities to further expand this body of literature. For the purposes of this literature review, empirical research that described research methods and results were considered. Studies that were programmatic descriptions or that reported research findings but did not describe data collection or analysis methods were not considered. Empirical research has focused on program implementation and student outcomes.

Cuban and Anderson (2007) use a case study approach to describe the process of a faculty fellows program institutionalizing service-learning from a social justice perspective. They find that to be successful, institutions needed to have social justice as part of the worldview of the institution, pay attention to the developmental process of the students, be prepared for blended outcomes due to varied political perspectives of the participants, and recognize that the relationships with the community partners can be fragile.

Einfeld and Collins (2008), Glennon (2004), Guthrie and McCracken (2010), Mitchell (2007), Schamber and Mahoney (2008), and Wang and Rodgers (2006) all examine the outcomes for undergraduate students who participated in critical service-learning. Glennon find that participation in a critical service-learning project, along with reflection on individual perspectives of race, gender, and culture and researching a social justice issue, broadened students’ understanding of social justice to include systemic elements and strengthened students’ sense of moral agency. Guthrie finds that online students in a social justice focused service-learning course were able to have honest and respectful conversations about issues of injustice, prejudice and inequality in online threaded discussions. Mitchell
describes how students in the Citizen Scholars Program at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, a four semester long academic program which combines service-learning and a social justice curriculum, came to a more complex understanding of social justice and deeper commitment to social action. She credits both the classroom component and the service-learning component for challenging stereotypes and privilege, developing new skills, and illuminating the systemic nature of oppression. Wang and Rodgers, a quantitative study, compare the cognitive development of students who participated in critical service-learning with students who participated in traditional service-learning. The cognitive level changes were significantly higher for students who participated in critical service-learning. Schamber and Mahoney find that students who combined a civic engagement course and service-learning have significantly higher changes in their political awareness and social justice attitudes than students who take the course without the service-learning component. Lastly, Einfeld and Collins examine student participants on a long-term Americorps program and their attitudes about and commitment to social justice. They find students increased their awareness of societal inequities, but did not have a commitment to pursue systemic social change. They found that their program lacked structured analysis of social issues and stated, “this study is evidence that being exposed to situations of inequality and service to underprivileged populations does not automatically foster a commitment to social justice” (p. 106).

There is very little research on the impact for students who participate in critical service-learning. The literature provides some preliminary data, but much
more needs to be known about the impact for students, especially over time. The above studies all examine the experience or outcomes for students directly after the end of the course or program. No literature describes the lasting or longer term impact of participation in critical service-learning. My study will fill this hole in the literature by describing the experience and meaning making of students who participate in critical service-learning over time. The context of my study is a specific practice of service-learning, international service-learning.

**International Service-Learning (ISL)**

Higher education is feeling an urgency to internationalize (Plater, 2011). Plater outlines increasing public pressure for higher education to engage their students in the world so that they have an understanding of culture and differences and are prepared for work and citizenship in a globalized society. ISL is an important avenue to prepare college graduates to be “active global citizens in the 21st century” (Bringle & Hatcher, 2011, p. 3) and to “act in the world and for the world” (Plater, p. 42, original italics).

Service-learning in an international setting is a growing practice in higher education. Campus Compact found that in 2009, 56% of their member institutions had ISL opportunities, an increase of 24% since 2002 (Campus Compact, 2002 & 2009). This section of the literature review will explore the definitions and conceptualizations of ISL and will examine practices and challenges for implementing ISL. There is a small but growing body of literature that has empirically examined the outcomes for students who participate in ISL. I will synthesize the findings on student outcomes, critique some of the research
methodology used, and finally discuss the research agenda for ISL that is found in the literature. This section of the literature review will situate my study in the context of ISL literature.

**ISL defined.** Crabtree (2008) describes ISL as an umbrella term for a variety of educational experiences found in higher education, including co-curricular international mission and service trips, study abroad programs with service-learning experiences, academic courses that include an international and service component, and international programs with service-learning curricula. Crabtree simply defines ISL as combining “academic instruction and community-based service in an international context” (p. 18).

It was only recently that a formal definition of ISL was offered in the literature. Bringle and Hatcher (2011) adapted their often-used definition of service-learning (discussed earlier in this literature review) to describe ISL experiences. The italics in the definition below are from the original text and are meant to highlight the parts of the definition that have been modified from the original. Their definition of ISL is:

*A structured academic experience in another country in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that addresses identified community needs; (b) learn from direct interaction and cross-cultural dialogue with others; and (c) reflect on the experience in such a way to gain further understanding of course content, a deeper understanding of global and intercultural issues, a broader appreciation of the host country and the*
discipline, and an enhanced sense of their own responsibilities as citizens, locally and *globally*. (Bringle & Hatcher, 2011, p. 19)

This definition still emphasizes the best practices of service-learning, while adding the international, cross-cultural, and global issues that students will face. This definition will guide my conversation of ISL.

**ISL conceptualizations.** With varied educational activities considered ISL, the literature has begun to discuss theoretical frameworks for the practice and research of ISL. Bringle and Hatcher (2011) view ISL as the intersection of study abroad, service-learning, and international education. They briefly explored each of these educational domains individually and paired together. For example, what would service-learning and international education look like without a study abroad component? Conceivably, students could have international educational experiences without leaving the U.S. if their service-learning was with recent Laotian immigrants.

Plater (2011) outlines how ISL brings the best of these three education practices together. He finds that in ISL, students are immersed in an experience with intensity and immediacy. Unlike domestic service-learning, students are unable to escape from the experience by retreating back to their campuses after a few hours. Students are able to apply their knowledge in real time and to connect their knowledge to a local community. ISL provides a unique opportunity to dialogue with others, a dialogue with a purpose so that the community and the students can work together on a project or activity. In study abroad, students can learn about life in their host country, but with ISL, students are immersed in a
community of action they might not otherwise be introduced to. Finally, ISL “inherently encourages students to connect their sense of local as they have lived it at home with their hosts’ sense of local as they display it in their actions” (Plater, p. 43). The question of being a global citizen often discussed in international education becomes very personal very quickly with experiences of ISL. Students become connected to families and communities in their host country and see their experience with new eyes.

Crabtree (2008) also provides a theoretical model for ISL, which included the elements of Bringle and Hatcher’s model (2011). Additionally, she adds that practitioners of ISL need to take into account learning theory, international development theory, and participatory research, as well as theory in one’s own discipline.

Along with variations of theoretical models, there is variability in ISL course structure. Jones and Steinberg (2011) identify course design elements, such as location of the course, the intensity of the service (high or low), whether foreign or domestic faculty teaches the course, and whether the course is content focused or skill focused. All of these design elements will impact the ISL experience for the students.

Jones and Steinberg (2011) describe five types of ISL course structures that are found in the literature. The “all in the host country” structure consists of a total course immersion of six weeks to a semester entirely in the host country, often utilizing faculty of that country. The “sandwich 1” structure is comprised of weeks of study in the U.S., followed by a week or more of immersion in a host country, and
then a return to campus for debriefing and follow up. The “sandwich 2” model, similar to the “sandwich 1” model, adds a domestic service-learning component prior to the international experience. The practicum model provides students with an international service-learning experience, which aids in their pre-professional development; for example, pre-service teachers doing student teaching in an international location. Finally is the competency based model in which students are part of a formal education experience, which may meet disciplinary or professional competencies, but is not necessarily offered for credit. Medical students with the desire to learn about international health issues or tropical medicine may fit this model.

My study will examine the experience of students in a “sandwich 1” structured courses. The advantages of this type of structure are that it allows for greater accessibility for students (Jones & Steinberg, 2011). Not all students are able to go abroad for a semester or longer. A high intensity service-learning component with meaningful interaction in the community and intentional reflection can compensate for shortened length of time in-country.

**Best practices in ISL.** While domestic service-learning has drafted best practices (Kendall, 1990; Howard, 1993, as cited in Campus Compact, 2003), no similar standards have been created for ISL. However, ISL practitioners often write about the challenges of facilitating ISL and the best practices that they would recommend. Brown (2011) discusses the outcomes for a well-designed ISL program or course which include:

- enrich students’ learning of academic subjects;
• promote intercultural and international understanding;

• foster students’ personal growth;

• provide support to nongovernmental organizations and communities;

• develop students’ leadership skills;

• establish reciprocity between university and community;

• provide clear connections between the learning and the service components;

and

• prepare students for their international experience and their return.

In reading ISL literature, there seem to be two themes regarding best practices that I would highlight. These themes are similar to the key elements of service-learning practice discussed in an earlier section of this literature review, but address the specific concerns for service-learning practice in an international setting. The themes are (a) creating reciprocal relationships and (b) critical reflection and analysis of experience. I will discuss each of these themes below.

**Creating reciprocal relationships.** Kahn (2011) asks a challenging question about overcoming the challenges of ISL practice. “Can we ever engage in ISL without succumbing in part to neocolonialist models of development that involve powerful and wealthy foreigners from one world providing for those in need in another?” (p. 116-117). This question gets at the heart of the challenge of ISL work. Creating reciprocal relationships in domestic service-learning is tricky due to power differentials and competing needs and expectations. In ISL there are additional challenges including language and cultural differences, communication over long distances, historical relationships between countries, previous disempowering
models of development and, oftentimes, staggering differences in economic resources.

Porter and Monard (2001), in their case study regarding creating reciprocal relationships in a Bolivian ISL program, use an Andean term *ayni* to contextualize this ongoing process. They focused on creating a relationship that springs from a genuine need in the community, that the exchange between the university and the community needs to be equitable, and that there should be risks for both partners. Importantly, attention needs to be paid to growing networks of stakeholders to share ownership of the project. This, in and of itself, can be challenging as Crabtree (1998) discusses, since ISL projects can be easily co-opted by special interests from nongovernmental and community organizations and may not actually represent the need in the community. Building relationships with communities and organizations is an ongoing process that takes time and patience.

**Critical reflection and analysis.** Also essential in creating reciprocal relationships is preparing students prior to and supporting them during the ISL experience through reflection and analysis. Students and faculty cannot begin an ISL experience thinking that they can help or develop a community (Kahn, 2011). Through ISL, students are immersed in a community with a complex intersection of politics, economics, environment, identity, and culture which are always changing (Sutton, 2011). Longo and Saltmarsh (2011) eloquently communicate how students should be prepared for ISL:

Students participating in international partnerships should be prepared not to have expectations for meaningfully contributing to
community change, but they can be prepared to participate in reflective inquiry on the origins and intent of the projects in which they participate, the relationships of the projects to the social and power structures of the host community and country, and the degree to which their projects and activities might either perpetuate or liberate political, social and economic structures. (p. 77)

For Longo and Saltmarsh, students must be prepared to reflect critically on their experience.

Grusky (2000) finds that when students are in the host country, many experiences present themselves that provide rich opportunities for reflection. In her experience of ISL in Latin America, often students have questions about the children and adults asking for money, about the female students who are heckled on the street, or about the difficulty in portraying the U.S. experience to their host family. These questions are opportunities for ISL practitioners to lead critical analysis of the social, cultural, and political realities of the host country. Analysis and reflection on these moments allows students to move beyond being tourists to understanding more about the complex realities of the country. Whitney and Clayton (2011) further echo the importance of intentionally creating opportunities for critical reflection for students to achieve deeper understanding of academic material, of global citizenship, and of “themselves as authors of their own growth” (p. 151).
It is the role of the ISL practitioner to intentionally structure critical reflection and analysis from many viewpoints so that students become aware of the complexities of global citizenship and their role to act responsibly and humbly in their host community. Sutton (2011) further stresses the importance of having a deep understanding of the local context.

Planting trees without knowing why the area is deforested, without knowing what trees are locally valued, without knowing who controls the land on which the trees are planted is naïve, dangerous and misses the research and learning opportunities inherent in this activity. (p. 126)

**ISL Research.** The literature on ISL is very limited (Crabtree, 2008; Grusky, 2000; Kiely, 2004, 2011; Tonkin, 2011) without any comprehensive research agenda established in this field (Tonkin). Kiely (2011) also discusses that much of the ISL literature is not empirically based. In my literature search, I found many descriptions of ISL programs and discussions of incorporating service-learning into existing study abroad programs and modifying ISL programs to respond to challenges in practice. Smith-Paríolá and Gòkê-Paríolá (2006) provide a detailed description of adding service-learning to a two week study abroad course in Jamaica and how this program has been modified over the years due to lessons learned. Florman, Just, Naka, Peterson, and Seaba (2009) discuss the evolution of their partnership with Rotary International, residents from a Mexican community, and the University of Iowa, and the process of creating an interdisciplinary course
including engineering, pharmacy, and journalism students. These articles stand out because of their detailed discussions of process and lessons learned, but do not make research based conclusions about the impact of these programs or modifications on the students or the community.

In reviewing empirical research on ISL, I narrowed the literature search to empirical studies, which described data collection and analysis procedures as well as results. Articles without a research methods section were not considered. Due to the narrow focus of this study, only empirical research which examined the experience or outcomes for higher education students from U.S. institutions where students traveled outside the U.S. were considered. Studies about ISL courses in countries outside the U.S. (i.e., Chinese students in a ISL course to Taiwan) were not included in this review due to the differing nature of institutional context and cultural assumptions.

Ultimately, I found nine studies that examined the impact or experience for student participants. I found an additional three studies that reported the impact or experience of students who participated in ISL that had a social justice focus. Since the focus of this study is on critical ISL, I will discuss the later three studies separately and in more detail. The research on ISL finds that this type of educational experience has an impact on student development in four areas: (a) personal and interpersonal development, (b) cultural and global competency, (c) professional development, and (d) academic learning. I will synthesize the findings below. Additionally, three studies described the experience of students. Since this is the focus of my study, I will discuss those studies in more detail.
**Personal and interpersonal development.** As a result of ISL involvement, students report an increase in self knowledge and development of values (Gaines-Hanks & Grayman, 2009; Parker & Altman Dautoff, 2007). When comparing students who participated in domestic service-learning to those who participated in ISL, Knutson Miller and Gonzales (2010) find that 54% of ISL students report a significant impact on personal growth and development while only 3.4% of domestic service-learning participants reported a similar impact. ISL has also been shown to increase students’ sense of autonomy and interdependence (Pyle, 1981).

ISL participants also identify interpersonal development. Stachowski, Bodle, and Morrin (2008) find that students report a feeling of connection to their placement communities. In their study, students conducted their student teaching practicum in various international locations and on domestic Native American reservations. In addition, students conducted a service-learning project in their host community. It was through the service-learning project, not the student teaching, that the participants felt a connection to their community. Parker and Altman Dautoff (2007) also find that students report a sense of connection with the student group and with the host community as a result of their service-learning experience. This study differentiates between study abroad activities and service-learning activities during an international immersion. It was through the service-learning activities as opposed to the study abroad activities (meeting local business leaders and touring factories) that this sense of connection is developed.

**Cultural and global competency.** As a result of participation in ISL, students have a broader worldview (Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005; Stachowski et al., 2008),
increased their cultural competence awareness and knowledge (Bentley & Ellison, 2007), and have had additional international travel or study abroad experience (Lewis & Niesenbaum).

**Professional development.** Much of the empirical ISL research that I reviewed examined the experience of pre-professional students. Pre-professional teachers were studied in Stachowski et al. (2008), Knutson Miller and Gonzales (2010), and Roberts (2003). Bentley and Ellison (2007) examine the experience of nursing students in Ecuador. These studies all see evidence of professional development in students as a result of ISL. This evidence includes informing future classroom practice (Stachowski et al.), career goal clarification (Knutson Miller & Gonzales), increased confidence in teaching ability (Roberts), and more willingness to seek education regarding cultural differences to improve nursing practice (Bentley & Ellison).

**Academic learning.** A less studied element of ISL is the academic outcomes for student participants, but there is some indication that ISL can increase students’ learning about academic content. Parker and Dautoff (2007) find that the majority of students referenced learning about the academic content of the course in their journal reflections.

**Description of ISL student experiences.** Of the studies reviewed, only three focused on describing the experience of ISL student participants as opposed to measuring outcomes for students. Stachowski et al. (2008) use written reflections from post-immersion papers to describe students’ experience of building community connections, broadening their worldview, and informing their
classroom practice. This study had a moderate sample size of 88 participants, but there was no indication of the data analysis process. As a result, there is some question about the trustworthiness of findings, since they cannot be replicated in another study. Additionally, the service-learning component in this study seems to focus more on the service than the learning. Students are placed in their host-communities as student teachers. In addition, they are required to create a service-learning project for themselves. The project described seem to resemble community service projects because there was no discussion in the article regarding connection to learning outcomes or reflection practices. While these experiences appeared powerful to the student participants, they did not reflect best practices in service-learning as they were described in the article.

Roberts (2003) describe the experience of pre-professional teachers in a practicum course in Costa Rica. Over a three-year period, she collected data from four cohorts of students, a total of 30 students. She collected data from multiple sources including interviews, focus groups, observations, and student assignments. She created composite descriptions of three different experiences of students that she found represented in her participants. The first perspective is "Wow, this is a life-altering experience" (p. 262). These students have a successful ISL experience "due in part to an ongoing commitment for acquiring knowledge and growth on both personal and professional levels" (p. 264). They are responsible for their own learning, connect their learning to life in the U.S., and develop a deeper consciousness of the world. The second perspective is called "stretching the borders" (p. 265). The ISL experience is challenging for these students because they
start the ISL experience firmly grounded in their own ethnocentrism. But with ongoing, guided instruction and reflection, ISL “has the potential to accelerate participants’ inquiry about a deeper consciousness for the world” (p. 268). The final perspective is “home is where I want to be, forever” (p. 268). These students were unprepared to cope with their ISL experience, often pressured by mentors or family members to participate. They maintained a level of disengagement throughout the experience and as a result did not benefit from the ISL experience. Roberts does not provide statistics for how many students fit into each category, but it is a unique finding to describe the type of student who may not benefit from ISL experiences.

All of Roberts’ (2003) data was collected during or shortly after the students’ ISL experience. Kiely (2004) is critical of ISL studies which only report short term effects of ISL, relying on only data collected during or shortly after the experience. Little is known about how students continue to understand and make meaning of their experience in the months or years that follow. My study’s data collection will include in-depth interviews at least six months after the ISL experience. The space between ISL and the interviews will allow a description of the experience of the students over time. Additionally, my study will differ from Roberts in that it will describe the experience of students who have different ISL experiences; Roberts only looked at students who had participated in one type of service in one host country.

Finally, Tonkin and Quiroga (2004) describe the impact of participation in International Partnership for Service-Learning and Leadership program (IPSL), a non-profit educational organization with a 28-year history of facilitating ISL
programs (IPSL website). Seventeen program alumni from the past 15 years participated in interviews and focus groups to describe their experience of ISL and the impact in their present lives. Participants discuss the service experience, the transitioning to a new culture, the process of leaving their comfort zone, their new awareness of being an American and of American culture, the challenges of re-entry, and the impact of ISL on their career choices.

This study has some similarities to my study. Participants had diverse service-learning experiences; they did not travel together in a group, rather their ISL experience was in different countries with different host-agencies. This study examined the experience of the participants over time; they were not freshly finished with their ISL experience, as with Roberts (2003) or Stachowski et al. (2008). This allowed the initial euphoria of the experience to fade and for longer-term implications of ISL to be described. The purpose of this study differs from mine; Tonkin and Quiroga hoped to assess the effectiveness of the IPSL program and the impact on the participants. The purpose of my study is not to assess effectiveness, but rather to describe the experience of students who participate in ISL. Finally, my study is different from this one due to my additional focus on critical ISL. The IPSL program is not specifically focused on social change and issues of power in its practice. There are a few empirical studies that examine the experience of students who participate in critical ISL. These studies will be examined in detail below.
Critical International Service-Learning

Critical ISL is not a term found in the literature, but the term that I am using in this dissertation to describe educational experiences which combine the elements of critical service-learning as described by Mitchell (2008) with the elements of Bringle and Hatcher’s (2011) definition of ISL. Specifically, critical ISL has evidence of:

A structured academic experience in another country in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that addresses identified community needs; (b) learn from direct interaction and cross-cultural dialogue with others; and (c) reflect on the experience in such a way to gain further understanding of course content, a deeper understanding of global and intercultural issues, a broader appreciation of the host country and the discipline, and an enhanced sense of their own responsibilities as citizens, locally and globally. (Bringle & Hatcher, p. 19)

Critical service-learning also incorporates the three elements that differentiate traditional service-learning from critical service-learning (Mitchell, 2008). These elements are (a) a social change orientation which develops a critical consciousness in students so that they can reflect, analyze, and act to change social inequities, (b) a questioning of the distribution of power in society, and (c) the development of authentic relationships in the community and in the classroom (Mitchell).

Like domestic service-learning, ISL does not automatically have a critical or social justice focus to it. Students could participate in an ISL course that utilizes best practices of ISL but would not have a critical focus. For example, nursing students,
as a part of their labor and delivery course, could travel to Costa Rica during spring
break and work with local midwives. Students would provide service to the local
community and have a sustained immersion in another country. Their experience
would be linked to academic learning goals and they could reflect on their
experience during and after the travel portion of the course. Certainly a student
would have the potential to have cross-cultural dialogue about life in Costa Rica and
specifically about health care in a different country. Students could be more
culturally competent health care provider as a result of this experience. The above
example would have all the elements of Bringle and Hatcher's (2011) definition of

An example of critical ISL would have an additional focus in comparison to
the course described above. Kiely (2004) describes a six-credit ISL course offered
during a January intersession at a small community college. Students organized
health clinics in rural Nicaragua, conducted participatory research with community
members, and volunteered at a local hospital. Through seminars they also learned
about Nicaraguan political economy and history, community development,
American foreign policy, and Spanish language. The learning goals of the course
included “raising consciousness about the historical development of racism, sexism,
outside disparities and unequal relations of power” (Kiely, 2004, p. 8).
Additionally, the service-learning activity is not just framed as working in a local
community. “The central premise underlying the program’s service-learning theory
is that experiential dissonance combined with critical reflection and deeper
connections with community through service-learning activities will lead to profound changes in students’ worldview” (Kiely, p. 8).

Kiely (2004) does not use the term critical ISL to describe his course, but rather that the course had “an explicit social justice orientation” (p. 8). His description of the course embodies the elements of Mitchell’s (2008) critical service-learning. There is a social change orientation; students are learning about social inequities and critically reflecting on them. Students learn about the disparity of power both within the Nicaraguan community and between the U.S. and Nicaragua. Students build authentic relationships with the community through implementing health clinics in collaboration with the community and working with community members to conduct participatory research.

Critical ISL research. There is extremely limited empirical research about the experience of student participants of critical ISL. As with all ISL research, there are more published articles that describe courses and the challenges of designing and implementing courses in an international setting. Only three studies have been identified which report empirical research regarding the experience of students who participate in critical ISL. Of these three studies, Kiely (2004, 2005) is the most often cited article in ISL research due to the longitudinal nature of his research and the transformational service-learning process model he created. Part of the purpose of this study is to compare the findings of this study with Kiely (2004, 2005). As a result, Kiely’s study will be discussed in more detail at the end of the literature review. Briefly, Kiely found evidence of the transformational process of ISL and
developed a corresponding model for this process. The other two studies, which examine critical ISL courses, will be discussed below.

Camacho (2004) describes an exploratory study of undergraduate students who participated in a course called *The U.S. Mexico Border/Borderlands*. Students at the University of San Diego took classes on campus and participated in multiple half-day service-learning experiences in nearby Tijuana, Mexico. In her qualitative study, she identifies three categories that describe how students experienced power difference through ISL. Her first theme is *constructing self and other*, where students articulate a “judgmental stance toward migrants, or a monolithic treatment of difference” (Camacho, p. 36). The second theme is *foreignness*, where students describe feeling awkward among the migrants. The third theme is *examining subjectivities* where students describe their awareness of their privilege or their social identities in relation to others. Camacho’s study differs from this study in that participants will have a prolonged immersion in another country, instead of a few half-day service-learning experiences. Additionally, there are differences in data collection (written reflections for Camacho and in-depth phone interviews for this study) and the participant pool (Camacho includes one cohort of her course; this study will interview participants from five different ISL courses). This current study can potentially have a wider view of the experience of critical ISL across courses and across institutions.

King (2004) describes an ISL service-learning trip to Tijuana, Mexico. This was not a credit bearing course, but did have clear learning goals, eight educational sessions prior to the service-learning component of the experience, and included
critical reflection of issues of culture, politics, and privilege. In King’s analysis, he finds that students developed strong connections through collaborating with the community partner and local people and began to identify more closely with other’s perspective. Students also have exposure to contrasting information, which caused them to examine their own preconceived notions, reevaluate their own lifestyle, and deepen their understanding of facets of privilege in their life. The combination of critical reflection, developing caring relationships, and encountering contradictory information allows students to wrestle and transform their thinking and action. Ultimately, King argues that service-learning can be a site for critical pedagogy.

King’s participant group is small, only 4 students, who were interviewed shortly after the same ISL experience. This study would add to the literature by examining the experience of participants of critical ISL courses over time and across courses and institutions.

Both studies described above included participants from only one cohort of the same course. Additionally, both studies interviewed or used written reflection from participants during or shortly after the completion of the ISL course. This study will expand the literature base by examining the experiences of students from more than one course and will not interview students directly after the ISL course. Instead, participants will be at least six months removed from their ISL course experience. This will allow a new understanding of how participants have made meaning of their ISL course experience over time.

One purpose of this study is to compare the findings of this study to the findings of Kiely (2004, 2005). Kiely grounds his research in transformational
learning theory, as have other service-learning researchers. The final section of the literature review will discuss transformational learning theory generally, make connections between transformational learning and service-learning, and will describe Kiely’s (2004, 2005) seminal work in ISL research. I will position my study in relationship to Kiely, both in the ways it is similar and different and why I plan to compare my findings to this research.

**Transformational Learning Theory**

Transformational learning theory has been researched in adult education, higher education, and continuing education for over 25 years and has grown to be the most researched theory in adult education (Taylor, 2007). Mezirow (1991, 2000) is generally seen as the founder of this theory. According to Taylor (2000), transformational learning theory can be applicable for adults ages 17-70.

At the heart of transformational learning theory is explaining the process of how adults make meaning of their daily life experiences. Taylor (2008) states that it is “imperative in adulthood that we develop a more critical worldview as we seek ways to better understand our world” (p. 5). Transformational learning theory describes the process where adults look at their frame of reference, which have been assimilated from others or society, and transform it to be more “inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 7-8). One of the goals of transformational learning theory is to help learners become more critically aware and reflective of the assumptions they and others hold, and how these affect their beliefs and actions (Brookfield, 2000).
Much of transformational learning theory and the subsequent research has focused on the elements that can lead to a transformation of perspective in the learner. The key elements of transformational learning are a) a disorienting dilemma, b) awareness of one’s personal frame of reference, c) critical reflection on one's frame of reference, d) engagement in discourse with others, and e) development of relationships. The journey to transformation is usually triggered by a significant personal event, a disorienting dilemma (Taylor, 2000). The concept of disorienting dilemma has been broadened in recent years to include not only one significant incident but, but also a combination of internal and external circumstances that move learners to become more critical of their frame of reference (Taylor). Through becoming more aware of one’s own frame of reference and then critically reflecting on it while engaging in constructive discourse with others, a learner is able to construct and appropriate “new and revised interpretations of the meaning of an experience in the world” (Taylor, 2008, p. 5). It is also essential that students develop relationships with other learners in an educational environment grounded in trust, solidarity, and empathy (Mezirow, 2000; Taylor, 2007).

Transformational learning theory is a theory that has continued to develop. Mezirow's (1991, 2000) conceptualization of transformational learning is a cognitive and rational approach to changing one's frame of reference to be more inclusive and discriminating. As the theory has developed, other theorists have conceptualized transformational learning process through other approaches besides cognitive (Baumgartner, 2001; Taylor, 2008). Taylor identifies three alternative
perspectives and four additional views of transformational learning. The three alternative perspectives includes a (a) psycho-analytical perspective through which individual transformation occurs through a lifelong process of coming to understand one’s self through psychic structures, (b) a psychodevelopmental view where mentors can support the process of making sense of one’s life, and (c) a social-emancipatory view based in Freire (1984) which has the goal of developing critical consciousness for the purpose of social transformation. Taylor also describes neurobiological, cultural-spiritual, race-centric, and planetary views of transformative learning.

Transformational learning is an appropriate lens for examining the experience of service-learning. In the next section of this literature review, I will describe how transformational learning and service-learning have been linked previously in the literature and describe empirical studies that have examined the transformative potential of service-learning.

**Transformational learning and service-learning.** Practitioners often want service-learning to be transformative for their students so that they see the world more critically. On the surface, there is potential for the service-learning experience to be a springboard for transformative learning. Students, through their service-learning placement, can interact with people whose lives have been affected by extreme poverty, violence, racial injustice, or other issues of inequity that are found domestically or internationally. These experiences can create a disorienting dilemma for the student where they question what they know to be true. This especially could be the case with ISL, where students are already outside their
comfort zones due to immersion in a different culture. Service-learning pedagogy provides an opportunity for students to become aware of their personal frame of reference, to reflect critically on their experience, to have discourse with others, and to develop relationships within the classroom and within the community. In theory, service-learning, and especially ISL, when using best pedagogical practices, can create an opportunity for transformative learning. Taylor (2008) in his review of research of transformational learning emphasizes the importance of direct learning experiences, such as service-learning, for fostering transformative learning.

Transformative learning has been linked to service-learning in the literature. Eyler and Giles (1999), one of the service-learning field’s first comprehensive looks at the impact of service-learning on student participants, finds evidence of transformative learning. They described that even though transformational experiences of service-learning are rare, intense experiences of service-learning may create a dissonance in the student that is hard to ignore. These intense experiences can facilitate a transformation of perspective by critically reflecting on one’s fundamental assumptions. Eyler and Giles describe that students who showed the most evidence of transformative learning were in long-term intensive experiences of service-learning where critical reflection and social transformation were explicitly part of the curriculum. This study included over 1,500 participants but did not specify if any had participated in ISL. ISL can create the environment for an intense experience of service-learning that creates dissonance for the student. It is the goal of this research to explore whether there is transformative learning potential in critical ISL.
Kiely (2004, 2005) uses transformational learning theory as the theoretical framework for understanding the experience of students who participated in an experience of ISL with an explicit social justice focus. Kiely (2005) describes the appropriateness of using transformational learning theory as a theoretical framework for service-learning practitioners. He stated:

It [transformational learning theory] focuses on how people make meaning of their experiences and, in particular, how significant learning and behavioral change often results from the way people make sense of ill-structured problems, critical incidents, and/or ambiguous life events. Mezirow’s empirically-based conceptual framework also has explanatory value unique to service-learning contexts because it describes how different models of reflection combined with meaningful dialogue lead people to engage in more justifiable and socially-responsible action. (p. 6)

One of the purposes of this study is to compare the findings of this study with that of Kiely (2004, 2005) as a way to further understand the transformative potential of ISL. Kiely’s study and findings will be described in detail below.

**Kiely’s Transformational Learning Model for Service-learning**

Kiely (2002, 2004, 2005) reports the transformational process of undergraduate students who participated in ISL with “an explicit social justice orientation” (Kiely, 2004, p. 8). He examines a specific ISL program, of which he was the co-founder and facilitator, and interviewed 22 participants who had participated in the program over a seven-year span. The program is cohort based; students travel and work together in a rural community in Nicaragua primarily to implement
health clinics in the local community. The primary transformative goal of the program is to “encourage students to develop a critical understanding of the underlying contextual factors, institutional arrangements, and structural forces that affect persistent poverty, economic disparities, and health problems in Nicaragua” (Kiely, 2005, p. 7). Kiely (2002) investigates how students “experience and interpret the process of transformational learning” (p. 17) as a result of ISL participation.

Kiely (2004) finds evidence of students’ perspective transformation as a result of their participation in an ISL program with a social justice focus. He uses the term “emerging global consciousness” (p. 9) to describe the pattern of perspective transformation. Within the broad pattern of emerging global consciousness, he identifies three categories: (a) envisioning, (b) transforming forms, and (c) chameleon complex. The envisioning category represents the initial shift of perspective that caused students to have the intention to act. Participants in this category had a sense of hope and optimism about their intention, but have not actually acted on their new perspective. The second category, transforming forms, represents specific types of shifts in self-perception or worldview for the participants. There are six types of transforming forms: (a) political, (b) moral, (c) intellectual, (d) cultural, (e) personal, and (f) spiritual. All participants experienced one or more type of transformation. The final category, chameleon complex, represents the long-term challenges for students to act on their transformation over time. He describes students who tried to hide their new perspective for fear of being labeled too radical. This last finding is especially important, since much of the
study of service-learning and ISL specifically looks at the experience of students
directly after the experience as opposed to their experience over time. The findings
of Kiely’s study are found in the figure below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emerging Global Consciousness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Envisioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Transforming Forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Political</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Moral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Intellectual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Cultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Personal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Spiritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Chameleon Complex</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 2. Kiely’s (2004) elements of emerging global consciousness for students who participate in a critical ISL program.*

Additionally, Kiely (2005) creates a model of transformational learning that
is specifically linked to service-learning. His model describes five dimensions of
“how students experienced transformational learning in service-learning” (Kiely, p. 9). These dimensions are (a) contextual border crossings, (b) dissonance, (c)
personalizing, (d) processing, and (e) connecting. Contextual border crossings
include four elements (personal, structural, historical, and programmatic) which
frame the impact of the service-learning experience on the student. Dissonance can
have different types, intensity, and duration. Kiely (2005) specifically distinguishes
the role of low intensity dissonance, such as communication in a new language or
adjusting to new food for which students can learn new skills to adapt, from high
intensity dissonance such as witnessing extreme forms of poverty. High intensity
dissonance can lead students to “reexamine their existing knowledge and
assumptions regarding the causes and solutions to ambiguous and ill-structured
problems such as extreme forms of persistent poverty” (Kiely, p.11).
Additionally, Kiely (2005) identifies three other dimensions of how students experience transformational learning in service-learning: personalizing, processing, and connecting. Students personalize their experience; it is not something that can be rationalized away because students have powerful reactions that cannot be ignored. Students process through the use of various rational, reflective, and dialogical ways to reevaluate assumptions and understand systemic problems. Finally, students report affective dimensions to make sense of their experience through connecting with local community members and their peers. Ultimately, Kiely’s model describes the process of transformational learning that happens in service-learning, specifically critical ISL. The five dimensions are represented in the figure below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Five Dimensions</th>
<th>Elements of Each Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Contextual Border</td>
<td>• Personal – individual life experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crossing</td>
<td>• Structural – race, gender, class, religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Historical – country specific factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Programmatic – ISL program specific factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Dissonance</td>
<td>• Types of dissonance – historical, environmental, physical, economic, political, cultural, spiritual, social, communicative and technological</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Intensity of dissonance – low and high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Duration of dissonance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Personalizing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Processing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Connecting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 3. Kiely’s (2005) Transformational Learning Model for Service-Learning.*

The context of Kiely’s (2004, 2005) study differs from this current study. I am interviewing participants from five different ISL courses, instead of participants from the same ISL program as Kiely did. Additionally, the institutional contexts of the studies differ. My study will be conducted at two large public institutions and
one medium sized independent institution, while Kiely’s study was at a community
college with primarily a health care focus. Since he was the program facilitator and
had traveled with the cohorts of students, he had seen preliminary evidence of
transformational learning prior to conducting his study (Kiely, 2002). I will not
have a previous relationship with the study participants. As a result, I do not have
preliminary evidence that transformational learning is occurring in these courses.
There is empirical research that suggests that transformational learning can be a
part of service-learning (Eyler & Giles, 1999) and of ISL (Kiely, 2002, 2004, 2005),
but I do not know if this will be the case with my study participants. As a result, my
interview protocol will be more open-ended than Kiely’s (2002). I will not assume
that transformational learning has occurred, but will allow the participants to
describe their experience and meaning making of ISL over time. In the second phase
of data analysis, I will look at my findings and compare them to Kiely's (2004, 2005).
This process is described in detail in the next chapter.

This current study is not a replication of Kiely’s (2004, 2005) study. It was
not my intention to recreate the same study to support Kiely’s findings. At the same
time, the field of service-learning is relatively new in higher education, and as a
result, the research base is slowly expanding. Comparing and contrasting the
findings of similar studies would allow the field to know more about the experience
of students who participate in critical ISL. Kiely’s study is a significant study in ISL
research, and is often cited by later researchers. For example, Bamber and Hankin
(2011) used Kiely’s (2004) framework of transforming forms to analyze their data.
There is value in deepening our understanding of Kiely's finding as well as potentially adding to the frameworks he created as a result of this study.

This literature review described three educational areas that are pertinent to this study: service-learning, social justice education, and international education. The purpose of this was to situate this study amidst the current empirical literature. Service-learning research had made progress in describing the impact and experience from a traditional framework, but there is little empirical research on students' experience of critical service-learning. ISL is a rapidly growing practice in higher education, but there is little empirical research that examines the practice. Of the empirical research, most examines one course or cohort of students and how they describe their experience directly after the course. This study will examine the experience of ISL across time, course, and institution. Finally, only three studies examined the experience of students who participated in critical ISL. There is much that we do not know about the experience of this growing educational experience.

The next chapter will describe this specific study, including the research methodology, participant selection, data collection and analysis process.
CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODS

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the experience of participants in a critical ISL course and how they make meaning of their experience over time. Additionally, this study describes the elements of the experience that participants indicate as influential. Finally, the purpose of this study is to analyze the experience and meaning making of the participants in light of transformational learning theory. The research questions for this study are as follows:

1. How do participants describe and make meaning of their experience of critical ISL over time?
2. What specific elements of the experience do participants identify as most significant?
3. How do the participants’ experiences link with transformational learning theory?

In this research methods section, I describe the design of this study that is framed by a transcendental phenomenological approach. I describe the context and setting of the study as well as the participants. I outline my methods and procedures for data collection as well as data analysis. Finally, since I have professional experience with ISL, I disclose my connection with this topic and how I controlled for this bias.

Research Design

This research inquiry is grounded in phenomenological methodology. A research study based in phenomenology “describes the meaning for several
individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). Phenomenology comes from a Greek word, which means “to flare up, to show itself, to appear” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). This research method allows an experience to be described in its essence and, ultimately, to show itself. Edmund Husserl is generally recognized as the founder of phenomenology and its research methods (Stewart & Mickunas, 1990).

Giorgi (1997) discusses that phenomenological methodology has three interlocking steps. The first step is a phenomenological reduction where the researcher “puts aside or renders non-influential” (Giorgi, p. 240) all previous knowledge or experience with the phenomenon so it can be encountered freshly. Next the researcher provides a precise description of the phenomenon limited to what is given to the researcher during data collection. Finally, the researcher provides a description of the essence of the phenomenon by becoming aware of the features of the phenomenon that are present across experiences.

For those who write about phenomenology, it is clear that it is a philosophy as well as a methodology (Creswell, 2007; Giorgi, 1997; Moustakas, 1994). Creswell states that researchers would be remiss if they did not devote some attention to the philosophical components along with the methodology. I will briefly discuss four underlying philosophical presuppositions of phenomenology before specifically placing my study within this research tradition.

Stewart and Mickunas (1990) outline four basic themes to the philosophy of phenomenology. The first theme is that phenomenology is a return to the traditional tasks of philosophy. The scope of philosophy had been restricted due to
the prevailing positivist views of the late 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} century that were interested in only empirical scientific truth. Phenomenological research widened the scope of philosophy back to its Greek philosophical roots of search for true wisdom and knowledge and human's place in the world. The second theme is that phenomenology is a philosophy without presuppositions; phenomenology suspends all assumptions and judgments to allow the essence of the phenomenon to be revealed. The third theme is the intentionality of consciousness. Intentionality of consciousness, according to Moustakas (1994), “refers to consciousness; to the internal experience of being conscious of something; thus the act of consciousness and the object of consciousness are intentionally related” (p. 28). Through the phenomenological interview process, participants are able to bring forth latent understandings of their consciousness into reality. The final theme is the refusal of the subject-object dichotomy. In phenomenology, reality is not divided into subjects and objects instead reality is only perceived in the meaning of the individual.

This study is appropriate for a phenomenological method. I specifically explored a common phenomenon of multiple individuals. The phenomenon of interest is the participants’ experience of ISL that has been identified as having a critical focus by the course instructor. The purpose of this study is to describe the experience of the participants and to describe how students make meaning of this experience. I described “what” the participants experienced (critical ISL) and “how” they experienced it (meaning making).

In the methodology of phenomenology, there are two different schools: interpretive or hermeneutic phenomenology and descriptive or transcendental
phenomenology. Hermeneutic phenomenology is grounded in the belief that “lived experience is itself essentially an interpretive process” (Cohen & Omery, 1994). The researcher not only describes the phenomenon, but also makes an interpretation of the lived experiences based on context and the cultural norms for the participants and the researcher. Transcendental phenomenology, on the other hand, “is a description of the meaning of an experience from the perspective of those who have had the experience” (Cohen & Omery). The researcher solely relies on the information given from the participants to describe their experience of the phenomenology. The purpose of my study is to describe students’ experience of critical ISL using their voices and stories to provide the description. I did not interpret their experience through context or cultural norms. As a result, I used the transcendental phenomenology as my framework, specifically guided by the methodological recommendations of Moustakas (1994) who writes about both the philosophical assumptions and gave specific instructions for the methodological practices.

Moustakas (1994) describes transcendental phenomenology as a “scientific study of the appearance of things, of phenomenon just as we see them and as they appear to us in consciousness. Any phenomenon represents a suitable starting point for phenomenological reflection” (p. 49). Moustakas identifies three core processes in this approach: (a) epoche, (b) transcendental-phenomenological reduction, and (c) imaginative variation. Both transcendental-phenomenological reduction and imaginative variation are discussed in detail in the data analysis section of this chapter. I define and describe the epoche process now because it
must be initiated prior to data collection and continued throughout data collection and analysis.

According to Moustakas (1994), epoche “is a Greek word meaning to refrain from judgments, to abstain from or stay away from the everyday, ordinary way of perceiving things” (p. 33). It is important that the phenomenological researcher intentionally and rigorously set aside prejudices and bias about the phenomenon under investigation. Lopez and Willis (2004) describe that the goal is to achieve “transcendental subjectivity” (p. 727), where the researcher is constantly assessing whether preconceptions have been neutralized so that they do not influence the study. The researcher must begin by reflectively meditating on her own experience of the phenomenon, write out any prejudices, and review this list until one is able to bracket one’s experience and be open to the experience of others. This is a continual process, not a one-time event, though it appears to be easier to set aside assumptions further along in the process.

In reading different researcher’s descriptions of the epoche process, I appreciated LeVasseur’s (2003) reflections that the epoche process “attempts to get beyond the ordinary assumptions of understanding and stay persistently curious about a new phenomena . . . this process provides opportunity for fresh experience and the possibility of new horizons of meaning” (p. 419). Prior to data collection, I began the epoche process. I reflected on my own experience of participating in and leading service-learning immersion trips, especially those that had a social justice focus and an international context. I focused on significant moments on those experiences. Through a process of reflective meditation, I tried to disconnect myself
from these memories. This repetitive process allowed me to fully listen to the participants experience of critical ISL without allowing my own habits of thinking, feeling, and seeing to interfere (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). While this process began prior to data collection, I continued to be diligent about bracketing my experience prior to the participant interviews and during the data analysis process as well. My goal continues to be “persistently curious” and to provide for a “fresh experience” of critical ISL (LeVasseur, p. 419).

**Context and Setting of Study**

There are three significant elements for the context of this study. Participants were enrolled in five different credit-bearing critical ISL courses at three different higher education institutions. Since the specific focus of this study is critical service-learning, the students experienced an ISL course that was reported by the faculty coordinator as having the three key elements of critical service-learning: (a) attention to social change, (b) questioning the distribution of power, and (c) development of authentic relationships with the community. Finally, the study describes the experience of students across international service-learning experiences; as a result, student participants did not have the same ISL experience.

To find ISL courses from which I could recruit participants my dissertation chair sent a request on a student affairs faculty listserv asking for suggestions of service-learning programs that have a social justice focus. Through this process, 24 higher education institution service-learning programs were identified. I contacted the service-learning coordinator or director at all of these institutions, explained my study, and asked whether ISL courses with a social justice focus were offered at
their institution. Of the 24 schools contacted, 23 responded and gave me information about service-learning on their campus. I found that 15 of the schools had ISL courses with a social justice focus. I then contacted a total of 36 faculty members from these 15 institutions to learn more about their ISL courses. I asked the course instructors the following questions:

- Was their course credit bearing?
- What preparation did students receive prior to the travel portion of the course?
- Did the course have a social justice focus?

I also requested a copy of their syllabus. From the 36 faculty members that I contacted, I scheduled seven screening phone interviews with courses that seemed to fit the selection criteria.

I ultimately selected five courses from which to recruit participants for this study. The courses all met the following four criteria. They were credit-bearing courses; students received between three and six academic credits through participation in this course. Course faculty utilized service-learning best practices in designing and facilitating their courses. Either through the screening phone interview or the syllabus, I looked for evidence of these best practices, including connection of the service-learning activity to learning goals, building reciprocal relationships with a community partner, and student reflection that is incorporated into the course. Thirdly, course instructors identified that their course exhibited the three elements of Mitchell’s (2007, 2008) description of critical service-learning. They specifically discussed how their course (a) paid attention to social change, (b)
questioned the distribution of power, and (c) focused on development of authentic relationships. Finally, course instructors or program coordinators needed to be willing to help me gain access to their former students for the study. All five courses at three different higher education institutions met these four criteria.

Figure 4 below provides an overview of the five courses included in this study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Cohorts</th>
<th>Duration of travel component</th>
<th>Social Justice focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bosnia</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2007, 2008</td>
<td>2 months</td>
<td>Aftermath of war and genocide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2005, 2009</td>
<td>3 weeks</td>
<td>Sociological lens of social justice issues including gender, poverty, and globalization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>10 days</td>
<td>Social and political activism in Mexico, globalization, and immigration</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 4. Description of five courses.*

Each university and the course(s) from that university are described below.

The first institution is a midsize independent university in the western region of the U.S. Participants were recruited from three courses at this institution. This institution has an extensive international service-learning program. The program is housed in the Office of Internationalization at the university. Students earn five credits for the ISL course, which are usually elective credits. The courses take place either between the month-long break in the academic calendar between fall and
winter quarters or during the summer session. All courses from this institution had at least four pre-departure meetings and an overnight retreat, which focused on learning about the history and social issues in the country, the service-learning placement, and team building. Students are selected through an application process, which includes a written essay, interview, and recommendations. The courses, which travel to India, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and El Salvador, are described in more detail below.

The first course is called the India course. It is a month-long course. Students spend three weeks in northern India working with the Tibetan government in exile. Students volunteer individually or in pairs to teach English to ex-political prisoners and Tibetan monks and nuns. They could also work with an art school, an elementary school, or an orphanage. A few students also worked with the Untouchable population in northern India. Students are also paired with an English conversation partner, an ex-political prisoner who has escaped from Tibet. The social justice focus of this course includes the Chinese occupation of Tibet, the experience of the Tibetan people, especially the Tibetan refugees and ex-political prisoners who have come to India, and the process His Holiness the Dalai Lama has used to end the occupation of Tibet. The last week of the course is spent touring around major landmarks in India, including the Taj Mahal.

The second course from this institution is called the Bosnia course. It is a two-month summer ISL program. The two students I interviewed from this course both worked at a summer school in a small town 30 miles from the capital city, Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina. At the summer school the students teach English to
Serbian, Croat, and Bosniak children. During the school year, these children go to school in the same building, but in different classrooms. During the summer, the goal was to have children from different ethnic groups interact with each other while in the same classroom. The social justice issue in this course is examining the aftermath of the war and genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina and how it affected the different ethnic communities.

The third course from this institution is called the *El Salvador* course. It is a month long ISL course. The service-learning component of the course changes each year based on the needs of the local community organization. Students have worked as camp counselors, built roads, and interacted with children at a neighborhood community center. Students in this course generally complete their service-learning together as a large group. The faculty facilitator described the entire focus of the course as social justice – learning about the civil war, human rights, and gangs and violence in El Salvador.

The second higher education institution is a large state university in the southern region of the U.S. The course from this institution is called the *Ghana* course. The course is housed in the sociology department, and students earn six sociology or independent study credits. This course has open enrollment; students simply need to register. Students attend five class sessions and then travel to Ghana for three weeks after the end of the spring semester. The faculty member has led this course three times. Each time the course has been offered, students have participated in different service-learning activities including working with an orphanage to set up a computer lab, building a library at a school, and working
alongside local public health workers to provide AIDS education. The course examines social justice issues in Ghana from a sociological perspective. Specific social justice issues include poverty, gender issues, and globalization.

The third higher education institution is a large state university in the Midwest. The course is a foreign language course that is called the *Mexico* course. Students in this course earn 3 credits. This course has open enrollment; students simply need to register. Students are mostly foreign language majors, but not all, since Spanish language was not a requirement for enrolling in the course. While the course had been offered for five years, the course instructor felt that the Spring 2011 course was the first time she had utilized good service-learning pedagogy. Only former students from the Spring 2011 course were invited to participate in the study. The class had eight class meetings prior to the 10-day travel component during spring break. The class had an additional eight class meetings after the travel portion of the course. This course had the shortest travel component and the shortest service-learning component. Students spent two days working at a multi-service agency, similar to the Salvation Army, and then spent two days working at a senior center. The social justice focus of the course was regarding globalization, immigration, and understanding political and social activism in Mexico both historically and currently.

It seems important to note that the courses all had a social justice issue that was the focus of their academic study. Participants learned about the historic and social forces at the root cause of these issues. They also learned about ways the local community was attempting to respond to these issues and how social and
political forces were sometimes working against these attempts. The service activities in the courses, however, were primarily charity based. Participants acted as tutors, teachers, camp counselors, youth mentors, and public health workers. They worked on building projects and did “behind the scenes” work at nonprofits, like marketing, grant writing, and organizing computer systems. They sorted clothing and prepared meals at a multi-service agency and visited with elderly residents of a senior center. These service activities responded to a direct need in the community. Most of these activities also provided participants with more information about the social issues in the country and how they were in small ways contributing to solutions. Given concerns in ISL literature about power differences and the challenges of building reciprocal relationships (Kahn, 2011), it would seem inappropriate for student participants of short-term ISL courses to presume that they could direct social change activities in the host country.

Participants and Sampling

There were specific criteria for selecting participants. First, potential participants needed to have been an undergraduate student when they were enrolled in the critical ISL course. Second, participants must have participated in one of the selected ISL courses within the last 10 years. Five participants interviewed stated that they had participated in more than one ISL course as an undergraduate. Four of the participants were enrolled in ISL courses that were not one of the selected ISL courses in this study. These participants were asked to focus their reflection on the ISL course that was included in this study. One participant, Alex, had participated in two ISL courses included in this study, the Bosnia and the
El Salvador courses. He reflected on his experiences of both courses during the interview.

The third selection criterion is that participants must have received academic credit for their participation in the ISL course. This allowed me to sort out those who may have participated in the service-learning component of the trip, but did not complete the academic requirements. The fourth and final criterion is that potential participants needed to be willing and able to talk about their experience of ISL with me.

Former students of the five ISL courses were sent invitations to participate in the study. For the India, Bosnia, El Salvador, and Ghana courses, the faculty member or program coordinator of the course sent my study invitation letter electronically to former students and asked them to consider participating in my study. For the Mexico course, the course instructor had collected students’ email addresses prior to the end of the course and let the students know that I would be contacting them about participating in this study.

Potential participants were sent an email invitation to participate in the study (Appendix A). A total of 151 email invitations were sent electronically to potential participants. A second email invitation was sent to potential participants two weeks after the first invitation (Appendix C). Two participants recommended peers who had been students in their course. These two potential participants were sent the invitation letter found in Appendix B. In the email invitation, the purpose of the study, the time commitments, and the informed consent process were discussed. Essential in the consent process is ensuring confidentially, allowing the participant
to end the interview at any time, to choose to not answer a question, and to withdraw from the study even after the interview is completed without any repercussions.

Participants who responded to the invitation were sent an email describing the study in more detail (Appendix E). The Consent Form and a link to an online screening questionnaire were attached to the email. I asked potential participants to read the Consent Form (Appendix D) and ask me any questions. The Consent Form was included as an email attachment to the participant invitation email letter. This letter had my name and contact information on it; this allowed the participant to continue to contact me with questions or concerns after the interview was completed.

The screening questionnaire asked participants to share their contact information, including current address, phone number, and email. The screening questionnaire then asked participants to verify that they were undergraduate students when they participated in the ISL and that they received academic credit. This allowed me to confirm that they met the selection criteria. Finally, the screening questionnaire asked the participants questions that would have allowed for a purposeful sampling process. These questions included gender, the institution, the course, and the year that they participated in the ISL course. If I had gotten more than 20 volunteers, this information would have allowed me to purposefully sample the participant group. In the end, 19 participants completed the Consent Form, on-line questionnaire, and interview. Potential participants who did not
complete and return the Consent Form or the online screening questionnaire were sent a reminder two weeks later (Appendix F).

Participants were enrolled in the study on a rolling basis. I informed the participants of their selection and scheduled a time for the interview (Appendix G). Participants who did not respond to the first request to schedule an interview were sent a reminder two weeks later (Appendix H). I would have also informed those volunteers who were not selected that I appreciated their interest and would have kept their contact information for future follow up study (Appendix I). This did not occur since all volunteers were included in the study.

**Participant Demographics.** The final participant pool included 19 former students of ISL courses. Five participants were male and 14 were female. The participants’ ages ranged from 22 to 29; the average age of the participants was 26.3 years old. The majority of the participants, 16, were White; two participants identified themselves as Hispanic and one identified her race as White with Hispanic origins. Two participants were born outside the continental U.S., one in Puerto Rico and one in the Ukraine. Both of these participants had grown up in the U.S. for the majority of their childhoods. English was the first language for all the participants except the two participants born outside the continental U.S. Participants were asked about their religious affiliation, 10 participants were not affiliated with any religious tradition, eight identified as Catholic or Christian, and one participant identified as Russian Orthodox. Participants were also asked about their undergraduate degree or major. Ten participants earned a degree in the humanities; there were also two business majors, two fine arts majors, one
computer science major, and four physical science (biology, ecology, geology) majors.

While there were 19 participants in this study, there were only 12 discrete course experiences. This was because more than one student from a specific course was in the participant pool. For example, three study participants were students in the 2002 cohort of the India course. Appendix M lists the pseudonym of each participant as well as the course and year they participated in the course.

In total there were four participants from the Mexico course, two participants from the Bosnia course, seven participants from the India course, four participants from the El Salvador course, and three participants from the Ghana course. As mentioned earlier, Alex participated in both the El Salvador and Bosnia courses and described his experience of both courses in the interview.

Participants had taken the ISL courses during different years, and therefore, different amounts of time had elapsed since their ISL experience. Four participants had taken their ISL course within the last year. These were all students from the Mexico course. Nine participants had taken the course between two and five years ago. Seven participants took the ISL course more than five years ago.

Participants were asked about their international travel experience prior to and after the ISL course as well as their foreign language proficiency. All participants had traveled internationally prior to their ISL course experience, though two would have described that travel as minimal: “only to Canada” or to a Mexican tourist destination. Eight participants had extensive international travel prior their ISL course experience, including five students who had studied abroad,
two students who visit family outside the continental U.S., and one participant whose family traveled yearly to rural Mexico. All but three participants had traveled internationally after the ISL course. The purpose of the travel included study abroad, leisure, another ISL experience, or other academic opportunities such as research projects, a global leadership summit, and a musical performance. The three participants who had not traveled internationally were all Mexico course students and had only returned from the ISL course seven months prior to my interview. Participants were also asked about their current foreign language proficiency. Four participants reported that they did not speak a language besides English. Six participants reported conversational fluency in either Spanish or Swahili. Nine participants reported being fluent in a language other than English. These languages included Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Spanglish, Russian, French, and German. This language fluency was reported in regard to their current language proficiency, not when they were an ISL course student. Some participants became fluent in another language after the ISL course.

Finally, participants were asked about their motivations for registering or applying for the ISL course. Fourteen participants were motivated to enroll in the course because they wanted to travel internationally. Twelve participants had a family member, faculty, staff, or peer encourage them to enroll in the course. Eight participants were motivated by the academic credit; it fulfilled a degree requirement or they got credit for the course. Seven participants described wanting to be challenged by the course, so specifically enrolled in an ISL course that traveled to the developing world and looked at social justice issues. Lastly, seven
participants were motivated by the opportunity to do service and six participants received financial assistance for the cost of the course, so they felt that they could afford it.

**Data Collection**

In phenomenological research, data is collected from first person reports of life experiences (Moustakas, 1994). In keeping with the transcendental approach, phone interviews were used to elicit participants’ description of and their interpretation of the ISL course experience. The interpretive part of the interview focused on how the participants made meaning of the ISL course experience.

Interviews were conducted between August 2011 and January 2012. The average length of the phone interview was 86 minutes. Interview questions were semi-structured and grounded in phenomenological method. Moustakas (1994) suggests that researchers collect data that describes the “what” of the experience, so that there is a precise description of the phenomenon for the participant. This description is called a textural description. Intertwined with the description of the “what” is the description of the “how” of the phenomenon – how the participant makes meaning of the experience of the phenomenon. This second layer of description is called the structural description. I designed my interview protocol to collect data for both types of descriptions. Additionally, I am interested in the transformation, if any, that has occurred upon return from the ISL. The interview protocol includes questions of this nature. The complete interview protocol can be found in Appendix J. The interview protocol was pilot tested with students who participated in a weekend-long social justice focused domestic service-learning
immersion at a program and institution not included in this study, and adjustments were made to the interview protocol as necessary.

Interviews were digitally recorded. Participants selected a pseudonym that was used for the research process. The researcher transcribed interviews; I listened to the interviews and dictated them into the Dragon Dictate software program. I then reviewed the interview transcripts as I listened to the digital recording a second time and made corrections to any errors found in the transcripts. I sent the transcription to each participant electronically and asked the participant to verify the accuracy (Appendix K and L). This process served as a member checking process. It allowed participants to clarify or add more to their description. I asked participants the following questions:

1. Does this transcription accurately reflect your experience?
2. Is there anything you would like to add or clarify about your experience?
3. What stands out to you as you read the transcription of your experience?

This conversation took place electronically and allowed me to verify the accuracy of the transcription of each individual participant’s experience as well as continue the conversation about how the participants make meaning of their experience.

**Data Analysis**

For this study, there were two phases of data analysis. The first phase was analyzing data from a transcendental phenomenological perspective to provide a description of the essence of the experience. Upon completing this phase of the data analysis, I analyzed the data to make linkages between the experiences of my study participants with Kiely's (2004, 2005) emerging global consciousness and
transformational learning model for service-learning. Both phases of the data analysis are discussed below.

**Phase One of Data Analysis.** Data analysis in transcendental phenomenology requires the researcher to stay as close to the text as possible to provide a precise description of the participants’ experience. Ultimately, the researcher needs to describe the essence of the experience common to all participants. Moustakas (1994) provides a data analysis process for transcendental phenomenology, which he describes as a “modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of analysis of phenomenological data” (p. 121). Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell (2004) describe this systematic method as “rigorous yet accessible to qualitative researchers” (p. 20). There is a six step procedure to data analysis, which I will discuss as it applies to my study below.

The first step in data analysis is for the researcher to describe her personal experience of the phenomenon. The purpose of this step is to “set aside the researcher’s personal experience . . . so that the focus can be diverted to the participants of the study” (Creswell, 2007, p. 159). Earlier in this methods section, I discussed the process of the epoche and my plans for bracketing my experience, which is part of both the data collection and data analysis phase of this study. Additionally, more about my connection to the phenomenon under investigation is discussed in a later section of this chapter.

The second step is to look at the verbatim transcripts and identify statements that are significant for the description of the experience. The researcher records all of the significant statements in a list. These statements are “non-repetitive, non-
overlapping” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122). Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell (2004) comment that at this stage, the significant statement list provides details of the participants’ experiences without attempting to group the statements in any way. This process according to Moustakas is horizontalization, where each statement has equal value and creates its own horizon. In my study, I created a list of non-repetitive, non-overlapping significant statements found in the transcripts of the interviews.

The third step is to cluster significant statements into meaning units or themes. To show evidence of the process of creating themes, Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell (2004) created a table, which listed the relevant themes from their data and provided examples of quotations from participants of those themes. I created clusters of meaning units from the significant statements of my participants and created a table similar to Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell, which provides evidence for those themes. Additionally, I created a crosstabs table, which includes the meaning units or emergent themes and identifies which participants had significant statements within those themes.

The fourth step in the process is to write a textural description of the phenomenon, which includes verbatim examples from the participants (Moustakas, 1994). A textural description is a description of “what” the participants experienced (Creswell, 2007). Moustakas encourages the researcher to describe the phenomenon from many angles, phases, and views to give an extensive description. Through this stage of my data analysis, I provided a detailed, precise, and extensive description of the critical ISL experience from the perspective of the participants.
The fifth step is to provide a structural description of the phenomenon, which Creswell (2007) describes as “how the experience happened” (p. 159) and Moustakas (1994) describes as the underlying factors, which explain the experience. For Moustakas, “structural description involves conscious acts of thinking and judging, imagining and recollecting, in order to arrive at the core structural meaning. Structures underlie textures and are inherent in them” (p. 79). I provided a structural description of the experience of critical ISL for participants. My interview protocol included questions, which encouraged students to reflect both on their experience and the elements of the experience that were significant.

The final stage in the process is writing a unified synthesis of the textural and structural descriptions and thus providing an illustration of the essence of the phenomenon. This description is usually a long paragraph which is a composite of both the “what” and the “how” experienced by the participants (Creswell, 2007). Through this data analysis process, I provided a description of the essence of critical ISL for participants of this program.

**Phase Two of Data Analysis.** One of the purposes of this study is to link my findings to transformational learning theory. The second phase of data analysis accomplished this purpose. As discussed in the Literature Review section of this dissertation, Kiely (2004, 2005) used transformational learning theory as his conceptual framework when examining the experiences of participants of an ISL course with a social justice focus. He described three elements of emerging global consciousness and five dimensions of the process of transformational learning.
I compared my findings with Kiely’s (2004 & 2005) findings. I looked for and described similarities and differences in our findings, using Kiely’s a priori categories contained in his emerging global consciousness and transformational learning model for service-learning. Kiely (2004) found evidence in three categories of emerging global consciousness, including six types of perspective transformation. In my study, I looked for evidence of similar patterns and similar types of perspective transformation. I also looked for other types of perspective transformation described by my participants. I compared the five dimensions of how students experience transformational learning as a result of ISL with a social justice focus. I looked for evidence of all five dimensions as well as other dimensions that emerged from my study.

It seems important to note here that I did not consider Kiely’s (2004, 2005) findings in my initial phase of data analysis. I allowed my participants’ experiences and stories to speak for themselves and created a description of their experience without linking it to Kiely’s findings. To accomplish this, I bracketed my experience of reading and analyzing these theories prior to data collection and throughout the data analysis process of the first stage. Only after I completed phase one of data analysis, including writing a description of the essence of the phenomenon, did I consider linkages between my findings and these findings.

**About the Researcher**

I have a personal and professional interest in this topic. Personally, I was raised in a family where social responsibility was an expectation. I attended high school and college at institutions where social justice was an explicit part of the
educational mission. After college, I participated in a year of post-graduate service work with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps where one of the four tenets of this program was social justice. As a result, I have many lived experiences of seeing injustice first-hand, analyzing my role in the injustice as a person with many privileges, and grappling with ways to respond to injustice that address systemic issues. I have been trained to critically reflect on my experience and discuss it in light of societal norms. Addressing issues of social injustice is important to me as a citizen and as an educator.

Service-learning immersion courses offer a unique and intense opportunity for students to immerse themselves in a new culture, away from the comforts and routines of home. As a student affairs professional, I have organized and facilitated co-curricular domestic and international service-learning immersions for undergraduate students. Some have been grounded in a charity model, while others had a clear social justice orientation to them. For many of the students who attended these trips, the experience was very powerful. Student evaluation forms commented on the importance of building relationships with a group of their peers, learning about a new culture, traveling to a new location, having new experiences, and appreciating their life in a new way. Some students discussed the impact on their sense of social responsibility and on their desire to and confidence in their ability to make a difference in their community. The immersions with a social justice focus seemed to elicit more powerful and transformational responses during and after the experience. Students wrestled with the areas of unacknowledged privilege and systemic oppression and seemed more motivated to do something
about it upon their return. I am motivated to conduct this study so that I can clearly describe the experience of students who participate in critical ISL, because of the transformational potential that I have witnessed on these types of immersions as a professional.

**Rigor in Qualitative Research**

As with any research, it is important to discuss the strategies that the researcher will use to assess the accuracy of the findings. This is a timely concern in the field of service-learning research. At the 2010 International Association for Research on Service-learning and Community Engagement annual conference, Michael Quinn Patton, a seminal researcher in qualitative research, encouraged service-learning researchers to improve the rigor and quality of research in this field.

Creswell (2007) views validation in qualitative research as the process to assess accuracy of the findings. Creswell suggests that qualitative researchers use at least two validation strategies in their analysis process. In my study, I spent time clarifying my own bias, through the epoche process, and documenting this process. I spent time reflectively meditating on my biases prior to data collection and writing these insights in a “bracketing journal.” Prior to each interview and after each interview, I recorded any new awareness about prejudgments or personal bias that was part of the interview process. In the data analysis stage, I continued to reflect on the areas of bias that I experienced and attempted to bracket that bias prior to making any decisions about data analysis.
I also used the process of member checking. As I have described above, after the interview was transcribed, I sent the transcription of the interview to each participant (Appendix K). Participants had the opportunity to read the transcription and add or clarify information about their experience. Ten participants commented on their interview transcripts. The comments were mostly regarding grammatical errors they found in the transcripts or confirmed that the transcripts accurately represented their experience.

Finally, I utilized an external auditor to review the first set of my study findings. The auditor is a published scholar in the area of ISL and is cited in this dissertation. He reviewed my emerging themes and quotes from the participants, which supported those themes. Some adjustments were made in the organization of the themes as a result of this process. In general, he found that the themes made sense and that the quotations accurately supported the themes.

The next chapter of this dissertation outlines narratives of the 19 participants and a composite description of the courses from which they were recruited. These descriptions create the context for the study findings which are provided in chapter five.
CHAPTER IV

PARTICIPANT NARRATIVES AND COMPOSITE COURSE DESCRIPTIONS

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the experience of participants in a critical ISL course and how they make meaning of their experience over time. Additionally, this study describes the elements of the experience that participants indicate as influential. Finally, the purpose of this study is to analyze the experience and meaning making of the participants in light of transformational learning theory. This chapter provides context to the research findings in chapter five by providing a composite description of the five courses from which study participants were recruited and a short individual narrative of each of the 19 study participants.

Composite Course Descriptions

There were five courses from which participations were recruited for this study. Chapter three provides some detail about each specific course and the institution from where the course originated. In this chapter, I provide a composite description of the courses. The description of the courses is derived from reviewing the course syllabus, from the screening interview with the course coordinator, and from the participants’ description of the course.

Academic credit. All the courses were credit bearing. Four of the courses were considered one academic course (either three semester credits or five quarter credits). In the fifth course, students earned six semester credits.

Faculty involvement. All five courses had a faculty coordinator who facilitated the pre-departure course meetings, traveled with the students to the host
country, facilitated the re-entry meeting(s), evaluated assignments, and assigned course grades. Each course had an additional university employee travel with the group to the host country. In four of these courses, this person was a university staff member who was listed as a course coordinator on the syllabus. In the fifth course, this person was a faculty member who was not listed on the syllabus.

**Location of course.** Three of the courses were housed in the Office of Internationalization at the university where there is a staff member who oversees the administration of all ISL courses. The other two courses were housed within the discipline of the coordinating faculty member.

**Preparation.** There were five to eight courses meetings before the students traveled to the host country. Three courses had an overnight retreat as one of those meetings specifically for team building purposes.

**Time in country.** The time the students spent in the host country ranged from 10 days to two months. The Mexico course had the shortest in-country component, and the Bosnia course had the longest in-country component. Four of the courses included academic lectures from faculty in the host country. The number of hours students spent in service ranged from 16 hours in the Mexico course to more than 160 hours in the Bosnia course.

**Academic assignments.** All the courses had academic assignments in relationship to course material. All courses required students to write reflective journals prior to and during the in-country portion of the course. Four of the courses required the student to select and critically analyze a social or cultural issue in the host country and to write a research paper on that issue when they returned
from the travel portion of the course. In one course, students had to bring written answers to the reading discussion questions to class and turned them in at the end of each class. One course assigned the students to create a photo essay of their time in the host country. Four of the five course syllabi specifically stated that students did not receive credit for the service component of the course, but rather it was the means through which their academic learning would take place.

**Re-entry information.** Two courses had one re-entry session that was held a few weeks after the students arrived back in the U.S. One course had eight hour-long class sessions after the travel component of the course. Two courses did not have evidence of students gathering together formally after the course ended in the host country.

**Participant Narratives**

Narratives of the 19 study participants are provided below. In each narrative, demographic information and motivation to participate in the course are described. In addition, the stories participants told about the service placement, the significant elements of the course, the most challenging element of the course, and the impact of the course are outlined. Finally, if the participant made any overarching statements or synthesis about their course experience, this is provided as well. Narratives are listed in alphabetical order based on the pseudonym the participant selected.

**Alex.** Alex is a 26 year-old male. He participated in the El Salvador course as a junior and the Bosnia course as a senior. He earned a B.A. in biology. He had traveled internationally on vacation to Mexico and the Dominican Republic prior to
his ISL course experiences. His motivation to participate in these courses was the opportunity to travel and receive academic credit and that he was able to use the credits toward a leadership minor.

In El Salvador, he worked with a local community agency doing what he called “community activism.” He worked with local youth as well as helped with building projects. In Bosnia, he taught ESL to eight -15 year-old youth. He described three significant moments within these courses. First was the way the people of El Salvador welcomed him and his peers. He was surprised that he felt so comfortable with the local people. As a result, he returned a year later to El Salvador with his family to visit the community. He also described an experience of having dinner at the home of a wealthy family in El Salvador. After working very closely with families living in poverty, it was a shock for him and his peers to see the disparity of wealth first hand. Alex described how many of his peers felt guilty about being in this home. However, Alex was more interested in talking with the family and learning about how they obtained their wealth. He made a connection with his own family’s immigration story. Finally, Alex talked at length about the conflict he had with the faculty coordinator of the Bosnia course. He did not feel respected by the faculty coordinator and this tainted his experience of the entire course. This on-going conflict was the most challenging element of his experience.

Alex described the impact of these course experiences. Seeing the impact of civil war in both countries caused him to change his perspective on death. He came to appreciate the opportunities in his life, especially his access to higher education. He also became aware of being part of the global economy. He now chooses to buy
free trade coffee and is aware of where many of the items he buys are manufactured. He has continued to stay connected to the El Salvador program through speaking to prospective students and by donating money for student scholarships.

**Becky.** Becky is a 24 year-old female who was a senior when she participated in the Bosnia course. She earned an international studies degree from her institution. She is fluent in Spanish and had studied abroad in Europe and worked at a summer camp in Mexico prior to her ISL course experience. Her motivation to participate in this course was to test her personal limits and to have an experience in the developing world.

In Bosnia Becky taught ESL to children nine years old and younger. She described the larger mission to the service-learning work. Through bringing youth from different ethnic groups together, she saw herself as part of a “sustainable peace process.” She was “building a community who can better help itself in the future.” She described two significant moments of her course experience. The first was working with the youth. She asked students to draw a picture of their family and one Muslim girl drew her mother wearing a burka. Becky was surprised that this girl represented her mom in such a formal way and felt like she was getting a new perspective of this culture. She also talked about the ways she creatively got children from different ethnic groups to interact with each other. The second significant moment was visiting the site of a mass grave from the Bosnian civil war. She talked about historically what had happened at the site and how the United Nations was unable to protect 3,000 Bosnian men and boys from being killed by the Serbian army. Becky talked about this experience as “devastating.” She cried at the
gravesite, was comforted by a local Bosnian woman, and came to understand genocide in a more tangible way.

A challenging part of this course was the language barrier; Becky wanted to be more connected with local people. She also found it difficult to describe her experience to her family and friends in the U.S. after the course. She described the impact of the course as “killed a little bit of my idealism about the power of the United Nations.” She also thought about global current events differently and had more tangible knowledge of the long-lasting impact of war. Becky wished that she could have lived individually with a host family to be more on her own in Bosnia.

Becky was just beginning graduate school when I interviewed her. She planned to focus internationally in her graduate studies. One of her career goals is to work to make the United Nations more effective.

**Brooke.** Brooke is a 25 year-old female who was a senior biology major when she enrolled in the El Salvador course. She had studied abroad in Europe prior to her ISL course experience. Brooke was interested in this course because a friend who had previously attended the course recommended it to her. A desire for a developing world experience was a prime motivator for Brooke. She specifically talked about wanting to put the experience on her medical school applications.

In El Salvador, Brooke worked with a local community agency, which works with youth, and also worked as a counselor at a summer camp. She described three significant memories. She talked about spending one night with a host family and appreciated being welcomed into their home, playing with the children, and learning about how the family lived. She also described an experience of picking
coffee beans with local families; she came to realize that this coffee would end up on U.S. store shelves and that the family only earned $.10 a basket. Finally, she described planning a Christmas party for the families; she felt that her group provided something the families “don’t get to have themselves.”

The language barrier was the most challenging aspect of the course for Brooke. She wished she knew more Spanish prior the course. She described the impact of the course for her was learning more about the history and culture of El Salvador and the everyday life of the El Salvadorians. Brooke was starting graduate school in a health care profession when I interviewed her. She found that she was better able to understand the point of view of her patients as a result of this course. Throughout the interview, Brooke talked about issues of safety; she felt safe at the hotel, but worried about gangs, theft, and violence in other neighborhoods. Brooke was not interested in returned to El Salvador again, she “did a lot of everything there was to do.”

**Catherine.** Catherine is a 27 year-old female. She was a sophomore when she participated in the India course. She earned dual degrees in Marketing and Art History from her institution. She was born outside the U.S. and she had extensive international travel prior to her ISL course experience including living in two other countries with her family and studying abroad in Europe. She was influenced to apply for the India course by the Resident Assistant on her floor and also by the course faculty coordinator. She also identified her passion for travel and learning about culture as a motivation for enrolling in this the course.
In India, Catherine worked at a Tibetan art school writing grants and setting up a computer system. Working at the school was one of the significant moments of the course for Catherine. She built a friendship with the director of the school, learned about her life, and found commonalities with her own life. Catherine also described a research project she conducted as significant. She provided disposable cameras to Tibetan refugees and asked them to document their lifestyle. Finally, she described hiking in the mountains with a group of students; this moment was significant both for the beauty of the environment and the bonding experience in the group. In general, she described the group of peer students as getting very close.

Due to Catherine’s extensive travel prior to the ISL course, she did not find the experience challenging; it reminded her of times earlier in her life when her family did not have much. She voiced regret that she did not stay in touch with the director of the art school because she felt close to her in India. Catherine said that as a result of this course, she learned to really listen to people and knew that everyone had struggles in their lives. She made connections between her family's immigration to the U.S. and the Tibetan refugees she met. She also found that her ISL course experience reinforced her desire to explore and learn about culture.

Desiree. Desiree is a 23 year-old female. She was a junior when she registered for the Mexico course. When I interviewed her, she was a senior psychology major. She is fluent in Spanish. She travels yearly outside the continental U.S. to visit family. Aside from visiting family, she had never traveled internationally prior to this course. The Mexico course allowed her the chance to
see something new and exciting; this was her primary motivation for registering for this course.

In Mexico Desiree volunteered for two days at a senior center and two days at a multi-service agency. She described four significant events in the course. The first was seeing the pyramids; she found them beautiful and full of history. This experience represented being a person who had experienced life: “I want to be that person [who] says, yes, I have seen the freaking pyramids.” She also talked about how shocking it was to see heavily armed police and military throughout Mexico, though this became part of everyday life after a while. She described a lecture by a Mexican faculty member who talked about Mexico’s drug war and the Zapatistas; she liked hearing about this from a local person who was well informed. Finally she described on the last day in Mexico where she and some peers took a bus to a waterfall; it was a beautiful and relaxing day to hang out with friends.

The most challenging part of the course for Desiree was the academic component, writing papers and reading articles. Desiree especially loved the hands-on nature of this course where she could experience the “real Mexico.” She was concerned that their group would be discriminated against, since they were Americans and Americans discriminate against Mexicans. She found however that this did not happen; they were well received in Mexico. Desiree said that this course increased her interest and confidence in traveling, challenged her assumptions about Mexico, gave her a boost in her Spanish language skill, and increased her appreciation for what she had. She described feeling like she was “part of something big” and the course was a personal test and an eye opener for her.
When I interviewed her, Desiree was aware that the Mexico course had been cancelled because of increased violence in the host city. She had stayed in touch with a friend in Mexico and heard about the violence directly from him.

**Eleanor.** Eleanor is a 26 year-old female. She was a junior when she enrolled in the India course. She double majored in gender and women's studies and in international studies. She had traveled to Europe twice prior to her ISL course experience, but considered this course her “first really big international trip.” She was originally interested in the course because her boyfriend at the time had attended the course. She described her motivation to participate in the course as being interested in social justice and human rights and because her scholarship would pay for the academic credits.

In India, Eleanor had two service placements. She did “non-profit management” for a Tibetan art school where she helped with fundraising and marketing. She also volunteered in the evening as an English conversation partner with an ex-political prisoner. She described three significant experiences that were part of her course. Her experience of the Tibetan people really stood out for her; they were peaceful, joyful, happy, and kind in the midst of their struggle. She also described learning more about the experience of oppression in Tibet and, after visiting an orphanage, how bad it must be for parents to send their children away in order to preserve their culture. Finally, she talked about the stories of torture and imprisonment she heard from the ex-political prisoners.

Eleanor described the challenging part of the course as “lots of little things.” She was using different bathrooms, often being cold at night, and sometimes being
unsure about what food was safe to eat. She found that her ISL course experience gave her the confidence to challenge herself in new ways. She changed her study abroad location from Sweden to Kenya after her ISL course. She also described that this course verified what she wanted to do with her life: make a difference in the world. It also solidified her interest in social justice.

Since traveling to India and Kenya twice, Eleanor has become more critical of the U.S. culture. She sometimes longs for the feeling of community found in the developing world. She has tried to contribute to changing the U.S. culture by volunteering, being less interested in consumerism, and working in the energy efficiency field and at a community garden.

**Fernando.** Fernando is a 24 year-old male. He was a senior Spanish major when he participated in the Mexico course. He is fluent in Spanish and had studied abroad in Europe prior to his ISL course experience. He was interested in the Mexico course after his study abroad experience. He saw a flyer on campus and was interested in another opportunity to travel.

In the Mexico course, the entire student group worked at a senior center and at a multi-service agency. Fernando told many stories about significant moments in the course. He talked about the academic preparation and learning about the social aspects and issues of Mexico. He traveled to Mexico with the knowledge that it is difficult to understand a culture of which you are not really a part; this knowledge was essential to understanding his experience while in Mexico. He talked about standing outside the multi-service agency on the first day; he watched people enter the building and saw the separation of wealth they had talked about in class. He
also described a scary experience of a cab driver who had been deported from the U.S. for drug trafficking; he wondered if it was safe to be in his cab. He also enjoyed working with the retirees at the senior center and found commonalities with the residents. All of his stories were about getting a snapshot into the lives of real people.

For Fernando, the most challenging part of the course was the short time period of the travel component; the travel felt jam-packed and there was not enough time for anything. He found that through the course he improved his Spanish, his sense of culture, and his sense of the world. This experience was his first time volunteering directly with people, and he hoped to do more in the future. He stated that this course helped develop a passion for travel and for learning about different people.

**Francesca.** Francesca is a 22 year-old female. She had recently graduated with a journalism degree. She was a senior when she participated in the Mexico course. Prior to her ISL course experience, she had had multiple international travel experiences, including a study abroad in Europe, an internship in Europe, and a short-term cultural exchange in the Middle East. She was motivated to register for the Mexico course because she was looking for more opportunities to travel and she had not been to Mexico before. She thought traveling with a course to volunteer in Mexico was a better way to learn the culture than “a crazy Cancun spring break.”

In the Mexico course, the entire student group worked at a senior center and at a multi-service agency. Francesca told three significant stories about her course experience. She enjoyed getting to know her cultural buddy and has stayed in touch
with her since the course. She appreciated getting to know the host community through the experience of someone her own age. She specifically enjoyed volunteering at the retirement home; she felt good about interacting with the seniors and found that she made a human connection with them. She also traveled by herself to Mexico City ahead of the group. She felt brave to travel by herself and got to see something the rest of the group did not get to see.

It was challenging for Francesca to not speak Spanish while in Mexico. She found that she did not understand what was going on around her and she missed out on so much. She had to depend on her peers to translate for her. As a result of her ISL course experience, she learned the importance of speaking another language, became interested in Mexican culture, and is considering teaching English in South America. In general the Mexico course was less impactful than her experience of study abroad or traveling to the Middle East. This was in part because of the language barrier, but also because she had already traveled so much prior to Mexico. Her first experiences of international travel seemed more profound to her.

Jake. Jake is a 29 year-old male who was a student in the India course. He was a biological science major and was a sophomore when he was in the course. Prior to his ISL course experience, he had traveled with his family to Europe and Central America. He was motivated to participate in the India course because he thought education outside the classroom could be more valuable than education inside the classroom. He was also interested in earning academic credit for traveling and chose the India course specifically because he would be outside his comfort zone.
In India, Jake taught English to Tibetan monks and nuns. He reflected on the symbiotic relationship between giving and receiving in service-learning; he was receiving as much from the people he was serving as he was giving. Jake told many significant stories about his intense course experiences. He loved the vibrancy and intensity of his experience in India; often he experienced sensory overload, but described it as never feeling more alive. Jake took every opportunity to be as adventurous as possible; he tasted exotic foods, met many people, and saw as many sites as possible. He talked about being exposed to death in a new way as a significant part of his course; death was as pervasive as life for Jake. Finally, he described the relationship with a friend he made in India; he learned about his experience of escaping from Nepal and said they felt like they known each other their whole lives. They continue to email a few times a year.

Jake found the hardest part of the course was returning to the U.S. After the intensity of the experience in India, he had a hard time re-entering back to his life; he also has a hard time effectively communicating his experience to friends and family. As a result of his course experience, he found that “he was put on the world to help people.” He also described how he was more interested in immersing himself in culture, more tolerant of different religions and people, and had a different perspective of global issues. After his India course, Jake registered for a second ISL course. Ultimately, Jake described the experience as changing his life forever and opening his eyes to life outside the United States.

Julie. Julie is a 28 year-old female. She was an accounting major and a senior when she participated in the India course. She had extensive international travel
experience prior to her ISL course. Her family traveled to the same small Mexican
town each year for spring break. It was not a tourist destination, but rather a
cultural immersion into Mexico. As an accounting major, she had a very structured
academic program that did not allow for a study abroad experience. She was able to
participate in the India course because it was held during the institution’s six-week
break between fall and winter quarters. She was also specifically attracted to the
Indian culture.

In India, Julie had three service-learning placements. The first two were
teaching English to Tibetan nuns and to ex-political prisoners. She also worked in a
Hindu Untouchables camp facilitating activities for children. She described two
significant moments of the course. The first was while she was providing ESL
tutoring. She found she had intensely emotional, almost magical, conversations with
the Tibetan nuns and ex-political prisoners. She learned about their life struggles
and shared her life stories with them. She also talked about the experience of being
in India; she liked the rhythm of the city because it was different than anything she
had experienced before. She also struggled with how to respond to people asking
for money on the street. She had been prepared by the course coordinator to not
give money, but rather to purchase a needed item like a blanket, though this did not
satisfy most people. She struggled with how to respond and felt better saying no
when she realized that only the Westerners were being approached for money.

Julie described the most challenging element of the course was sharing her
experience with her peer students. Though they had a cohesive group, it was hard
to be vulnerable with the group because her sharing had so much emotional power
behind it. She challenged herself to share even though it was difficult. The India course was an “an experience of a lifetime” for Julie. She finds that she now pays more attention to the news, has a different global perspective, and thinks about her lifestyle differently; she is aware that she could have so much less.

Julie was flipping through a scrapbook she had put together after the course as she spoke to me. She described how challenging it was to put the scrapbook together because it was so difficult to put her experience into words and it never felt adequate enough to describe her complex experience.

**Katya.** Katya is a 29 year-old female. She was a computer science major and a junior when she was a student in the India course. She is fluent in Spanish and Dutch. She had traveled extensively prior to her ISL course experience. She was a foreign exchange student in Europe and had had two previous ISL experiences prior to the India course. She was primarily motivated to participate in the course because of the service aspect. She had taken a leadership course looking at service and saw this course as an opportunity to do something meaningful and to “travel with a purpose.” She also credits her family's interest in travel and long history of public service as influencing her decision.

In India, Katya worked at a Tibetan art school. She helped organize the computer system and did English tutoring. One of her significant memories was teaching English to Tibetan teenagers. She enjoyed interacting with these youth. She also described multiple experiences of getting to know local people and being invited into their lives. One example was how she became friendly with a local shopkeeper and his sons; she was invited into their home to share a meal. Katya
contrasted these experiences of meeting friendly and genuine people with times she was targeted as a tourist. She found that she stood out as a White Westerner and that people were only friendly to her then because they could get a commission if they bought something in their store.

The most challenging part of the course was the language barrier for Katya; she had a hard time understanding what was going on around her. The impact of the course has been significant for Katya. She described how her experience directed her away from a career in computer science and toward education. She felt that she learned more about the country, about religious diversity, and is more aware of different parts of the world. She says that she has a visceral understanding of inequality and is more able to interact with people from different cultures.

Katya returned to India with her sister and has maintained relationships with people she met in India. She also was aware of how she was more comfortable being outside of her comfort zone. When she was in eighth grade and did a cultural exchange in Mexico, she spent most of her free time reading alone in her room. In India, she was able to interact with local people more comfortably.

**Lucy.** Lucy is a 23 year-old female. She was an international studies major and a sophomore when she enrolled in the El Salvador course. She had only traveled once to Canada prior to her ISL experience. At the time she enrolled in the course, she did not speak Spanish. She was motivated to enroll in the course because there was not a foreign language requirement. She also chose El Salvador because it felt closer to home in comparison to other programs that traveled to Europe or Asia.
In El Salvador, Lucy’s service experience was varied. The group worked as camp counselors for a week, but also did whatever was needed by the community organization they worked with, including bagging rice for one day. Having “no set objective” was frustrating for Lucy as well as her classmates because they felt like they were not doing anything substantial. In the van after the service experience the group would ask: “Why did we do what we did today?” She described two significant experiences as part of her course. First, during a free weekend, she and another student, instead of traveling to a beach community with the rest of the group, traveled to a rural village that was a rebel stronghold during the Civil War. She met people who shared their experience of the Civil War and a local teenager who was their tour guide for the day. This experience solidified her career aspirations to work with survivors of war. It also proved to herself that she could navigate around a foreign country. Second, she described an experience of spending the night in the home of a local family where there was no plumbing or bathroom. Using the backyard as a bathroom made her think more about water and sanitation as issues of international development.

The biggest challenge for Lucy was the language barrier; she was unprepared for how frustrating it would be. She also voiced regrets about not pushing herself outside her comfort zone; she wished she had done some things differently. In addition to this course impacting her career aspirations to work in communities rebuilding after war, she described an increased cultural sensitivity and an increased confidence to travel internationally. She also talked about being aware of
where products, like coffee, chocolate, and flowers, are produced and trying to make socially responsible decisions.

Lucy described this experience as her first time travelling internationally and that all international experience since has been compared to this one. Her sense was that this experience came at the right time in her life both personally and academically; she would not have been ready for the experience any earlier.

**Lynn.** Lynn is a 27 year-old female. She was a sophomore and an international studies major when she participated in the India course. She had had some international travel experience: travel to Asia to visit friends and an academic music tour to Europe. She was initially interested in the India course because her work-study supervisor recommended it to her. She did not initially consider herself a candidate because she was new to campus and did not think she could afford it. She was able to get scholarships for the cost of the course and appreciated that the credit would go towards her international studies major.

In India, Lynn taught English to Tibetan refugees and created a curriculum that could be used after she left. She also individually tutored a Tibetan ex-political prisoner. Lynn described two significant moments in her India course experience. She described learning about a “cardboard tent village” and deciding to bring rice to distribute at the village. She was struck by the abject poverty and disease that she witnessed; it was like “hell on earth.” Villagers mobbed Lynn and her friends for the rice they brought. This experience was devastating for Lynn, and she described a crisis of faith as a result. Even though nine years had passed, she still has not made sense of it. Another significant moment occurred when she was alone in the
bedroom of the man she was tutoring. When he made sexual advances toward her, Lynn felt unsafe, was grateful she could remove herself from the situation, and felt unprepared by the program to navigate, what she described as, a cultural difference.

It was challenging for Lynn to listen to the horrific stories of people who had left Tibet to come to India, but she found it striking how happy and optimistic they were about their lives now. Lynn described the overall ISL course experience as it “just knocked my socks off.” She described India as foundational for the rest of her academic career; she was able to take what she was learning in the classroom and think about it in the real world. She also described thinking on an emotional level, asking big spiritual questions, and thinking about issues from multiple sides. Ultimately she said that she has vibrant memories and more tools in her toolbox.

Lynn talked about how she thinks of global poverty differently now than she did in India. In India, witnessing poverty paralyzed her, but through academics and her faith, she has started to make sense of the experience. She now thinks organizations are important ways to address global poverty.

**Maddie.** Maddie is a 22 year-old female. She was a senior and a social family development major when she was a student in the Ghana course. She had participated in a service-learning trip to Central America when she was in high school. She was initially interested in the course when she heard the faculty coordinator talking about it. Maddie did not know much about Ghana, but she was interested in working with people and getting credit; she did not want to miss this opportunity.
In Ghana, Maddie participated in two building projects in two different rural communities. In both projects the group was working with local villagers to build a library for a school. These building projects were one of her significant memories. She described the demanding physical labor in the hot sun and working alongside local people. She specifically talked about how strong the women were, especially those working with children tied to their backs. She also loved the opportunity to play with the children who would benefit from the library. Another significant element of her experience was struggling with the cultural differences she encountered. She told multiple stories about times she encountered cultural differences. These stories included witnessing domestic violence, people asking for things from her, having to use the bushes as a bathroom, the treatment of people who steal, and people talking about curses and magic in relationship to AIDS. She said that she did not get over how different people were in Ghana. She emphasized many times that she liked the people in Ghana and that she liked the course experience in general. One significant relationship Maddie built was with a peer student; they became best friends and are still so today.

The greatest challenge for Maddie was the cultural differences; she said she “struggled to step over the barrier.” She also specifically described witnessing a domestic violence incident outside the guesthouse where the group was staying. She watched a neighbor beat his wife. She said her “feeling of safety and justice in the word depletes with that kind of thing” and she is “never going to understand it.” Even with the challenges, Maddie said that ISL is important as are learning about different cultures and understanding the everyday struggles of others.
Since her ISL course experience, Maddie participated in a long-term cultural exchange and became aware of how short a month-long immersion can be. Through living in a different foreign country, she has come to appreciate how long it takes for someone to learn about another culture.

**Marie.** Marie is a 23 year-old female. She was a junior when she enrolled in the El Salvador course. She changed her major to international relations after the course. She had traveling internationally only briefly prior to the course on two short trips to Mexico. She was motivated to participate in the El Salvador course because she was interested in getting out of the U.S. and she thought the service experience would help her get to the “cultural meat of the country.” The location of the ISL course was not of particular interest to Marie.

In El Salvador, Marie worked with a community organization and with youth from a local neighborhood. In one of the projects, students worked with the youth to address issues of trash and sanitation. The most significant moment of the course was when her student group, along with 20 youth from the community, was held up and robbed at gunpoint inside the community center. No one was hurt in the incident, but it was very scary for Marie. She talked about the most touching moment of the experience was when parents of the children starting flooding into the community center, and one mother started rubbing her arm to console her. As a result of the robbery, the group traveled with a security guard for the last week of the course and did not return to the community center again. Marie and her classmates felt a lot of guilt because the community was so adversely affected by this experience. There had not been that level of violence in this community before;
parents began forbidding their children from going to the community center. She thought that they were targeted because they drove up in the same big white van everyday. The student group became very close as a result of this incident and continued to support each other. Marie had difficulty sleeping after this event, but seemed to feel less affected at the time of the interview than she was directly after the event.

Marie had expected getting sick would be the biggest challenge for her, but when it happened it seemed insignificant. Instead, she identified the language barrier as the biggest challenge. The ISL course experience has wide impact for Marie. She changed her major to international studies, decided to study abroad and specifically chose a South American location to help her heal the scar left from the robbery. She also said that she has more connections to world events and learned about commonalities of people across cultures.

**Miriam.** Miriam is a 27 year-old female. She was a senior and a sociology major when she registered for the Ghana course. She had traveled to Europe and the Caribbean for vacation prior to this course experience. She heard about the course from the faculty coordinator who showed a slide show from her recent trip to Ghana. Miriam did not originally think she was strong enough emotionally to travel to Africa, but then felt like it was a good time to step out of her box. Ultimately being part of this course felt like something she “needed to do.”

In Ghana, Miriam chose to work for the public health organization where she traveled to villages with a translator to hand out condoms and to increase HIV, AIDS, and STD awareness. Miriam’s significant memories were all about being
uncomfortable. She, along with the whole group, were sick. She said they "had dysentery the whole time." She said that she had never been that sick before and that it was the hardest thing she had ever done to her body. She also described scary experiences. For her service work, she traveled by cab with another student and a translator and felt unsafe at times. She also described being pick pocketed and having to push someone off her, walking alone to a payphone at night by herself, and being stranded by the side of the road for four hours when their van got a flat tire. She said that the whole group was scared and that because it was the first time the course had been offered there was a lot of trial and error. She also talked about feeling like she was "wearing a big sign that says 'Hey. I have money come and get me.'” Even with all the uncomfortable experiences, she felt good about persevering and thinks of the Ghana course as a good experience.

Miriam described the course as an all around challenging experience, but the sickness was the worst part. She described a range of impact of the course, most specifically on her career path. “I was meant to do that because it was going to spark something in me that would kind of lead me down my career path.” Miriam was entering school to earn a health care degree when I interviewed her. She also described that the course changed her whole perspective on life; she felt more independent, more confident, and more self-aware. Miriam also traveled to Kenya to an orphanage her grandfather had supported after the course and is now on the board of directors for the orphanage.

**Peter.** Peter is a 22 year-old male. He is a geology major and was a junior when he participated in the Mexico course. He had traveled to the Caribbean for a
mission trip and to Russia for a music exchange program in high school prior to his ISL experience. He was motivated to register for the course because he needed the credit for his Spanish minor and wanted to practice his Spanish. He also had wanted to study abroad, but was not able to, so he looked at this experience as his international education opportunity. Finally he thought it would be a more enriching experience to travel with the course instead of partying all week.

In the Mexico course, the entire student group worked at a senior center and at a multi-service agency. Peter told three stories about significant moments in his course experience. After telling the stories he reflected, “I think the things that I remember the best are the things that make me feel more out of place.” His first story was about learning about the corruption and mistrust in Mexico. The students had learned about corruption in Mexico as part of their course. Peter asked his host mom about her experience of corruption when they were out to lunch. She was afraid to talk about this in public. He also had an experience of being alone in a park writing in his journal. A police officer approached him and told him to stop writing. Peter felt vulnerable because he knew about police corruption. Finally he talked about a time when he went out to a nightclub with classmates and local friends. They were seated in a reserved VIP section; Peter felt isolated and uncomfortable being set apart and being treated like a tourist.

Peter identified that being surrounded by people all week was the most challenging part of the course. Peter discussed that as a result of this course, he has more confidence in traveling, speaks Spanish better, and can relate to people better. He appreciated learning from people first hand about life in Mexico and became
critical of the media because they did not tell the whole story. Finally he described being more comfortable speaking up when people are misinformed about Mexico; he described challenging his family’s perception of Mexican immigration.

**Sophie.** Sophie is a 22 year-old female. She was a junior and an English major when she participated in the Ghana course. She had traveled to Europe and the Caribbean as a tourist prior to her ISL course experience. She had planned to study abroad in Europe, but after hearing a presentation about the Ghana course decided to change her plans. She specifically wanted to be outside her comfort zone and to interact with local people and see what life in Ghana is really like.

In Ghana, Sophie worked with her student group to build a library addition to an elementary school. She had expected that it would be like a Habitat for Humanity building project with hammer and nails. In fact, the group was building every single element of the library, including making the bricks from scratch. She described the act of building the library a “humbling surprise.” Sophie described three significant elements of the course. First, she described witnessing a domestic violence incident outside the guesthouse where the group was staying. She heard the wife screaming and watched as the husband threw the baby to the ground and beat his wife. She was shocked at seeing this violence and also that no one responded to help the woman. She described it as a cultural difference between the U.S. and Ghana. She also described an experience of handing out small toys and candy to the local children; the kids were hitting and kicking each other to get a gift. She gave a necklace to one boy, but his mother took it for herself. The program coordinator ultimately asked the students to not give out more presents. Finally she talked
about her connection to the community they worked with. At the end of the trip the group decided to give some of their spending money to the community to purchase more building supplies. The community hosted a celebration for the group, gave them traditional African clothing and thanked them for their work.

Sophie was most challenged physically by this course. She was hungry for most of the trip because she did not eat seafood. She also had to work outside in the heat while sick. Sophie described various ways that the course has translated into her life: becoming very close to the group of students she traveled with; being surprised to find similarities between herself and the Ghanaians; and developing a new confidence and strength that enables her to be outside her comfort zone. She feels a new empathy for people who are in the U.S. from other countries. Sophie ended the interview by talking about how hard it was to explain “all these little tiny random weird awesome sad experiences.” It was challenging to articulate this multi-layered experience to other people.

**William.** William is a 28 year-old male. He was an ecology and biodiversity major and a sophomore when he participated in the India course. He had traveled with his family to Europe and Central America prior to his ISL course experience; he credits his interest in the India course to his childhood travel. He was also interested in having a new challenge, traveling to Asia, and looking for an opportunity to test his limits. William did not know about the service component to the course initially, but this added to his interest in the course.

In India, William worked as a handyman for a Tibetan school and also provided one-on-one English tutoring to a Tibetan refugee. One of his significant
memories was tutoring this young monk. They were the same age but had vastly different life experiences. William learned about how this monk traveled in winter over the Himalayas to be able to express his culture and religion in India. It was a humbling experience for William and he thought he was receiving more than he was giving in the service-learning relationship. William also described the bonding experience he had with his peers; two friendships have lasted over nine years. William relied on his friends to process the intense experiences of this course, and they still share stories about the course to this day. Finally, William shared a story of getting food poisoning and feeling miserable; he had “too much of India.”

The most challenging parts of the course were witnessing the poverty in India, experiencing sensory overload, and internalizing the stories of the monk he tutored. Williams described ways that he had to mentally shut down at times, reading a book in his room and drinking chai at a chai stand. He also talked about it being challenging to know what to pack; he did not bring enough warm or casual clothing. There were times he felt uncomfortable because he was dressed like a tourist. William identified that he learned about the Tibetan political situation and refugee situation directly from people involved in it. He grew in his understanding of the world and what poverty and misery really is. He described his ISL course experience as the “greatest experience” of his life and a “coming of age experience.” He was aware of being 19 at the time and being inexperienced with life. He now is aware of how he has developed a mental framework for understanding international settings as a result of this course.
The next chapter of this dissertation describes the findings of this study. It describes the emergent themes that were identified and uses quotations from participants to illuminate the essence of the experience of critical ISL. Structural elements of the course that added to the participants’ experience are also portrayed. Finally comparisons between the findings of my study with Kiely (2004, 2005) are described.
CHAPTER V

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The purpose of this study is to describe the experience of participants in a critical ISL course and how they make meaning of their experience over time. Additionally, this study describes the elements of the experience that participants indicate as influential. Finally, the purpose of this study is to analyze the experience and meaning making of the participants in light of Kiely’s (2004, 2005) application of transformational learning theory in service-learning. In the following chapter, I discuss the findings of this research study.

There were two distinct phases of data analysis. The first phase focused on the experience of the participants. Through analyzing the data, six themes emerged as descriptions of the experience of participating in an ISL course with a social justice focus. Four of the themes describe the experiences of participants during the course, which includes the preparation, in-country experience, and post-course follow-up. The other two themes describe the participants’ experiences after the course. These findings correspond to the first research question for this study: How do participants describe and make meaning of their experiences of critical international service-learning over time? The six emergent themes that will be described in this chapter as well as subthemes are listed below:

During course themes

1. Stretching: “Putting yourself really far out there”
2. Destabilizing: “It will always be an experience that will haunt me”
3. Being known and unknown: “We got very close” and “being out of place”
4. Service-learning: “Who is getting the better end of the deal?”

After course themes

5. Seeing self, culture, and the world differently: “It opened my eyes”

6. Enduring impact on thinking and behavior: “It’s informed a lot of who I am today”

It is also the intention of this study to examine structural elements of the course that participants describe as most significant. The elements identified are programmatic or structural elements of the course that participants identify as adding to or detracting from their course experience. They could be helpful for practitioners who are designing ISL courses. These structural elements are:

1. Challenging by design
2. Preparing for safety issues
3. Processing the experience with peers
4. Creating opportunities for individual interactions
5. Understanding the context of the service

The structural elements are described in more detail after the six emerging themes. These structural elements, along with the four during course themes, shed light on the second research question: What specific elements of the experience do participants identify as most significant?

The second phase of data analysis compared the findings from this study with the findings from Kiely’s (2004, 2005) study. Kiely creates a framework, which describes the elements of transformational learning that can be found in service-learning. He described the emerging global consciousness for students of his ISL
course with a social justice focus and developed a model to describe the transformational service-learning process. By comparing the findings of this study to Kiely’s, there is potential to deepen the field’s understanding of the transformative potential of ISL. This set of findings corresponds to the third research question of this study: How do the participants’ experiences link to transformational learning theory?

**During the Course Themes**

The first four emergent themes detail the participants’ description of their experience while a student in the ISL course: the preparation, in-country experience, and follow up after the course. These themes are (a) Stretching: “Putting yourself really far out there”, (b) Destabilizing: “It will always be an experience that will haunt me”, (c) Being known and unknown: “We got very close” and “being out of place”, and (d) Service-learning: “Who is getting the better end of the deal”? In each of these themes, there are conflicting experiences that created tension for some participants. The ISL course stretched participants in ways that were both manageable and overwhelming. The destabilizing experiences were both haunting and transforming. Participants felt both connected and out of place. The service-learning was both enjoyable and unsettling. Some participants encountered both sides of the continuum of experiences – they tried to find balance among contradictions. Other participants only described one side of the range of experiences.

**Theme one: Stretching: “Putting yourself really far out there.”** The ISL course experience was challenging for participants; it stretched them outside their comfort zones. They described a range of types of challenges as well as a range of
reactions to those challenges. Participants were asked near the end of the interview, what, if anything, was challenging about their experience with the ISL course. As a result, all participants described an experience of being challenged or being stretched or pushed outside their comfort zone. However, often by that point in the interview, participants had already relayed stories of challenge as a result of their experience.

Fourteen participants talked in general terms about how demanding the experience was for them. They described feeling outside their comfort zone, feeling stressed, or experiencing sensory overload or a personal test at some point during their experience. Participants were challenged physically:

There were a lot of things that were challenging, but, being hungry a lot and then being outside when it’s 115° and, you know, lifting blocks all day… that was really, really challenging. (Sophie, Ghana)

Participants were also challenged emotionally:

There were times that I was just miserable and there were times it was like I have had too much of India. I smelled too many awful smells. I have seen too many lepers. I have seen too much suffering; I can’t deal with this anymore… I had to wall myself up in my room and read a book or do something because… I had reached my saturation point. (William, India)

Only two participants specifically said that they did not find the overall experience of traveling and living in an international location challenging, and three other participants did not specifically describe their experience as challenging or not. Interestingly, the two participants who did not find the experience challenging had had extensive international travel experience in developing countries prior to their ISL experience. The other three participants were students in the Mexico course, a shorter duration of trip.
A range of experiences stretched participants out of their comfort zone. For some participants the challenge was one specific part of the course experience. For others the challenge of the experience was extensive and the participants described different types of challenges. Most were as a result of being immersed in a developing country. Participants identified general travel experiences like the extreme temperatures, being sick, different housing, not liking the food served, and using different types of toilets or showers than they were used to. Other immersion challenges described were difficulty understanding the culture, the language barrier, and witnessing suffering in the local community. Additionally, participants described the difficulty of traveling with a group of peer students, returning home from the travel experience, and talking about the experience with family and friends after the course. I will describe in more detail two of the most commonly described challenges, immersion in the host country and difficulty describing the ISL experience.

*It is not like home.* Through traveling and living in a developing country, participants faced experiences that were challenging. These experiences were outside their comfort zone as they encountered, reacted to, or adjusted to environmental, social, and cultural factors that were different. These immersion challenges are a unique part of ISL, something that campus based service-learning participants usually do not have to encounter. Often they could have been predicted, but, nonetheless, stretched the participants outside their comfort zone. For many participants these moments were a springboard for a deepening of their experience of the ISL course.
For some participants, the challenge was being sick.

_We were all very sick. We basically all had dysentery the whole time. And we joked because we would have our pills in the morning, we take our malaria pills and take the Imodium. We were just not very well. And we kind of dehydrated too. So I was sick as a dog the whole time. . . . It was definitely the hardest thing that I've ever done. . . . We just never knew if the food was washed properly. The water over there, we never knew if that was purified or what, if it was real drinking water. It was a big issue. (Miriam, Ghana)_

Being sick throughout the in-country portion of the course was a major theme for Miriam. She would call home crying about how awful she felt and her parents considered flying to Ghana to bring her home. Sickness created a level of camaraderie among her peer students, since everyone needed to support each other. She did not know anyone else on the course, but found through being sick, the group became “very close.” Since this was the first time this course had been offered, there was a sense that the group was the “guinea pig” for later courses. The sickness the group experienced was part of the bonding that they experienced.

For other participants, the challenge was living in rustic conditions. As part of the program, Lucy (El Salvador) and another student spent the night in the home of a local family, which did not have electricity or running water. She became “freaked out” by having to have a bowel movement in the backyard, since there was no bathroom in the house. That uncomfortable experience was the springboard for her to think about her later career path:

_I had never considered something so basic as sanitation and how essential it is. . . . to live a life without humiliation. The little girls who we stayed with . . . during the day when they are at their home and they go in their backyard and do this [go to the bathroom] . . . men and boys and all these people can see them doing it. And it’s something so simple that we take for granted that I think has always stuck with me. For a while . . . I thought that a specific route I might want to take would be going into water and sanitation. And I have kind of steered away from that sense because of the technicalities and the engineering
kind of goes over my head. But it's still something that interests me and I think should be a part of development strategies in whatever career I go into. (Lucy, El Salvador)

The cultural differences also posed challenges for participants. Maddie (Ghana) described cultural differences in the justice system, response to domestic violence, language, housing, and access to water and sanitation. Most pronounced for her was the challenge of interacting with local people.

Ghanaians are what we would call, but try to de-stigmatize the word, opportunists. They don’t have a lot and when they see opportunities, you know, they are really trying to rise to that occasion. (Maddie, Ghana)

Struggling to understand the cultural differences between her and the people she met in Ghana continued throughout the interview. Later in the interview, she talked more about what she meant by “opportunistic”:

It was a cultural difference. And I remember [faculty member] telling us that Ghanaians are opportunistic but it’s not the same word that we use. . . . She told us before we went that if you have a bracelet that somebody likes, they’ll say, “I like your bracelet can I have it?” And just cultural differences like that. (Maddie, Ghana)

Local people asked her for things, including a woman on the street asking her for one of her shoes. She said she did not ever get over “being asked for things all the time.” Finally at the end of the interview, she ultimately admitted that she did not feel that she got beyond the challenge with the cultural differences.

One part that that I am still struggling with is the, is accepting people for who they are and there are cultural differences. I’m sounding like I didn’t like the people and that is not true at all. But, but there’s just a barrier that I struggled to step over, between understanding, you know, someone’s motivations maybe. (Maddie, Ghana)

While Miriam and Lucy, among other participants, were able to use the experience of being challenged as a catalyst for deepening their experience, Maddie
was not. She continued to struggle with the cultural differences while in Ghana. She was one of only two participants who articulated that she was not interested in returning to the host country again.

“They just wouldn’t understand because they weren’t there.” One of the hard parts of the experience for half of the participants was talking about and processing the experience once they returned back to the U.S. Often participants were excited to return home and share their experience, but found it difficult to express the experience in words or to find people who wanted to listen to their experience. Participants felt hurt by family and friends who were not interested or not as excited to hear about their experience as they expected.

Sophie (Ghana) articulated both the challenge of finding the right words to adequately describe the experience and the challenge of finding people who really wanted to hear about her experience.

*The thing with service-learning is . . . that it’s something that you can’t really describe to a lot of people. Like when I came back from my backpacking trips in Europe, I could totally relate my entire experience to everyone. But it’s almost like when you go to a country like Ghana and do service-learning, it’s almost like people only can understand what I experienced to a certain degree. . . . Like there are just some things that I could never explain to anyone else. But they just wouldn’t understand because they weren’t there. . . . Because there are just so many different parts of it. And so many different aspects of it. . . . I don’t want to use the word intense. It was just so heavy that I found myself just struggling to be able to explain it to people.* (Sophie, Ghana)

When I asked her how her experience in Ghana was different than her experience backpacking through Europe, she talked about how complex her experience was.

*Whereas for a service-learning trip, it’s not cut and dry. You have all these little tiny random weird awesome sad experiences. . . . It’s not like you’re going to a little tourist trap and eating at cute little Parisian cafés. You’re sitting outside, eating rice out of a bowl and . . . listening to a woman cry, telling her story, in a*
small little hut. It's really different. And it's really hard to put stuff like that into words for people. (Sophie, Ghana)

Sophie also articulated what many participants described: that people at home did not understand why she would be interested in participating in an ISL course.

I think people who have traveled before were more interested in Ghana but some of it makes people feel uncomfortable because that's the whole idea of it is to be uncomfortable. Or they wouldn't understand why I would want to go somewhere like that. I heard that from quite a few people, especially older people, who never really traveled. They would be like “Why would you want to go there? Why would you pay money to do that? I don’t understand that.” (Sophie, Ghana)

Participants struggled to find the right words to adequately describe their experience. Often it was because the experience was so complex and multi-faceted. Participants also struggled to find family and peers who were interested in hearing their stories and who wanted to hear more than a quick one-sentence description of the experience.

**Range of reactions.** Of the types of challenges described, participants had varying reactions to those challenges. For a similar type of challenge, some participants adjusted easily and creatively, while others really struggled or stayed stuck in that experience. Thirteen participants found the language barrier to be challenging, though there was a range of intensities for how participants described it. For some it was a manageable obstacle that was overcome with creativity, like communicating without words or using interpreters. Katya (India) showed creativity in how she managed the language barrier when she stayed with some students in a guesthouse of a local family. She showed photos she had brought from home and drew pictures to communicate ideas.
I can still picture this exact place 10 years later. You can make a connection with people without really being able to talk to them. You show them a picture of your family and say the basic words for sister or dog or whatever and then they smile and say “oh yeah.” You can communicate with people without a lot of language. (Katya, India)

Some participants described the language barrier wistfully because they wanted to have deeper conversation with the people in the host country. Becky (Bosnia) had a previous study abroad experience where she could speak the local language. In Bosnia she longed to have stronger and deeper relationships with local people, but was prevented by the language barrier.

I think one of the most challenging things for me was that the previous two times that I’ve lived abroad, in Mexico and in Spain, I spoke the language pretty fluently. And so it was easy for me to make friends with locals. And kind of get that integration and experience the culture. In Bosnia, I obviously interacted with the host mom that we had in [city] and with the kids and with their parents [at service location]. But not in the same way that I did in other countries, where I had friends my own age. Because I obviously didn’t speak the language. . . . I think the language barrier was difficult, not necessarily because I felt like I couldn’t go to the market and buy something. That level of language I had figured out. Survival language, I definitely had. I didn’t feel like I could connect as much with the people that I was around. (Becky, Bosnia)

For a few of the participants, the language barrier was the most difficult part of the experience and a barrier to understanding the people or the culture. The participants who struggled the most with the language barrier were in the Spanish speaking countries, Mexico and El Salvador. Lucy (El Salvador) had taken one academic quarter of Spanish language prior to her ISL course and had hoped that was enough to communicate with people in the country. When she found that she did not understand most of what was said in Spanish, she became really frustrated.

But for me and a couple others, the language barrier had gotten really, really frustrating . . . I had to leave the group once or twice and just go and cry to get my frustrations out. . . . I was probably the best student in my Spanish class and I probably learned more than most people do in that short time but I just had
really high expectations for myself. So when I got there, and it really hit me that I didn’t have a clue what anybody was saying, that was hard. And I didn’t deal with it well. I spent a lot of times huffing and puffing, hopefully off to myself. I didn’t want them to see me. (Lucy, El Salvador)

Similarly, 12 participants described challenges associated with living in another country, like getting sick, being hot, different food, and bathrooms. For some participants the challenges were small and manageable. One participant had been afraid of getting sick prior to her travel. But she found that getting sick was “not a big deal.” Another participant talked about peeing in the woods because there were no bathrooms in a matter of fact way; that was just what needed to be done. For others, these travel challenges were very trying. One participant talked about being hungry for five weeks because she did not eat seafood, which was the meal option in coastal Ghana. Another participant talked about vomiting and crying and feeling like he had had enough of India.

There was not a clear pattern to why participants had varying types of reactions to these challenging experiences. Expectations may have played a role in their reactions. Lucy had expected to be able to communicate comfortably in Spanish after one academic quarter and so when her expectations were not met, she had a strong reaction. Openness to adapt to situations could be another factor. Sophie did not eat seafood and was not willing to try it, so she spent five weeks in Ghana being hungry.

Overall this describes the varying types of challenges participants experienced as well as the varying reactions they had to those challenges. As a result of living and working in a developing country, these participants were stretched outside their comfort zone when they encountered environmental,
cultural, and social factors different from their own. For some, these experiences were springboards for deepening their learning experience and opportunities for personal growth.

Theme two: Destabilizing: “It will always be an experience that will haunt me.” Sixteen participants described destabilizing experiences that were intense, confusing, or unsettling. These experiences were more than just challenging, like those described in the above theme. The experiences shook the participant up in some way – either because their sense of safety was threatened or because they did not know how to make sense of the experience – they did not have a frame of reference to understand what they were seeing or experiencing. Some participants continue to feel unsettled about their experience years later.

These destabilizing experiences fell into two categories. The first category captures experiences when the participant felt unsafe. They would use the words “scary” or “terrifying” to describe these moments.

Being over there is just scary. It really was. I remember being in a cab, just me and the other girl [peer student]. We were kind of on our own, away from the group. I remember being in cabs and trying to be pick-pocketed and having to shove a guy off of me. And . . . walking at night alone to a pay phone. . . . It was a scary time and beneficial, a lot of growing. (Miriam, Ghana)

The other type of intense experiences recounts times when students witnessed something for which they had no frame of reference. Participants used words like “haunting,” “traumatic,” or “shocking” to describe these experiences.

You’d see things and smell things and hear things that were beautiful and alluring and wonderful and then moments later you’d be absolutely shocked by something just heinously atrocious. And so, yeah, it was like getting punched. (William, India)
The variations in the types of destabilizing experiences will be described in more detail below.

**It was terrifying.** Surprisingly, over half of the participants talked about experiences in which they felt unsafe in the host country. There was a range of experiences described. Some participants felt they were possibly in danger. For example, driving through a dangerous neighborhood and the driver telling everyone to roll up the windows or an experience of walking alone at night to a pay phone to call home. Nothing happened to the participant, but they felt scared or vulnerable.

Four participants were involved in incidents where they were more directly in danger. One group was robbed at gunpoint; another participant was alone with a man who made aggressive sexual advances; one participant had things thrown at her and people screaming in her face for working at an Untouchables camp; while a fourth participant had to push off a man who was pick-pocketing her.

*We were waiting to get back on the bus and people driving by or walking by who were not of the Untouchable caste were literally throwing bananas at us and food at us and yelling and screaming and, you know, coming up in our faces and yelling at us. Because they didn't want us helping them [the Untouchables] because, you know, they're the Untouchables, and people don't talk to them and people don't touch them and don't associate with them because they are the... the lowest of the low there... It was terrifying. (Julie, India)*

These experiences were unsettling for the participants. Their sense of safety was compromised and they felt vulnerable. For some participants, these experiences of feeling unsafe were not unexpected, but were unwelcome and uncomfortable. For most participants who experienced feeling unsafe, these experiences were just one part of the complexity of their ISL course experience. They were scared in the moment and felt on guard at times in the country, but these
experiences were not the most significant part of the course for them. Only for Marie, whose group was held up at gunpoint at the community center, did the safety experience become a focal point of the course. The group hired a guard to travel with them after the robbery; they did not return to the community center and they had to convince their parents to let them stay in El Salvador. Marie experienced signs of trauma, including not sleeping, when she returned to the U.S. For all participants the experience was scary and they felt vulnerable, but it did not affect future international travel for any participant.

*An experience that will haunt me.* Fourteen participants described a story that was intense, confusing, or shocking for them. These were experiences that were unexpected. Participants did not have a frame of reference to understand the experience in the moment. Participants felt destabilized in the moment, and some continued to feel unsettled years later.

While many participants described a time that was destabilizing, the context of the experience varied by participant. For some participants it was about seeing extreme and desperate poverty and feeling helpless to respond in a way that would provide real relief.

*And I was just so incredibly struck by the abject poverty. It was just, unlike anything I had ever seen. Maybe I had learned about that, but to actually see it was so incredibly impactful. But we brought rice down to this village, because, we wanted to bring something. And it was gone within seconds. We were mobbed essentially by these people, over just a handful of rice. And it was so bizarre because they were pushing each other out of the way, climbing over one another, just for a couple of grains of rice. And, I mean, these people live, breathe, they work, and then they die in this village. It’s like, inescapable.* (Lynn, India)
Lynn participated in this course in 2003. Nine years later she still struggled with how to make sense of this experience.

*I don’t think there is any way to come to grips 100% with that kind of experience. It will always be an experience that will haunt me. And it should haunt me. . . . I think that that experience, as horrifying as it was and is and will continue to be, it’s a really important experience for me to maintain my perspective, to keep my priorities in the right place, and to really work for social change and to actually bring change to things that are widespread and overwhelming.* (Lynn, India)

For some participants, the intense and confusing experience was as a result of bumping up against how women’s rights are different outside of the U.S. Two women talked about witnessing extreme domestic violence and realizing that there was no way to help the victim and that society did not view domestic violence in the same way. Sophie (Ghana) describes her experience of watching a husband beat this wife and throw their infant child to the ground outside.

*So that just made the biggest impact on me because I had never seen someone beat their wife out in the open. You know like it was no big deal. I mean there were other neighbors, there are people walking on the street and they did nothing. And it was just really, really, really resonated with me. How different it is so, . . . it made me more passionate about domestic violence anyway because I knew there’s only so much that I could do there. So, I became more interested in it here. So that was definitely an experience that stuck in my mind when I think about that trip, I think about that a lot, just because it just really showed the different values that Ghana has from our country.* (Sophie, Ghana)

When Sophie was asked how she made sense of the experience of witnessing domestic violence, she said the following:

*But in terms of understanding that specific experience, I don’t know if it is something that I could really make sense of. Because, even right now, two years later, it still gets me riled up, it still gets my blood boiling because it makes me so mad. I don’t know if it is something that I have come to terms with.* (Sophie, Ghana)
Participants also described experiences of being much closer to death than they ever had been in the United States.

_Instead of burying people, they burn the dead bodies on the ghats. And so I have a lot of intense experience dealing with death and the afterlife in terms of religious ceremonies. I saw bodies being burned next to rivers, being swept into the rivers. I saw a lot of the Untouchable caste can’t afford to buy enough wood to completely burn the body, so I saw packs of wild dogs pulling apart a half burnt cadaver that had not burned to completion. Smelling the intensity of burning bodies. . . . Life is not always this pretty little glittery thing that a lot of us think that it is in America. . . . We don’t really face it that often unless a close relative passes away. But in [the] Third World, death is almost as pervasive as life. I have never seen, never been exposed to that type of education before._ (Jake, India)

Jake struggled with how to describe these experiences beyond using the word intense. It was these intense and destabilizing experiences that provided the greatest opportunities for growth for him.

_It changed me forever. You can’t walk away from those experiences and be the same person that you were going in. I think that I just selected a couple of stories, not to be gruesome, but to essentially . . . describe to you that I was not in London or Piccadilly Circus. This is why I went there, I went there because I didn’t want to be in another country and pretend that I was in Chicago or Denver . . . . This is the education I went there for._ (Jake, India)

In each of these experiences, participants were outside their comfort zones and pushed to face confusing, intense, and disorienting experiences of life in another country. Like the challenging experiences described in the first theme, these experiences often became a springboard for a deeper understanding of their ISL experience. Lynn became more committed to working for social change and deepening her relationship with God as a result of witnessing extreme poverty. Sophie became passionate about domestic violence issues in the U.S. after witnessing domestic violence in Ghana. Jake became more aware of issues of death in India and well as the U.S.
Overall, this theme describes destabilizing experiences of participants. These experiences did more than stretch participants outside their comfort zone; they shook up their sense of reality. Through experiences of feeling unsafe or shaken up, participants were forced to re-examine their frames of reference. Some participants continued to feel unsettled even years after the experience. While more preparation may help participants, in general these experiences developed organically and participants and program coordinators needed to process the experiences in the moment.

**Theme three: Being known and unknown: “We got very close” and “being out of place.”** All participants described an experience of having a strong emotional or felt connection as a result of their participation in an ISL course. Participants felt connected to their peer students with whom they traveled and lived, with local individuals or groups they met through the service-learning experience or through living in a local community, and with the local culture and the social issues in that culture. In contrast with these experiences of being known, half of the participants described experiences of being the “other” or being out of place because they were Westerners in a developing country. Often this experience came in the form of being targets for begging or theft. For participants who made emotional connections with others through their ISL course experience, there is evidence that those relationships have lasted over time and distance.

**Connecting with peer students.** Fifteen participants described that a significant element of the ISL course was being with a group of peer students. Participants used similar language when describing the felt connections with their
peer group. They talked about how the group “got very close” and it was a “bonding experience for the group.”

So it was really remarkable . . . going through this incredibly positive, life-changing, challenging experience . . . for the people involved, what a bonding experience it became. And I would suspect that the probability, even compared to most study abroad programs, service-learning programs . . . produce lifelong friends, couples, whatever, at a pretty high rate because I’ve still got friendships from both of my [service-learning] experiences that have really stood the test of time. (William, India)

Participants described feeling connected to peers, developing friendships, and providing support throughout the ISL course. Due to the intense nature of the experience, for some participants, processing the experience with their peer group was an essential element of the course. For 13 participants, the relationships and support they received from peers during and after the course were significant.

Participants described the importance of building supportive relationships with individuals or with the entire student group. For some participants it was important to informally process the experience with peers during or after the course. For others it was important to be with other students who were non-judgmental, also experiencing homesickness, or who shared the experience of being outside their comfort zones.

It was more the people and the group really getting close to everyone. When we had dinners together, people were very open, it was very . . . comforting environment, you didn’t judge anyone. Maybe it was just the group of people that were on the trip . . . each person was really special in their own way and you felt very secure. It was great to have that community, I guess. (Catherine, India)

It was also important for participants to have peers to process the intensity of the immersion and service-learning experience.
We just got confronted by the reality of India. . . . The poverty and the smells and the action, nothing stops, nothing is tranquil, everything is swirling around you. And we got, we were approached by, a probably, a 12-year-old girl who was horribly disfigured and was holding a baby who looked like it was dead. Really on our first morning there in India. And I think it . . . was like getting punched; we just, both of us were speechless for a good while afterward. But we really leaned on each other to try to process that, to try to make sense of what we had seen. And I think that that process kind of continued throughout the whole trip as we all know we couldn’t do it all inside our own heads. The experiences we were having were way too intense. And so as we leaned on each other to process what we were feeling and seeing. I think that fostered some really, really intense deep friendships that have persisted after nine years. (William, India)

Living and working with a group of peer students was not a uniformly positive experience; there were challenges for participants with group dynamics.

Well, I’m a pretty social person, I talked a lot to people and I can talk to just about anyone. I enjoyed being around people but I also like having that ability to be by myself and get away. And during this week . . . you were around people all the time, and in two different languages, too . . . I would say that was the hardest part. (Peter, Mexico)

Not that I didn’t like the Americans [peer students] that I was with, but none of them and I became best fast friends. I felt a little isolated and maybe I was self isolating as I was processing what was going on around me. (Becky, Bosnia)

Despite the challenges of living and working with peers, most participants found they relied on their connections within the student group for support and to process their experience.

**Connecting with local people.** Participants also felt connected to and built relationships with local people in the host country. This mostly occurred either through their service-learning experience or through the programmatic elements of the course like cultural buddies or home stays. Through interactions with local people, participants developed an affective sense of the lives of others and were often surprised to find commonalities with people from other cultures and life
experiences. Jake (India) developed a friendship with a local man, which has endured over the last nine years.

My best friend in [name of city] was a Tibetan man by the name of [name of friend]. And he basically, I think at about 13 years old, walked from Tibet to India, with no shoes on. . . . He went from walking over . . . snowcapped peaks with no shoes on, to teaching himself English, to opening a school, to help people learn English. And he was one of the most prolific characters in my trip to [name of city]. We still speak to this day. . . . We felt like brothers, we had nothing in common, outside of just being good people. And man, he was just, one of the nicest most genuine, kindest, hard-working, most intelligent people I have ever met. And we felt like we had known each other for our entire lives. (Jake, India)

Jake’s friend connected with other members of that student group as well. Katya, who was in the same cohort as Jake, talked about this man hiking with the group of students and staying in contact with him through Facebook. He became a peer and a friend to students in that course.

Julie (India) found that through her service-learning placement teaching English to Tibetan nuns and ex-political prisoners, she was able to build “emotional, human connections” with people she encountered.

I remember having these intensely emotional conversations with them. . . . I was speaking English and so were they, but there was so much of the conversation that wasn’t English, it wasn’t Tibetan and it was just so emotional and just a human connection that I was really surprised by that. . . . And not knowing what barriers I thought might be there we could actually take the conversation so much further. And really learned about each other. And I still don’t quite understand how we were able to get there. I am still kind of stunned, but it’s one of those kind of magical moments that I look back on. (Julie, India)

Julie built connections with the people she was tutoring through sharing about her own life and listening to the stories of others. The emotional depth of the conversation and that she was able to connect with a person, whose life was so different from her own, surprised Julie.
Participants were often surprised to discover commonalities between themselves and the people they interacted with in the host country. Often these commonalities were the impetus for building an emotional connection with others.

*Being a woman its interesting to see how another woman, what her role is in society . . . who she is and how she kind of gets by. And her problems and her challenges and how, what she values in life and how she lives her life. So it was really kind of interesting to see that. We got very close and she opened up and it was kind of great to hear it from a perspective of a younger woman. A professional lady, learning about how she is surviving or how she is thriving in this culture. It’s interesting because it’s so different . . . but at the same time you have things in common. (Catherine, India)*

*I saw a lot in the people down there that I could draw comparisons or commonality with. . . . You can pick out compassion and even some of the things they worry about like that are the silly stuff that we worry about. Like beauty or that kind of thing. . . . The more I travel the more I realize that we are just quite the same, in a lot of ways. (Marie, El Salvador)*

**Connecting with culture and issues in culture.** A smaller number of participants described a felt connection to the culture and the country where the immersion component of the course took place. They were specifically connected to and attracted to the culture in which they were immersed. Eleanor (India) talked about the most significant element of her experience was being immersed in Tibetan culture. As she spoke there was wistfulness in her voice.

*I would really say that the biggest thing that stands out by far is the people. Tibetan culture and people are just extraordinary. They are so peaceful and so kind and they are just so, you know, the epitome of living religion. . . . I’ve never seen so many people just so . . . at peace, so much community, so much happiness, so much . . . beauty. It’s like the way that life should be. (Eleanor, India)*

Alex similarly fell in love with the culture. He started the course with some apprehension, since this was the first year the course had been offered in El Salvador. He found that the community organization and the local people warmly
welcomed him. He returned to El Salvador a year later with his family, stayed at the same guesthouse, and went to visit the community organization where he had volunteered the previous year.

Before going in-country, it was kind of like how is this whole project going to pan out? Are we going to be welcome? And, yeah, respected? Because, we come from a developed country, where El Salvador is just maintaining its democracy and so, the biggest thing that stands out in a memory, is that we arrived in country and there was this group of kids that kind of welcome us into this community as a whole, invited us to see where they live, and how day to day life is, how it is just taken not for granted. They just welcomed us with food, with the limited resources that they have. And it was just amazing that people that had . . . so little . . . that they fully didn’t know what type of opportunities I have, or everyone in the group have, that they may never have the opportunity to partake in. But yet they had no, no resentments, they were just welcoming and just made you feel like . . . you could return to their country at any time, and just return to where you left off in your conversation in that relationship. Which made me love that whole culture and I actually felt so comfortable that I did return the following year and brought my family for Christmas to El Salvador. (Alex, El Salvador)

Participants also described experiences of having an affective connection with the issues in the host country. Through being in the country, hearing the stories of the people, and seeing both the joy and the challenges they face, participants had a felt sense of the social issues they were learning about.

You can really kind of put a face or an image to a lot of the things that we had been discussing in class. And we had been talking about, you know, the separation between upper-class and lower-class and all kind of things like that, but to actually have that experience and to have those memories kind of imprinted, you know, makes it all the more meaningful. (Fernando, Mexico)

Later in the interview, Fernando returned to talking about the difference between learning about poverty in class and then seeing it first hand.

Some little kids that live in poverty there . . . trying to make a living by selling flowers and, or just begging, and, you know, there’s a difference between hearing about it and then actually seeing it. (Fernando, Mexico)
Connections that last over time and distance. Twelve participants described staying in contact with peers, local people, the culture, or the program after returning from the course. This was not a specific interview question, but something that emerged through data analysis. As described above, some participants made strong connections with peers and those friendships have lasted through the years, as long as nine years for William and Jake. Participants have also stayed in contact with local people they met. Social media outlets like Facebook have aided this process, especially for participants who traveled most recently. Participants of the Mexico course, Spring 2011, were most likely to talk about connecting with local Mexicans through Facebook.

Well it’s so easy with Facebook. They can do it right when you’re there. They might forget your name in a month, but if they send you one [Facebook friend invitation] when you’re down there … it’s so much easier. (Peter, Mexico)

The woman that Miriam worked with in Ghana was sponsored by the university to visit the U.S. Miriam has stayed in touch with her and helped her connect with USAID while in the U.S.

I actually still talk to her. So it’s pretty special. . . . She came over a couple years ago. I used to live in Washington DC. I had some political connections there. . . . I got her to meet with a person with USAID so they could talk to her about getting more government funds. (Miriam, Ghana)

Participants also reported traveling back to the host country and visiting, staying in contact with the faculty coordinator of the course, with alumni of other years of the course, and donating money to the course to provide scholarships for other students.

Being out of place. In contrast to the many affective connections participants described, there were also stories about being out of place or the
“other” as a part of their ISL course experience. For some participants, the feeling of being out of place was more striking due to the close relationships they had formed. Katya (India) talked extensively about the many relationships she built with peers and local people. When she stayed in India for an additional week after the course ended, she often felt targeted as a tourist who could be a source of income for locals.

So I was there a week by myself... I think it’s people who see you as “here is the rich Westerner”... you have to have a certain amount of money to be able to come visit these places anyway and so you are walking down the street and you have people call out saying, “I’m a guide, I will help you get to this place” and then it turns out that... they are just after a commission from a shop or something like that. (Katya, India)

She contrasted that experience with her experience as part of the ISL course.

When you have time to build a relationship with people, as being in [name of city] for almost a month... you can tell if they are just trying to get something from you... or if they genuinely just want to be friendly and share... The advantage in being in a service-learning program is that you are helping as much as you can and in a particular way, ... I think the effect of one individual is probably not that great, but, you know, over the course of a sustainable program like 10 years of [name of program] when you have built up relationships... I think you can make more of the difference. It feels less one-sided in those sorts of interactions. (Katya, India)

Like Katya, other participants were aware of times that they were seen as tourists during their ISL course. Julie (India) struggled with how to respond to persistent begging. She realized that she was being targeted because she was a Westerner and that the local Indian people were not being approached.

But you also notice that none of those people [asking for money] were addressing of any of the local people, they were just addressing, you know, the Americans or the Australians. (Julie, India)

Peter (Mexico) went out to a bar with a group of peer students and local Mexican college students who were their cultural buddies. The bar created a special section for the group, along with a security guard. He talked about this experience,
where he was set apart from the rest of the people in the bar as feeling isolated and uncomfortable.

So it was interesting being, being the foreigners, being VIPs. We felt like we were isolated, we felt like we were tourists, like we were foreigners. We were the other, I guess. When somebody comes to our country, we look at people the same way that they were looking at us.

Through the interview process, he realized that the significant stories that he was telling me all were about times he felt out of place. Specifically, in the bar he became aware of being White and male, an uncommon experience for him in the United States.

So I think the things that I remember the best are the things that make me feel more out of place or had a bigger emotional effect on me. Like that sense of, at the bar, I had the sense of being different and that was something that living in the States you almost never feel [if] you are White or male. (Peter, Mexico)

Overall, this theme describes experiences of participants building deeply felt connections. Many participants felt connected or bonded to other peer students. The student group was an important venue to process the intense experience and receive support. Participants also built affective connections with local people. They had a visceral emotional connection with their life. Participants also felt connected to the culture of the host country and the social issues faced there.

This theme also describes the opposite experience of feeling connected to people. It describes times when the participants experienced being out of place when they were seen as tourists or rich Westerners. Participants found these experiences to be jarring in contrast with the emotional connections they had developed through the ISL course.
Theme four: Service-learning: “Who is getting the better end of the deal?” The service-learning component of the ISL course was a significant element of the experience. A majority of the participants described positive experiences of providing service or being thanked for their work. There was evidence that the ISL program tried to create reciprocal relationships with the community partner. At the same time, participants described moments of unintended consequences, where the power differentials between the students and the community became evident and where they potentially impacted people or the community in negative ways. In the end, some participants wondered whether or not they had made a positive impact in the community.

Fifteen participants described having a positive experience doing service-learning with local organizations. Participants described this positive experience in terms of providing depth and purpose to their experience. They said the service-learning was a “deeper experience”, “adding a layer of depth”, and that they “did something besides visiting a place.” They also discussed the positive feelings that they had as a result of their experience, including feeling a sense of accomplishment, feeling happy to help the community, and enjoying the service-learning they were doing. Participants also described the positive reactions from the community, the excitement on the faces of the local kids, the gratitude of the community, and the compassion they received from local community members.

In the Mexico course, the group spent two days volunteering at a retirement community.

* A really moving event I think for a lot of people in the class and for myself as well was when we were volunteering at the retirement home. So it was just sort
of the second day especially, because that was the day where we really sat with the residents and, you know, played the games with them, we exercised with them. And it wasn’t even so much talking with them as sort of like being there and holding their hands and listening while they spoke, even if we didn’t really understand what they were saying. And they were just so, so happy and so grateful that people were visiting them. People were paying attention to them. They obviously weren’t getting that sort of attention from their own family members, if they had family members still alive or still in the area. . . . It really got a lot of people emotional and really, it was really touching, probably the most touching event out of the experience. . . . It wasn’t like we were doing much, but to them it meant, it meant a great deal. (Francesca, Mexico)

Francesca felt appreciated for her work and could see the appreciation in the faces of the elderly residents that they were visiting. This service-learning felt good to her. She was giving of her time and talents and the residents were receiving. You can hear the one-sided nature of charitable service-learning in her quote.

Not all participants saw the service-learning relationship as one-sided. Jake (India) was aware of all that he was taking from the community and was grateful for an outlet to give back.

I felt like I was taking just being there. Because I was able to observe people in their daily lives and in their activities and the way they washed their clothes and the way that they buy food and the way that they harvest food. . . . And that was just such a cool experience, like, I would have never have been able to have. I was absolutely taking from that culture. Not that I was taking anything physically or anything like that, but just the experience and to give back. . . . The entire time I saw it as a symbiotic relationship where I would take from them and learn from them and the country and the people and would do all that I could to give back. Because I felt the experience was so powerful. (Jake, India)

Similarly, William (India) wondered, “Who’s getting the better end of the deal,” as he tutored a Tibetan refugee through this service-learning placement.

It occurred to me how radically different my experience [was than] this young guy that I was tutoring. And it really became very unclear to me who was tutoring whom. . . . There is always that sort of weird dichotomy . . . in this sort of service-learning thing, . . . who’s getting the better end of the deal. . . . Are you benefiting more than the people you’re coming up ostensibly to serve and learn about? And it made me think that I was probably more . . . on the receiving end
because he taught me a lot about how far a human being can go for what they believe in and what they find intolerable in a way that I hadn’t ever and have not yet ever had to really internalize on my end. (William, India)

Through his interactions with this Tibetan monk, William became aware of his own privilege in life and that he was receiving as much or more from the service-learning relationship.

**Reciprocity?** Participants also described their attempts to build respectful and reciprocal relationships within the community and ways that the relationships got tripped up by the disparity of resources. Seven participants talked about working alongside community members or about making the relationship less one-sided by listening and being respectful of the needs of the community.

*There was no really defined program outline of in-country events. It was kind of based upon the model that service, international service, is not what you have pre-thought as a meaningful mission, what can I offer the country? I’m in country based on their needs, at a given moment, time. . . . We helped build a road, on one of the new locations for [community organization], so we worked on the road for three days and that was just kind of what the neighborhood needed of us.* (Alex, El Salvador)

Participants were also aware of times when the differences in power and wealth were apparent between the local people and their group. Often these moments were when the group was giving money or gifts to people or the community organization. Participants brought books for a local library, computers to an orphanage, toys and candy for local children, and Christmas presents to a community center. Two participants talked about the group deciding to give their own spending money to local organizations.

Sophie (Ghana) talked about how the group brought over toys and other trinkets to give the children they met. The faculty member of that course eventually
asked the students to stop giving out these toys because of the aggressive and violent reaction from the children.

An example of one thing that was really surprising to me was before we left we had all decided to bring . . . little candies, little toys, and stuff like that in our bags . . . to give up to the children wherever we went. We were really excited about that. And when we got there, we learned that is actually not a really good idea to do because . . . you come up to this a crowd of say 10 kids and if I pulled out three pieces of candy and just put them out, held them out [in] my hand, they were like animals, literally like animals. [Faculty name] . . . said that we shouldn’t do it anymore because they were like smacking each other and hitting and biting each other just for those little toys.

The intention was to give the kids something fun to play with. The reaction of the children was surprising. Sophie continued to talk about the experience.

It’s weird because . . . I’ve grown up with so many material things, it’s almost like a joke that someone would even care about that stuff. So for these kids to be literally fighting like dogs over these little pieces of what . . . a six year old would literally throw away here. It makes you feel really sad that it is such a big deal to them. (Sophie, Ghana)

For the students in the India course, responding to persistent begging was a challenging experience that students in other programs did not mention. Lynn (India) decided not to give money to the woman begging, but instead to offer to buy a blanket and some rice. Nine years later, after getting a master’s degree in International Administration, she looked back on the decision to give her these material items differently than she did in the moment.

That kind of approach to poverty was totally inappropriate. I mean for her, maybe I helped her getting her some rice and a blanket. More likely I probably put her in danger because she suddenly had a resource that her neighbors didn’t have. And I also . . . perpetuated this precedent that tourists will provide you whatever you need as long as you look desperate enough. Which is certainly not good for the little babies they are carrying around who really need medical care and shouldn’t be just carried around as a prop for getting things from tourists out of pity. So I think I perpetuated that, as well, which was not good. And that kind of effect is immediate. Later in the day there were already more women coming up to me with babies asking for rice and blankets.
The word spread like crazy, like wild fire. . . . In general most people probably give them a couple of dollars, or a couple of rupees. But for me I didn’t want to give them money, I wanted to give them something that would be useful. It really backfired on me. (Lynn, India)

The unintended consequences for the community were not exclusively related to giving material items. Marie (El Salvador), her classmates, and children from the neighborhood were held up and robbed at gunpoint at the community center. She thought they were targeted because they arrived everyday in a big white van and were obviously not from the neighborhood. In reflecting on this traumatic experience, she described the hardest part of the experience was the negative affect on the children in the community.

But I think the hardest part for us was that now a lot of the kids said “My parents won’t let me hang out at the community center.” So now that community got tarnished in that way. And, and we were just able to go home to our, sort of, safe neighborhoods and we all felt kind of a guilt about that. (Marie, El Salvador)

Did we make an impact? Finally, participants talked about the impact their service-learning made in the community. Two participants clearly felt they did not make an impact because they learned how great the scope of the need was and did not see any immediate concrete changes. Others struggled to understand the impact of their service.

But a couple times a week there would be conversations in the van of our group of American students like, what are we doing? Why did we do what we did today? It seemed like a waste of time. I’m happy that they’re [people in the community] happy we are here, but we could do more. (Lucy, El Salvador)

Lucy and her peer students felt frustrated throughout the in-country portion of the course about the impact their service-learning was making. It was something that
was processed through group meetings. In a follow-up question, I asked her how she felt about the experience now, four years later. She responded:

I would say, for the most part, those frustrations are totally gone. Hindsight helps to look back and see that you can't change much of anything in four short weeks. Especially going in with no perspective as to what these people live like. To come in and impose your ideas on them would be stupid. But at the time, I think that's what some of us wanted to do. (Lucy, El Salvador)

Peter (Mexico) talked about sorting clothes for two days at a multi-service agency. He felt they had made an immediate impact for the agency, but wondered about what would happen after the group left.

We got a lot done for them, but just seeing all those clothes piled up and how much we got through, I feel like they don't get a lot of help. So it was a good thing that we did that but the thing we kept talking about afterwards was who was going to be there tomorrow? (Peter, Mexico)

He did not see evidence of many groups coming to volunteer with the organization.

Other participants talked about the impact in terms of hopes; they hope they made an impact or a difference for the people they met. Others thought that the appreciation of the local people was proof of the impact that they made for individual people or that local community.

Overall this theme describes the service-learning component of the ISL course experience. For the most part, participants enjoyed the service-learning work and found that it deepened their cultural immersion experience. While participants tried to build respectful and reciprocal relationships with the community partners, the disparity of resources became apparent on a number of occasions, sometimes creating unintended consequences for the community. Participants wondered about the impact they made in the community.
The first four emergent themes described significant moments of the ISL course, while participants were students (preparation, in-country experience, and follow-up). The next two themes describe the experience and impact after the course.

**After the Course Themes**

Participants were interviewed between eight months and nine years after their experience with an ISL course. The four participants from the Mexico course had taken the course during spring 2011; they were interviewed eight months after their experience. There were seven participants who had completed their ISL course over five years ago. As a result, the participants could talk about the impact of the course in their lives in many different ways. The impact after the course fell into two categories. The first category is new learning, often evident immediately after the course. In this category there is evidence of increased awareness and/or understanding about (a) themselves, (b) culture, and (c) worldview. The second category relates to the enduring impact of the course both in (a) changes in thinking and (b) changes in behavior. These changes developed after the course, though some took quite a while to become apparent.

**Theme five: Seeing self, culture, and the world differently: “It opened my eyes”**. All participants were able to identify one or more things that they learned as a result of their participation in the ISL course. Participants described that learning in different ways. For some it was a new awareness; they became aware of something that was not part of their frame of reference prior to the course. For others it was a deeper understanding about a topic that they had had awareness
of before. This was especially true about the social issues they faced in the host country. They had awareness of the issues prior to traveling to the country, often from the course preparation. But through living and working in the country and hearing the stories of people there, they had a deeper understanding of those issues. The increased understanding was both on an intellectual level, where they came to learn the historical and political aspects of the issue as well as an emotional level, where they understood the experience on an emotional level. There were three types of learning that participants described: (a) increased self-awareness, (b) increased cultural awareness and understanding, and (c) an expanded and more personal worldview. Each type of learning will be described below by first giving a definition of the type of learning and providing examples from participants about the variations of the learning.

**Increased self-awareness.** Sixteen participants described an increase in knowledge of themselves as a result of their participation in an ISL course. This self-awareness came in many forms: (a) a greater appreciation of their life situation and their privileged place in the world, (b) awareness of their family background, (c) awareness of their race, gender, or age, and (d) awareness of personal limitations and growth. Of the 16 participants who described an element of increased self-awareness, 13 described self-awareness in more than one form.

For some participants it was a greater appreciation for their life in the U.S. in comparison to the life they witnessed in the host country. Participants were aware of what they take for granted (basic necessities, security, wealth, easy life) and
discussed how they do not take it for granted anymore and do not complain about their life circumstances as much.

[It has] given me a very visceral understanding of the inequality in the world... . Here in the U.S., we complain about what seems kind of stupid when you look at some of the houses that people are living in [name of city], what they are getting by on compared to what we get by on and complain about. So I think it has taught me a certain amount of; I'm not quite sure what the word that I am looking for is, but a perception of that difference and an awareness of that that is always in the back of my mind... when I am starting to complain about something and then I think it could be so much worse. I could have so much less. (Katya, India)

It has been nine years since Katya was in India, and she still remembers the inequality that she witnessed.

William (India) talked about how privileged his background was. Through his ISL course experience, he became increasingly aware of how easy his life was in comparison to the Tibetan refugees he met, some of whom were the same age as he. He developed humility as a result of this awareness.

Every 19-year-old boy is full of piss and vinegar and thinks that he knows everything about really everything. I’ve always been reasonably intelligent, reasonably articulate, school never posed that much of a hassle for me. It really made me realize how much I still had to learn and that was a deeply humbling and kind of “oh my God” sort of experience to realize that, I don’t really have a handle on life. I just have a handle on life because I’m lucky enough to have a life it’s really easy to get a handle on. So, it was more of recognition of how much I still had to learn and a forcible instilling of the humbleness that I hadn’t been terribly willing to exhibit before that. (William, India)

Self-awareness also came in the form of becoming more aware of their family background through the ISL course. Some participants connected their ISL experience to their family’s immigration story, cultural background, history of service, and history of travel. They came to understand their own family background better through their participation. Desiree had never traveled outside
the U.S. prior to the Mexico course. She began to better understand some of her parents’ messages to her growing up.

But I think because I am Latina and I was raised with, you know, Latinos . . . don’t trust their government . . . . Me coming there [Mexico] kind of connected what I was raised with . . . . It kind of made it more clear about what my parents have always told me about. (Desiree, Mexico)

Five participants described becoming aware of their own race, gender, or age through their ISL participation. Through having an experience of rubbing up against different cultural identities, participants learned more about their own identities. As was described earlier, Peter became aware of his race and gender identities as a result of his ISL course experience, something he identifies that would not have happened if he were in the U.S.

Finally, nine participants described learning about their own limitations or acknowledging personal growth as a result of their ISL experience. Participants described an increased sense of confidence, increased knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses, and a desire to continue to grow as a person.

The trip overall gave me a lot of confidence and strength to do new things and to leave my comfort zone. Because it was almost like a personal test for me to see, okay, you are going to go here, you don’t know anyone, you don’t know what it’s going to be like. Let’s see if you can kind of make it . . . . And so, that kind of gave me confidence and strength to do that later in my life. So now I’ve moved to a new city where I didn’t know anybody and started all these new things and I feel like I was . . . . able to do that in some regards because of my experience in Ghana and . . . . knowing that I can leave my comfort zone and can be okay. (Sophie, Ghana)

Through participation in an ISL course, participants came to know themselves better. For most, this came in the form of increased appreciation for their own life circumstances and awareness of their access to resources in relationship to the global population. Participants also identified increased
awareness of their family background, their cultural identities, and their personal strengths and limitations.

**Increased cultural awareness and understanding.** Through the process of living and working in a different country, 16 participants described their experience of learning more about and coming to understand a different culture. For many participants, there was a sense of getting an insider’s look at the country and the culture.

*I just felt like I was being able to take a look into, it was a really deep look into this other culture. I felt privileged to be able to see that. Privileged to have that shared with me. It is just a perspective that I would have never ever gotten any other way.* (Becky, Bosnia)

Participants often talked about the experience of learning about a new culture through describing what was different from their own experience. Participants became aware of and described a variety of cultural differences. Some were value neutral, where the participant described the difference, but did not seem critical of that difference – like eating style, food, dress, language, religion, and housing. These were differences that were perhaps expected and did not seem to contradict with their own values. Peter (Mexico) felt prepared for many of the cultural differences he experienced. He discussed them in a matter of fact way.

*I didn’t really have any problem with culture shock or anything like that. I mean the food was different, but it was good, I ate it. The people spoke other language, yeah, we knew that was going to happen.* (Peter, Mexico)

There were other cultural differences, which were much more challenging for participants to understand and accept. These cultural differences included the justice system, women’s rights, social cues, and opportunistic attitude. Some participants struggled to understand and respect these differences.
I mean, definitely like an overall cultural sensitivity that I don’t think I really had refined before. Something [name of project coordinator] had said really stuck with me, where she said you are going to compare things and it’s important to know that just because something is different doesn’t mean it’s better or worse, just let it be different. And so you know in terms of like country A versus country B like that sensitivity is there. But even just in personal interactions, conversations with another individual, I’ve really become a lot more sympathetic, empathetic . . . patient, slow to judge, and you know try to always understand that there is more than two sides to every story and not to assign my outlook on everybody else. (Lucy, El Salvador)

Through interacting with cultural differences, participants became aware of, and sometimes became critical of, their own culture. They identified parts of the culture of the U.S. that they did not like or were interested in doing differently.

Eleanor traveled to India in the ISL course and twice to Kenya after the course for a study abroad experience and a research project. In both of those developing countries she found a sense of community connection that she had a hard time finding in the U.S. She was critical of the U.S. lifestyle that was individualistic and hurried.

*There’s just a feeling of community in a lot of other countries that I don’t think that we really have in the U.S. I live in an apartment building and I know very few of my neighbors. And I talk to even less of them. That’s kind of the American way. You know, we are always on our cell phones and driving alone in cars, and running here and running there in a hurry. [In developing countries] there is more of a willingness to kind of stop and know the people around you and have time for yourself and have time for others. I think it’s really beautiful. I think it’s really obvious to people when they travel, when you see that difference, culturally.* (Eleanor, India)

Participants were also critical of the sense of time in the U.S. They found that life seemed more robotic, that there was more of an emphasis on consumerism, and a lack of interest in sharing resources.

Some participants specifically described how their experience with an ISL course had an impact on their ability to be sensitive to and confidently interact with
people from other cultures. Katya (India) described that once she became aware that there could be cultural differences, she tried to be more aware of the assumptions she had about interactions with people from other cultures.

*I think it also taught me... to be aware of your assumptions and your prejudices and that we all have them even when we try not to... That when I take offense to something or when I need to be aware, oh maybe they are making different assumptions than I am. Because it’s so easy to do that.* (Katya, India)

Through living and working in a country with a culture different from their own, many participants described an increase in their awareness of cultural differences; they were less judgmental and more open minded. Participants also described increased understanding of another culture. For some, that understanding came easily with cultural differences that were expected or value-neutral. For others, there was more challenge to understand and respect those differences. Many participants also were able to learn about their own culture because they were contrasting their own cultural experience with that of the host country.

*Expanded and more personal worldview.* Through participation in an ISL course, participants described an awareness of their worldview prior to the course and how their worldview expanded. They also described a more personal worldview where they felt connected to the world in a more personal way than prior to the ISL course. Participants described this expanded and personal worldview in a few different ways. Participants talked in general terms about having an expanded worldview as a result of their ISL course. Other participants talked specifically about learning about the host country and social issues faced in
the host country. Finally, participants described a stronger connection to global current events as a result of their ISL course.

Fourteen participants used general terms to describe their expanded worldview. Common phrases used were “having a different perspective” about the country they traveled to, “having a more global perspective,” and feeling like a “citizen of the world.” The majority of the participants had both traveled internationally prior to this course and after this course as well. It is therefore hard to know specifically how the ISL course contributed to this learning. But for Marie (El Salvador) who had only traveled briefly to Mexico for a vacation prior to her ISL experience:

I think for one it sort of blew my world wide open . . . . My major changed to international studies after that. But also I’m a lot more globally minded. There is a lot less mystery in it for me. I would travel anywhere and kind of like I said, the world is just full of humans and we are all very similar so that’s exciting for me and I like, I think with that program, I kind of started to fall in love with what’s going on out there. (Marie, El Salvador)

After her ISL course, she changed her major to international studies and decided to study abroad in Argentina. She became more interested and aware of the world and wanting to be part of it.

Similarly, William (India) had a more intentional sense of his place in the world. His experiences still help him frame world events and challenge him to understand his perspective of the events.

And I think it’s also given me a better understanding of just what my position in the world is . . . . When I travel, what I represent and when . . . I’m trying to understand a world event, to understand what my own perspective is. I think that has also been heavily informed by my experiences in India. (William, India)
Participants talked also in general terms about what they learned about the specific country to which they traveled. Eight participants talked about general information that they learned about the host country, including religion, governmental structure, geography, and major historical events. Fifteen participants outlined social issues that they learned about the host country. These social issues varied, based on the focus of the course and the country, but included women’s rights, poverty, disparity of wealth, effects of war and genocide, sanitation issues, and the experience of refugee populations. Participants appreciated learning about the host country directly from local people as opposed to just through a classroom lecture. They felt that the first hand learning in the country validated the classroom learning, was more enlightening and powerful than classroom learning, and that they appreciated hearing about the country from the source.

For participants who expressed an expanded worldview, they felt a more personal connection to the country or to the political, social, or economic issues faced in that country. Half of the participants talked about paying more attention to international current events or being critical of media coverage of those events. Some made connections between the “Arab Spring” in the Middle East to the issues they learned about in the host country. For many participants these issues now felt real and they had a sense that the events are not happening only in the media, but are affecting real people and real communities.

Becky was interviewed during the summer of 2011, when the U.S. had become involved in the Libyan civil war. In her ISL course in Bosnia, she had visited a town where 3,000 men and boys had been killed in the Bosnia war even though
U.N. peacekeeping troops were stationed there. That experience had a strong emotional impact for her, and she cried when telling me the story. Even though she described herself as a “West Coast peace loving hippie,” she still understood why the U.S. might intervene militarily in the Libyan conflict.

But [it] definitely affects the way I view current events. . . . I can remember when we [the U.S.] first started getting involved in Libya and everyone was like I can’t believe the president is . . . bombing, sending our troops to go do something. And saying to one of my friends, you’re the president and you’re faced with . . . essentially thousands of people being killed by their own government and you have the power to stop it in some way. You have the power to do something about it. Would you be able to say no? . . . It definitely changed my perspective on current events, being able to see it from the perspective of someone who is living in the country. (Becky, Bosnia)

Julie (India) talked more generally about paying attention to global events and feeling like she understands more about what people are experiencing. She is less able to ignore what is going on in the world.

When I hear about different things on the news, I pay a little bit more attention because I think that I can understand a little bit more about what that must be like or what impact that’s having on the people. As opposed to just saying, well, I don’t know anything about that. I can’t connect with that at all and just going to ignore it. I think I pay more attention to that now and what people are experiencing. (Julie, India)

Participation in an ISL course expanded the worldview of all but one participant. This expanded worldview was described in many ways, both in general terms of being more globally minded as well as specifically aware of social, historical, and political structures in their host country. Participants also described a more personal worldview. They had a sense of understanding and feeling connected to global current events in a way that they did not prior to their ISL course.
Overall this theme describes how participants came to see and understand themselves, culture, and the world differently as a result of their ISL course. Participants learned more about themselves, their privileged place in the world as well as their social identities, family background, and personal strengths and weaknesses. They learned more about the culture of the host country, felt more able to interact with people from other cultures, and became critical of the U.S culture. They also learned about their own worldview. Participants described their worldview as becoming larger; they were more aware of global issues. At the same time, their worldview became more personal; they felt a personal connection to global current events and knew that issues like poverty and violence were affecting individuals, families, and communities.

**Theme six: Enduring impact on thinking and behavior: “It's informed a lot of who I am today”.** During the interview, participants were asked to identify if there were ways their ISL experience had translated into their life after the course. All 19 participants were able to identify at least one impact in their life as a result of the course. Eighteen participants were able to identify more than one impact. Due to the longitudinal nature of the study, some participants had more time since they had been a student in the ISL course. Especially for those participants five or more years from their ISL course experience, they were able to follow the thread of this experience throughout their life. This impact goes beyond a new awareness or deeper understanding described in the above theme. These enduring impacts have made long-term ripples in the participants’ thinking and behavior.
The enduring impact that the participants described fell into two categories: (a) thinking and (b) behavior. Participants talked about thinking about social and global issues in a more complex and critical way than prior to their ISL course experience. Participants also described changes in their behavior including (a) vocation, (b) travel, (c) interpersonal relationships, (d) consumer habits, and (e) reevaluation of priorities. These two categories of enduring impact will be described in more detail below.

**More complex and critical thinking.** Many participants went beyond a simple awareness and understanding of culture and the social issues they witnessed in the host country. Nine participants described trying to think about social and global issues in a more complex and critical way. They described an awareness of the complexity of the situation and their attempt to think about issues from multiple sides. Lynn (India) described a change in how she thought about social justice issues. She now looks at the multi-faceted structures that affect issues.

*So now when I think of the issue, whatever it is, whatever kind of social justice [issue] that is, I really do think about all these different components. Like what does that mean medically? What does that mean politically? What does it mean socially? What's the big system? I think it gives you a way to, kind of, develop a more complex understanding of issues, which in turn makes you have the ability to live more intentionally and more effectively.* (Lynn, India)

Lynn was also able to describe how her thinking about an issue changed over time. This was a benefit of interviewing her years after the ISL course experience.

*So, I think that just my understanding has grown since that time. But I think that it is really interesting to see just for me personally the progression of how I thought about poverty. Because I think after India I felt crippled by that experience. And at this point, I don't feel crippled by it, I feel, you know there is still this feeling of tragedy, seeing that level of human desolation is really, really hard. It's a really hard thing to remember. But I think it's important to*
remember. And I think it’s informed a lot of who I am today, I guess. (Lynn, India)

Participants were able to identify interconnections between global issues and to articulate and wrestle with the complexity of global economics, poverty, and international politics. They did not take things at face value and tried to push themselves to think more critically about global issues.

Participants were asked if they saw evidence of the social justice focus of the course. Eleven participants made connections between social issues in the host country and the social justice focus of the course. They talked about learning and analyzing the larger social structures at the root cause of the social issue. The social justice issues were different in each country, but the participants were able to describe how they came to think about the underlying social and political structures of the issue and often framed the conversation about the larger goal of social justice.

Eleanor (India) talked about the Chinese occupation of Tibet and the non-violent peace process the Tibetan government-in-exile is using to respond to the injustice. She was able to put the understanding in context of the course, but also in context of larger global social justice.

*If Tibetans are continuing to be repressed in the way that they are, . . . [it] feels like that issue is so central to world peace, because . . . it epitomizes everything that should be right. You know, these beautiful people, it’s all non-violent, they are so interested in cooperation, they are interested in building community, they’re interested in transitional justice. They are doing everything right and they are not succeeding. And so to me . . . I just came away feeling the hope that . . . success is so central to the greater hope for humanity. There is really a chance for greater global cooperation, there’s a greater chance for human rights, for social justice. . . . if we can’t see success in Tibet, then I think that that it’s going to be hard in other places, because I don’t know how you get an example that is more worthy than what they are doing.* (Eleanor, India)
For participants who described a more complex and critical way of thinking, they did not take things at face value. Instead, they wrestled with large questions where there were no easy answers. They would look at the underlying structures and at the root cause of the problem. They looked for more complex and longer-term answers to their questions about the social issues they learned about in the host country.

*Changes in behavior.* Participants were also able to describe the impact of the ISL course on their behavior. These behaviors are grouped in five different areas: (a) vocation, (b) travel, (c) interpersonal relationships, (d) consumer habits, and (e) reevaluation of priorities. For the four participants who had completed their course less than a year ago, the changes in behavior were articulated more as hopes or anticipated changes. For the other 14 participants who described changes in their behavior, these were actual changes that they had made. Only one participant did not identify any changes in her behavior as a result of ISL course participation. The six areas of changes in behavior are described below.

Fifteen participants described a change in their vocational choices, including academics, career, or service involvement after the course. Changes in academics included changing a major, being re-energized for coursework back on campus, adding a minor, changing location for study abroad, doing a second ISL course, or using the experience as part of a capstone course or graduate school application process. Changes in career include influencing their career aspirations, changing their career path, putting on resume, and giving focus to the type of work they want to do.
The types of impact on participants’ academics and career are varied. Lynn (India) gives one example of how her ISL experience became a central experience in the rest of her undergraduate and then graduate educational experience.

So I finished my undergraduate, I got a Masters degree, and, I think, that India in a lot of ways was sort of foundational for taking what I was learning in the classroom and thinking about it in the real world. And not just America but thinking about it in the international realm. An understanding that there are different social norms, there's really intense political situations that really affect everyday people. . . . I think service-learning is just such an important part of education and especially international education. I think you could probably integrate it into nearly any field. But having the kind of depth of experience that [name of city] was, it just took what I was learning in the classroom and brought it to life. (Lynn, India)

When participants talked about changes in their vocation, they were often able to follow the thread of the ISL experience through their life.

[Name of city] led to my wanting to go to Kenya, and Kenya was an incredible experience and really had a big impact on where I am now. (Eleanor)

Thirteen participants described a change in their attitude about travel or their travel activity. They were more confident in their ability to travel; they traveled internationally again, and they sought out more opportunities to travel “with a purpose.” Desiree, who had never traveled internationally prior to her ISL course, learned that she wanted more international experiences. She said, “One thing I learned was I need to travel more. Not because . . . traveling is fun but because it going to help me appreciate life more.” (Desiree, Mexico)

Ten participants described an impact on their interpersonal relationships; they are more open-minded, less judgmental, and more interested in understanding other people. For these participants, there is an indication that their participation in an ISL course had an enduring influence on their behavior. For example:
I learned really listening to people and learning about who they are. Not judging people. You know, everybody has their struggles. . . . As I mentioned in my job now, I think that one of my passions is to listen to people and really understand what their motivation is for doing something. (Catherine, India)

To a lesser degree, participants described changes in their consumer habits and reevaluating life priorities. For participants who changed their consumer habits, they talked about buying less or buying fair trade.

I have enough. I have a small apartment and it’s enough. . . . I really tried to be out of that need to buy more and consume more and be more and all of that. And realizing that that is a very Tibetan principal, realizing to be happy, you know, with where you are and what you have. And it is enough. . . . In this society, it’s me, mine, and more. Stepping back and really looking at us, ours, and enough. (Eleanor, India)

Lucy (El Salvador) spent a day picking coffee beans with local families. Through “seeing that commodity chain”, she came to understand how buying coffee in the U.S. has an affect on people around the world.

Seeing where things come from and the implications of our actions as consumers in America. . . . You can use that same kind of analogy to chocolate or to flowers or to almost any other consumer good. So just in everyday life, I try to make socially responsible decisions. And I think that practice definitely came from my time in El Salvador. (Lucy, El Salvador)

Some participants talked about reevaluating or changing their life priorities as a result of their course participation. After the ISL course, participants put “priorities in the right place”, “wanted to live up to my potential,” or “woke up out of routine.” They did not see their life as the same after the course and made changes to the focus or priorities in their life.

I think that [name of city] was really the beginning of this process for me of reevaluating my beliefs, reevaluating my culture, reevaluating my family, my priorities and my finances -- just taking all of those different components of life and really reorganizing them. And starting to be much more intentional about how I live, what my choices are, how I spend my money, do I travel, do I not travel, is it selfish, is it not selfish, do I put everything on the line for my career
- all of those huge questions. In a lot of ways, I think [name of city] was influential in allowing those to be part of my life. (Lynn, India)

Overall, this theme describes the enduring impact the ISL course had on participants’ thinking and behavior. Participants report thinking about social justice issues in more complex and critical ways. Participants also described changes in their behavior after the course. They described examples of changes in the vocation, travel, interpersonal relationships, consumer habits, and life priorities that were connected to their ISL experience.

**Structural Elements of the Course**

In addition to the six emergent themes, which described the participants’ experience of critical ISL, five structural elements of ISL courses were identified. These were programmatic elements of the course which participants described as adding to or detracting from their ISL course experience. The elements described below could specifically be helpful for ISL researchers or practitioners who want to know the elements that have the most significant impact on the participants. The structural elements below are not an exhaustive list; they were the one’s described most often by participants. Other structural elements are also embedded into the emergent themes described above. For example, participants talked about the importance of peer group connections for processing and support. This is an implicit structural element in the being known and unknown theme: developing relationships within and among the peer group. This element will not be described below because it was described at length in the emergent themes section.

**Challenging by design.** Many participants described that they expected the ISL course to be challenging. The challenges themselves were an important element
of the course because they stretched the students beyond their comfort zone.

Sophie (Ghana) described her ISL experience as a “personal test.”

_The trip overall gave me a lot of confidence and strength to do new things and to leave my comfort zone. Because it was almost like a personal test for me to see, okay, you are going to go here, you don’t know anyone, you don’t know what it’s going to be like. Let’s see if you can … make it. (Sophie, Ghana)_

The location of the travel component of the course was challenging. Seven of the participants stated that their motivation to apply or register for the course was to travel to somewhere that would be outside their comfort zone. Many participants had traveled internationally prior to their course involvement, but only three participants had extensive travel in a developing country prior to their ISL experience.

_I would not have studied abroad in London or Rome. . . . The farther you leave your comfort zone to a place that is more challenging and more distant than the things that you know in everyday life, you’re going to gain more from that experience. (Jake, India)_

For Jake, India represented that place that was far outside his comfort zone, and he arrived to the country prepared for intense experiences that would challenge and change him.

Katya (India) described the value of being in an ISL course specifically designed to challenge the students.

_You can travel by yourself and certainly be stretched outside of your comfort zone, but I think that the wonderful thing about a service-learning trip . . . because it is somewhat organized, it feels safer but then it can be designed to also stretch you. . . . It allows you to stretch out of your comfort zone that you might not otherwise. And so it is perfectly possible to travel and see amazing things and never really have to struggle, but that doesn’t help you grow as a person. That travel by itself is not enough. You have to travel with a purpose. (Katya, India)_
Katya found that an organized ISL course helped her "travel with a purpose" in a way that just visiting a country, as a tourist, would not have. The planned elements of the course were designed to stretch her in an environment that seemed safe but yet allowed for personal growth.

Some of the experiences that challenged participants were intentional programmed events in the course. For example, the students in the El Salvador course spent a day picking coffee with local families and it created an intense experience of seeing the global economy in action. Participants came to realize how hard these families, including children, worked for such little pay and that this coffee ended up on grocery store shelves in the U.S. However, most of the intense and confusing experiences were born out of unplanned organic moments of living and working in a developing world that was different than the student’s reality. Program coordinators would need to be ready to process the experience quickly in the moment.

While many participants described being outside their comfort zone as an important and ultimately positive element of the course, there was some evidence of participants who were either pushed too far outside their comfort zone or not stretched far enough.

*There were people who would literally spend most of their days outside of work in their room, because that was their little comfort zone. And the world outside was too much to handle. And the world outside was way too intense for them to even compute in their head.* (Jake, India)

Only Lucy (El Salvador) voiced regrets for not being more outside her comfort zone both during her ISL experience and during her study abroad experience in Argentina the next year. She took responsibility for not seeking out more
challenging experiences and for acting “like an American” when she was in El Salvador and Argentina.

I learn more and I get more out of situations when I am challenged, when I am forced to kind of look in the mirror and dissect what I see in myself, what I see in the world around me. Those have much far more reaching impacts . . . then if I just do everything the way I’m used to doing things. I had the same situation, when I went to Argentina . . . I . . . acted like an American in Argentina for the most part. And I wish in that situation too, I had challenged myself more, pushed out of my comfort zone more. (Lucy, El Salvador)

When I asked Lucy what acting like an American meant, she talked about not being 21 years old and getting caught up in drinking and going to clubs both during her ISL and study abroad experience.

Preparing for safety issues. The safety issues that participants experienced were not a complete surprise. Many participants indicated that safety concerns were addressed in the preparation prior to the travel component of their ISL course. Some participants had to convince their parents that they would be safe in the country prior to being allowed to attend the course. Peter’s father was worried about him traveling to Mexico because all he knew about Mexico was what he learned in the mainstream news.

Actually that was a big point of contention with my dad. I didn’t really care about the violence. It wasn’t going to stop me from going. I felt safe knowing that I would be with a class and the teacher that’s been there before and being with a school down there. And also that our city didn’t have any history of violence for the most part. But my dad saw it a different way. He looked at the reports of gang violence and all the stuff going on up in northern Mexico. And he almost didn’t let me go because of all that. (Peter, Mexico)

Peter did research about the specific town to which they were traveling and the statistics about violent crimes. Only then did his dad agree to allow him to go to
Mexico. In general, other participants echoed Peter’s statement that they felt safer traveling with a group and with an experienced faculty member.

Lynn (India) was the only participant who made specific recommendations about preparing participants to be safer when in the host country. She felt unprepared to deal with the sexual advances of the Tibetan refugee she was tutoring. She was not aware she had put herself in a vulnerable position because she did not understand the different cultural cues and expectations.

*But I think, when it came down to gender and sexuality prep, I don’t think that was included in the program [preparation]. And I really think it should have been. The way that we perceive [interpersonal] relations in the U.S. is so incredibly different than how they are perceived in other areas of the world, often where women really don’t have a choice in whether they have sex or not. As an American, we may completely misread the signs in a place like India, where we are just trying to be friendly English teachers. For them, they see that as a sign that you are willing to have sex with them. It’s just a very different kind of environment, and I think that’s an important thing that students need to be aware of. (Lynn, India)*

Over half of the participants described an experience of being unsafe in the ISL course. There is an opportunity for program coordinators to focus on how they prepare their students to make good decisions while in-country as well as how to think about and make sense of feeling unsafe.

**Processing the experience with peers.** During the interview, participants were asked about whether reflection was part of their ISL course experience and if there was anything significant for them about this aspect of the course. Participants were given examples of types of reflection including formal or informal group conversations, journal writing, and reflection papers or presentations after the travel portion of the course. Interestingly, over half of the participants identified informal conversations with peers to be the most important aspect of reflecting as a
way to process the experience. Because the student group is living and working together in the host country, there was a lot of time for this informal processing.

I feel like that we were constantly talking about the same experiences with the other students. So at breakfast . . . you were talking about . . . who you were going to go visit that day. And then our ride home from the volunteer placement, we were talking about what we did volunteering that day. Or walking back up from the English conversation, people were sharing some of the stories that their English partners had told them about . . . their experiences. So, it was definitely . . . a lot of that on an informal basis. (Eleanor, India)

Reflection in service-learning literature is about connecting the service experience to academic learning outcomes. When the participants shared stories of reflecting on their course, they often used the word processing instead of reflecting. They were sharing their experiences and learning about the peers’ experiences. There was a sense of the intensity of the experience they were undergoing and the importance of understanding the experience and not going through the experience alone. There is a level of emotional sharing in the participants’ description of processing. Alex (El Salvador) told a story about being invited into the home of a wealthy family and how the group struggled with the disparity of wealth between this family and the families that they had been working with during the course. The group processed the experience at the end of the night.

It was clear . . . that people were a little unnerved about what they saw. When it came time for reflection . . . the topic wasn’t avoided. It was like hey, today we saw something that was a whole different side in the country, poverty versus wealth, that we hadn’t seen before. Does any one want to elaborate? Can we talk about this because some people seem to be upset? So that it was kind of brought onto the table and multiple people were like, yeah, brought up their feelings about how they currently feel. (Alex, El Salvador)

Participants also seemed to need to process intense experiences with their classmates. Marie (El Salvador) was with her classmates and local children in the
community center when they were robbed at gunpoint. She processed the experience with her peers.

*And we spent some time . . . processing what happened and a lot of us felt guilty because it wouldn’t have happened to those kids if we hadn’t been there with our cameras and iPods and stuff.* (Marie, El Salvador)

Marie continues to meet and process this experience with her peers, four years after the course. Katya (India) also found it important to process her experience to make it less terrifying.

*You don’t just experience it, you have to process it as well and I think that that is how you grow. And that’s how being out of your comfort zone becomes more comfortable rather than just being terrifying, through that processing.* (Katya, India)

Since the participants were living and working together for extended periods of time, they had ample opportunities for informal reflection throughout the day. There were also times where the participants appreciated more formal opportunities to process the events with the entire student group.

**Creating opportunities for individual interactions.** The opportunity to talk to, learn from, and connect with local people was a significant element of the ISL course for most participants. These connections were often developed when the participant was alone or with only a small group of other peer students. Just as the group was an important place to process the experience, it seemed important for the participants to step away from the group to connect individually with local people. In all of the ISL courses, there were opportunities built into the course that allowed for this. In the Mexico course, students were paired with a cultural buddy, a Mexican college-aged student who they met with individually. Francesca talked about finding surprising commonalities with her cultural buddy.
You know just general things when you talk to someone, what are your likes and dislikes? What sort of music we were into. Or movies and popular culture things like that. Like she loves Lady Gaga and so do I. So I think sort of funny things like that, you realize that can be like a commonality and get you initially talking to someone. When you first think that you might not have a lot in common with them. (Francesca, Mexico)

In the India course, students provided one-on-one English tutoring with ex-political prisoners. In the El Salvador course, there was a one night home stay with a local family. In the Ghana course, students worked in pairs as public health educators and visited women in their homes to talk about AIDS prevention. In Bosnia, each student worked with a classroom of children to teach English. Alex (Bosnia) talked about the best experience in the course was working one-on-one with students in his classroom. “The best experience I got from that was being in-country and engaging with students one-on-one.”

Lucy (El Salvador) was one of the participants who wished she had been more outside her comfort zone in the course. During the in-country portion of the course, the group had one free weekend to do whatever they wanted. While the rest of the group went to a town on the beach to relax, she and another student traveled to a town that was a rebel stronghold during the Civil War. The weekend was a challenging adventure of navigating travel in a new country and meeting local people and learning about the effects of the Civil War. She wished for more opportunities to individually engage with local people.

We didn’t really have the opportunity, but... the free weekend quote unquote where the other gal and I went and did our own thing. I would have loved to [be] able to do something like that more... Our project, as opposed to other ones, was always done as a group. And... nobody had individual internships or anything like that. And at the time I don’t know that I was, would have been totally comfortable and on board with it. It would have been a big challenge to
strike out on my own. But I think it would've been definitely a good thing in the end to have challenge myself and to have done it. (Lucy, El Salvador)

**Understanding the context of the service.** It seemed important for participants to have a sense of where their service-learning contribution fit within the needs of the community. This sense could be on a small scale, why their work mattered directly to the community they worked with. In the Mexico course, more than one participant was aware that not many groups from the U.S. came and volunteered in this community. Francesca learned that there had not been a group of volunteers to the retirement community for the past two years. This made her service-learning feel more meaningful.

*And the person who was running the retirement center . . . he mentioned that there hadn't been a Western group of students in probably two years . . . There used to always be people visiting them every couple of weeks. They hadn't had anyone come in, like our class, for about two years. And just from having people translate from what some of the residents were saying, they were just saying like, “oh God bless you,” “what you're doing is so great,” just things like that. It really, I know it really got a lot of people emotional and really, it was really touching, probably the most touching event out of the experience. (Francesca, Mexico)*

Some participants had a larger sense of the meaning of their service-learning work. Becky, who taught English to Serbian and Bosnian children, clearly had a sense of the larger importance of this work. It was about teaching individual kids English, but it was more about bringing kids from different ethnic groups together and working to “create a sustainable peace process.”

*So the point of the program is to bring kids from those different ethnic groups together in one classroom. Obviously, we were teaching English, which I had a background in, doing ESL teaching. I think a more important piece of the program is that you bring the kids together in the same classroom, they are doing the same thing together. They have some way to see, these kids are not that different from me. I work to create a sustainable peace process, through understanding in the next generation. (Becky, Bosnia)*
Katya (India) had a larger sense of being part of a program that had been sending students for the past 10 years to the same community.

*Over the course of a sustainable program like 10 years of [name of program] ... you have built up relationships. ... Even if it's not the same volunteers, it's a regular stream of volunteers, I think you can make more of a difference.*

(Katya, India)

For all of the participants, it was important to place their service-learning experience within the context of the community. This was an important part of their making meaning of the experience.

There were very few participants who did not seem to have a sense of the context of their service. As described above, Lucy, in El Salvador, struggled to understand the larger sense of why they were doing what they were doing. It was not enough to know that the community was grateful for their work. She wanted to understand the bigger picture.

This section of data analysis identified six emergent themes as described by participants. The first four themes identified significant experiences during the ISL course. The other two themes identified new learning and enduring impacts for participants after the course. Structural elements that add to or detracted from the experience were also highlighted. The second set of findings, connecting these emergent themes to Kiely’s (2004, 2005) application of transformational learning theory to service-learning will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

**Evidence of Transformational Learning**

Kiely (2004, 2005) describes the transformational learning process in service-learning in his examination of 22 participants from five different cohorts of the same ISL course. He collected data through participant interviews, document
analysis of student journals and final reflection papers, and on-site participant observation, since he was the co-facilitator of the course. The ISL course had “an explicit social justice orientation and is intentionally designed to disrupt students’ notion of reality” (Kiely, 2004, p. 8). The course’s learning goals included learning about historical developments of social structures and the unequal relations of power. “The central premise underlying the program’s service-learning theory is that experiential dissonance combined with critical reflection and deeper connections with community through service-learning activities will lead to profound changes in students’ worldview” (p. 8). Participants of this study all traveled to rural Nicaragua to organize and implement health clinics. Kiely (2004, 2005) uses transformational learning theory as the conceptual framework for his study. As a result of his study, Kiely (2004, 2005) describes the emerging global consciousness of his participants and to create a transformational service-learning process model. It is my intention to compare and contrast the findings from my study with that of Kiely (2004, 2005) and possibly deepen the knowledge base about the experience and meaning making of participants of ISL courses with a social justice focus. More detail about Kiely’s (2004, 2005) study can be found in the literature review section of this dissertation.

**Comparison to Kiely’s emerging global consciousness.** Kiely (2004) identifies three categories of emerging global consciousness in his participants. The first category is *envisioning* which was participants’ initial shift in their perspective and their intention to work for social justice. The second category is *transforming forms*, which represents a significant shift in how the participants see themselves
and the world. All participants shifted their perspective in at least one of six ways: (a) political, (b) moral, (c) intellectual, (d) cultural, (e) personal, or (f) spiritual. Finally, Kiely describes the longer-term challenges participants had in translating their transformation into their lives, which he calls the *chameleon complex*.

**Similarities.** There are similarities between the findings of this study and Kiely’s work (2004). Specifically both studies found evidence of changes in thinking, cultural awareness, and self-awareness. Additionally, both studies found that participants made deep connections with the local people during the in-country portion of the ISL course. I briefly describe the similar elements below.

Both studies describe a change in the thinking or intellectual process for the participant. I determined that more complex and critical thinking is one enduring impact of participation in the ISL course. Participants went beyond a simple awareness and understanding of societal issues. They became aware of the complexity of the social and economic issues and tried to think about issues from multiple sides. Participants learned about issues directly from the people affected by the issues and those who were actively working to address them. Kiely (2004) defines the term intellectual transforming form as a process of questioning assumptions about the origin, nature, and solutions to the social and economic problems the participants encountered in Nicaragua.

Another similarity is an increase in critical awareness and understanding of culture. Participants in my study describe an increased sense of cultural awareness and understanding about other cultures as well as their own. Through identifying cultural differences, some participants were critical of the U.S. culture, specifically
around individualism and materialism. Participants also describe a new self-awareness about their life situation in comparison to other people in the world and their privileged place in the world. Finally, some participants specifically describe changes in their behavior around consumer habits: buying less, buying organic, buying fair trade. Similarly, participants in Kiely’s (2004) study began recognizing their own privilege and made changes to their lifestyle, including changes in their consumerism habits.

Both studies also find evidence of increased self-awareness in participants and changes in their behavior as a result of this awareness. Participants in my study describe an increased awareness of their family background, their social identities, and personal limitations and growth. They specifically express an increase in their confidence and a desire to continue to grow personally. Participants also describe changes in their behavior as a result of their ISL course participation. They made changes in their vocation, travel, and interpersonal relationships and reevaluated life priorities. Participants portray personal growth and made changes in their life based on that growth. This was similar to participants in Kiely (2004) who reevaluate their identity, lifestyle, relationships, and career.

Developing deep connections was the last similarity between these two studies. Some participants in my study developed deep and lasting relationships with local people in the host country. They met and learned from people who were refugees, whose lives were affected by civil war, governmental corruption, or scarce economic resources. They developed more than an intellectual understanding of the experience; they created a deep emotional and empathetic connection with
individuals or groups of people in the host country. A level of respect about life experiences different from their own was developed. Some participants in my study were able to operate on a level of reciprocity with the local people, while others stayed grounded in a charity model of service, where they were giving and the community was receiving. Kiely's (2004) participants also built deep relationships with the people of Nicaragua, which were based in empathy and reciprocity. They learned about the daily struggles of the Nicaraguans and came to see them as friends. For both studies, that deep connection was an important element in the experience of the students.

**Differences.** There were also findings in each study that were not present in the other. Due to the longitudinal nature of Kiely's (2004) data collection, he was able to describe the developmental process of each participant from being a student, to re-entry to U.S., and to later integration of the ISL course experience. As a result he was able to describe the envisioning process, often soon after students return from ISL travel, which represents participants' initial shifts in their perspective and their intention to work for social justice. I did not capture that data point in this study; all participants had completed their ISL course more than six months prior to the interview.

Additionally, he describes the chameleon complex: the struggle participants had translating their ISL course experience into action after returning from Nicaragua. Participants in my study, in general, did not struggle to return to campus or their lives in the U.S. after the ISL course. Seven participants talk about finding it difficult to return to their lives after their ISL abroad experience. However,
describing their return as difficult is relative because all but one found that after only a week or two, they got back into the swing of their life with their family or on campus. One participant described a challenging “ISL hangover” that lasted more than a month. Participants were also directly asked if there were ways their ISL course experience had translated into their lives. Not one participant described a challenge or a tension in translating their experience. If I had talked to participants directly after their ISL course experience or had access to their final reflection papers, I may have seen more evidence of this theme as participants were in the first stages of translating their experience back to their life.

Kiely (2004) describes a political transformation in participants where they rethink their role as citizens as they come to understand the unequal distribution of power and resources in the world. Participants find ways after the course to raise the consciousness of others and to advocate for people experiencing oppression. He also describes a moral transformation where participants develop a moral obligation to do more than provide charity-based service-learning to the community; they develop a moral solidarity with the people of Nicaragua that lasted after the course. Participants in my study did not describe these experiences. While their worldview both expanded and became more personal, they did not seem as focused on political action or advocacy upon returning from their ISL course. Similarly, while participants in my study developed emotional connections with the people in the host country, they did not feel in solidarity with them in their struggle.

Both of these differences could be due to the differing levels of social justice focus in the courses. While all courses under investigation had a social justice focus,
there was a different level of intensity with Kiely’s (2004, 2005) course. A purpose of the course was to create dissonance for the students and to disrupt the students’ notion of reality. The courses in my study also had a critical focus, as evidenced from the screening interview with the faculty member. But I did not hear from the faculty member or find evidence in the syllabus that the course was intentionally meant to shake up the students’ sense of reality. In the courses in my study, the social justice element of the course was just a part of the course, not necessarily the focus of the course as described in Kiely (2004). This may account for some of the differences in the findings between these studies.

Finally, participants in the Kiely (2004) study describe a change in their spiritual frame of reference after their ISL course experience. They talk about the importance of having a spiritual base for renewing their faith, re-examining spiritual beliefs and searching for harmony as they continue to find ways to channel their ISL course experience. Spiritual transformation is not part of the findings of my study. There is evidence that one participant reevaluated her understanding of God as a result of her ISL course experience, but no other participants used religious or spiritual language to describe their experience of the course or their meaning making after the course.

An element that is present in my study, but not in Kiely's (2004) is the sense of participants’ more expanded and personal worldview. This is different, but not less important than, Kiely's political transformation. While my study's participants were not focused on political action upon return, they did feel more aware of and connected to the world. They paid attention and felt connected to international
current events. They had developed an interest in and empathy for people around the world. Instead of feeling disconnected from the world, they felt more connected.

**Comparing Kiely’s (2005) transformational learning model for service-learning.** Through his study, Kiely (2005) looks for evidence of the process of transformational learning theory in his ISL course with a social justice focus. He described five learning processes, which explain transformational learning for his participants. These processes are (a) contextual border crossings, (b) dissonance, (c) personalizing, (d) processing, and (e) connecting. In this section of data analysis, I will compare and contrast the findings of this study with Kiely (2005).

**Similarities.** Both studies describe experiences for participants where they experience a conflict with their normal frame of reference. Kiely uses the word dissonance, while I use the word stretching or destabilizing experiences. Through their immersion into another culture and country, participants encounter the unfamiliar and struggle with how to respond to it. Both Kiely and I find that participants had a range of reactions to these experiences. For some participants, there was an easy adjustment period to challenges they faced and for other participants those same challenges, like language barrier, posed a tremendous obstacle to fully immersing in their experience. Similar to Kiely (2005), the destabilizing experiences of this study created powerful emotional experiences for the participants. They did not have a frame of reference to understand their experience and the experience had a lasting impact on them. Some participants continued to be unsettled about their experiences years later.
Participants of both studies made personal connections to their experience. They built meaningful relationships with individuals and groups in the community. They also described having a more personal worldview as a result of their experience. They felt more personally connected to international current events, and they had a stronger connection to the struggle of people in the world. Global issues such as violence, poverty, civil war, refugees, and women’s rights had names and faces now as a result of their experiences. Participants paid more attention to world current events, felt more personally connected to them, and tried to identify more closely with the individuals experiencing those events.

Participants also struggled with intense emotions as a result of their ISL experience and especially as a result of destabilizing experiences. Most commonly, participants described feeling sad, horrified, humbled, guilty, joyful, sorrowful, scared, stressed, and overloaded. Participants were aware of their personal reaction to these experiences. They did not, however, consistently evaluate their own personal strengths and weakness as a result of these emotional experiences, as participants in Kiely’s (2005) study did. Rather, participants of my study often turned to peers for support instead of turning inwardly to personalize their experience. The role of peer student group seemed more prevalent in my study than in Kiely’s study.

Finally, both studies describe the importance of building connections with others. They describe developing and sustaining emotional connections with local people, with peers, and with the culture of the host country. For many of these participants, the relationships built have lasted over distance and time, especially
thanks to technology. These connections were built through direct service-learning opportunities, informal conversations, formal group processing, and community presentations.

**Differences.** There are two major differences between the findings of these studies. The first is in the use of the word *processing*. Both studies find this element significant, but use it in different ways. Kiely (2005) describes processing as a learning strategy to cognitively process and understand issues participants faced in the course of their ISL experience. This is a rational, reflective, and dialogical way for participants to explore and articulate root causes and systemic responses to the social justice issues they were witnessing. There were many programmatic activities that facilitated this processing, including daily reflection, academic seminars, community reflections, group presentations, research projects and informal conversations with faculty, locals and peers. He uses the term *connecting* to describe the affective learning dimension that participant’s experience (Kiely, 2005).

In my study, I also identify the importance of processing the experience for participants. Participants use the term processing to define their way of coming to understand their experience on both an emotional and a cognitive level. I am unable to separate out these two dimensions of learning, as Kiely (2005) did. They describe feeling overwhelmed or overloaded by their experience and needing to process it with their peers. There is an emotional component of wanting to be heard, wanting to struggle with verbalizing their experience, wanting to feel not alone in their experience, and finding support through their peers who were having a similar
experience. Some participants were so destabilized by their experience that they needed process it to make sense of it. Participants’ processing was both emotional and intellectual; it allowed them to feel overwhelmed so that they could eventually come to the point of making meaning of the experience.

The second difference is participants’ description and analysis of their own power and privilege. Fewer than half of the participants in my study used language of power and privilege when describing their experience. Some participants became aware of their social identities or privilege, which was often described as having more opportunities (i.e., educational) or resources (i.e., wealth) than the local people. But this did not necessarily translate into describing the power or socioeconomic or political capital they have relative to the people they met in the host country as it did in Kiely’s study. Along the same vein, participants in my study described a new awareness of the historical relationship between the U.S. and the location of the ISL course, but this new knowledge did not lead the study participants to examine the unequal power relationships or obligations of their U.S. citizenship, as they did in the Kiely study. As described above, there was a differing level of intensity with the social justice orientation with the course as opposed to the courses of my study. Participants in Kiely’s study may have been pushed to think more specifically or critically about their power and privilege.

This chapter unpacked the six emergent themes described by the participants about their experience of critical ISL. Participants were able to describe both their experience and meaning making during and after the course. Five structural elements of the ISL courses were identified as important programmatic
components, which added to the participants’ experience. Finally, evidence of transformation was examined through comparing and contrasting the findings of this study with Kiely (2004, 2005). In the final chapter, I discuss my own thoughts about this study and suggest implications for research and practice.
CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the experience of 19 participants of critical ISL courses and how they made meaning of their experience over time. Additionally, this study describes the elements of the experience that participants indicated as influential. Finally, the purpose of this study is to analyze the experience and meaning making of the participants in light of transformational learning theory. Participants of five different critical ISL courses at three different institutions are included in this study. Participants were interviewed at least six months and up to nine years after their course participation. A brief summary of the findings of this study can be found below.

The collective story of critical ISL is a story of contrasts. While participants were students in the course, they were stretched in both manageable and overwhelming ways. They were both haunted and transformed by destabilizing experiences. They were both welcomed into a new community and were identified as outsiders. They both enjoyed and struggled with service-learning in the host country. Critical ISL made a lasting impact on these participants. It impacted their awareness and understanding of themselves, culture, and the world. Participants’ thinking became more complex, and they made changes to their vocation, travel choices, interpersonal relationships, lifestyle, and priorities.

Specific elements of the course were identified that contributed to the experience of the participants. Participants expected that the location and subject matter of the course would be challenging. Participants needed to be prepared for
the safety issues they faced. It was important to have peers to process the experience with due to the intense nature of the course. Participants needed both the support of the group as well as individual interactions in the country to deepen their experience. Finally, participants needed to understand not only the history and culture of the country, but where their service-learning fit into the context of the community.

Finally, there is evidence that the findings of this study link to transformational learning theory. Through building deep connections with peers and local people and experiencing intense emotions and destabilizing events, participants described a change in their thinking and personal behavior. However, in contrast to Kiely's (2004, 2005) study, participants in my study did not describe the same depth of political, moral, or spiritual transformation. This may be in part due to the intensity of the social justice focus of the course.

In this discussion section, I highlight four elements of this research which seem significant to me and which add to our understanding of social justice education, service-learning, and international education. These elements are (a) critical service-learning in theory and in practice, (b) the importance of connection, (c) the challenge of building reciprocal relationships, and (d) the benefit of examining an ISL experience over time. I also briefly describe my experience as a researcher in examining this topic. Finally, I provide recommendations for future research and practice as well as limitations of this study.
Discussion

**Critical service-learning in theory and in practice.** It was challenging to find critical ISL courses to include in this study. When I was seeking out courses from which to recruit participants, I was explicit about looking for ISL courses “with a social justice focus.” As discussed in chapter three, service-learning coordinators suggested faculty members on their campuses who led courses similar to my description. I asked prospective faculty members an intentionally open ended question: Is there a social justice focus in either the course preparation for students or in the work in-country? Some faculty members’ responses provide insight into the challenge of social justice education; social justice can be a politically charged buzzword that is hard to describe. One faculty member commented that social justice was too politically charged so he does not use the word: “I think our work does promote social justice, but we try to avoid running into trouble over purely semantic issues.” Another faculty member used the term social justice in her course title because it is a draw for recruiting students. Others thought there was a social justice focus, but had a hard time articulating it to me: “Social justice is always part of public health” and “We were investigating how libraries serve the unique needs of their communities.” I did not see a social justice focus in those courses. There was also a range of emphasis of the social justice focus. One faculty member commented that the syllabus did not include social justice, but there were readings that included the concept of social justice. Ultimately one faculty member admitted: “Not sure I know what social justice really means... I know that sounds crazy.”
There were faculty who were able to describe the social justice focus of their course; they most often described the issues in the country (access the health care, civil war, genocide, immigration, refugees, poverty, sustainable development, human rights) and how students learned about the systemic factors, which are the root cause of the issues. The five courses in this study were among those courses. More in-depth screening interviews took place with these faculty members and I asked if their courses had the elements of Mitchell’s (2008) critical service-learning. All the courses in this study had evidence of these elements from the screening interview.

In my data analysis, I did not look at the interview transcripts with a critical lens. Instead I wanted to understand the experience of critical ISL from the point of view of the participant. Participants’ descriptions of the course indicated some of the elements of critical ISL, but there were also some significant gaps. I will describe the ways the participants’ descriptions aligned, or did not, with Mitchell’s (2008) elements of critical service-learning: (a) a social change orientation which develops a critical consciousness in students so that they can reflect, analyze, and act to change social inequities, (b) a questioning of the distribution of power in society, and (c) development of authentic relationships in the community and in the classroom.

**Critical service-learning comparison.** In regards to a social change orientation, many participants in this study described an increased understanding of the systemic elements of the social problems they encountered. Some described their ability to think more complexly and systematically about social issues. But
they did not describe a sense of moral connection to the lives of the local people, which Mitchell (2008) includes in her description. In contrast, participants in Kiely’s (2004) study described a sense of solidarity with the people in the rural village of Nicaragua. Some participants in Kiely’s (2004) study became more politically active, advocating on behalf of the global poor and working to change unjust institutions. This was different for participants of my study. Only four participants made connections to changes in their behavior (changes in consumer habits or career) that were specifically linked to the social change orientation of the course.

In regards to questioning the distribution of power, participants described becoming more aware of the realities of global inequality and poverty through their ISL course. However, only four participants used the language of privilege to describe their situation in the world. Another four participants described power imbalance in the service-learning relationship or the power of the U.S. or being an U.S. citizen. Other participants increased their awareness of the vast differences in access to education, health care, economic resources, and gender equity, but did not frame their conversation in the language of power. No participant described working to challenge or redistribute power as part of his or her ISL course experience, which is part of Mitchell’s (2008) description.

Participants also described the process of developing authentic relationships within the community. A major theme found in this research was the emotional connections developed with local people. Many participants also described the process of becoming aware of and respecting differences in the community as well
as finding unexpected commonalities. Participants also described their desire to meet the needs of the community, rather than their own agenda, and became aware of how much they were receiving from the local people. What was missing from participants’ descriptions in comparison to Mitchell (2008) was being aware of and acknowledging power relations that come into play. This leaves some question for me about the ability for participants to develop authentic relationships through these ISL courses if they have not considered the power relations.

There is some disparity between the faculty coordinators intention to facilitate a critical ISL course and the participants’ description of that course. None of the faculty coordinators had read Mitchell’s (2008) description of critical service-learning: they were all responding to my screening questions about whether these three elements were present in their courses. As described in the results section of this dissertation, Kiely’s (2004, 2005) course had an explicit social justice orientation; it was the focus of the course. For the five courses included in this study, there was a critical element to the course, but it was not the focus. As a result, while all three elements of critical service-learning may have been present in the courses, there were some gaps in the descriptions by the participants.

The impact of the ISL course for participants of my study was significant; they described influential changes in their awareness, thinking, and behavior. What I did not find was a lasting impact on participants’ sense of and use of their own power and privilege to address injustice locally or globally. The impact was more centralized or personalized on themselves and their understanding: they changed their major; their worldview was expanded; they traveled more; they thought more
complexly. What is missing is action with and on behalf of others. Only four participants linked the social justice focus of the course to their behavior. Three participants (Alex, Eleanor, Lucy) described changes to their consumer habits as a strategy for responding to global poverty. Becky (Bosnia) was starting law school when I interviewed her and hoped to focus on international law as a way to work for and improve the United Nations. Other participants voiced hopes for employment in international development, but due to the economy had settled for other types of work or had future intentions to “live up to my potential.” There may have been something missing to push participants from changes in awareness and thoughts to more concrete action for social change. This echoes Einfeld and Collins (2008) and Warren (1998) that analyzing and reflecting is not enough; social justice educators must guide students to action.

Importance of connection. The findings of this research supports the importance of connectedness found in literature. In this study, participants described the importance of processing their experience with nonjudgmental peers who understood the complexity of their experience. Other researchers in both social justice education literature and ISL literature outline the importance of student group relationships. Adams, (2007), Wade (2004), and Warren (1998) find that it is important to create a supportive student-centered classroom to discuss issues of social justice. Through engaging with issues of injustice, students have a variety of feelings and need a place to share these feelings and experiences honestly. Social justice educators need to help create authentic relationships within the classroom as well as within the community (Cuban & Anderson, 2007; Einfeld &

Participants also described the significance of building relationships within the community of the host country. They described an emotional connection where they got a glimpse of the lives of people and made connections that transcended culture and life experience. King (2004) and Stachowski et al. (2008) also find that ISL course participants identified the importance of building community connections. Mitchell (2008) warns that when students create connections and identify commonalities with local people, they need to be challenged not to create a sense of artificial homogenization – where the local people are “just like” the student.

**The challenge of building reciprocal relationships.** Participants in this study described unintended consequences they witnessed as a result of their service-learning in the host country. These were times when some participants wondered if they were doing more harm than good. This finding echoes Kahn’s (2011) questions about ISL practice: “Can we ever engage in ISL without succumbing in part to neocolonialist models of development that involve powerful and wealthy foreigners from one world providing for those in need in another?” (p. 116-117). ISL courses are challenging to implement, as described earlier in the literature review, due to the cultural differences, historical relationships between countries, and significantly different economic resources. It takes time to develop relationships built on trust and reciprocity. A few participants were in the first
cohort of students for their course. They were aware of being the "guinea pig" or that later courses benefited from the foundations they were developing. The faculty coordinator of the Ghana course considered working with an established program that organizes immersion courses instead of organizing it herself because the program had built the relationships ahead of time. It is challenging to develop ISL relationships, especially when seeing the opportunity for unintended consequences.

The benefit of examining ISL experiences over time. Kiely (2011) finds very few studies that had examined the experience of ISL participants with a longitudinal view. This study responded to that gap in literature by interviewing participants not directly after their experience, but waiting at least six months and up to nine years after the course. There were benefits of this research design; it allowed participants to move beyond the initial angst or excitement after the course to now learn more about how they made meaning of their experience over time. It also emphasized the significance of the ISL course experience. It had been many years for some participants since their course experience and yet they can “still picture this exact place 10 years later.” This speaks to the intensity, as described by Plater (2011), and the significance of the experience that could only be described from interviewing participants with that much distance from their experience.

Participants were also able to describe how their understanding of the experience changed over time. Lynn (India) was able to describe how she responded in 2003 to a woman who was begging and how she has come to understand her experience differently over time. Lucy (El Salvador) was able to
describe the softening of her frustrations in 2007 about whether her service-learning made an impact.

Finally, the long-term impact of the experience was able to unfold. Miriam was just starting nursing school when I interviewed her; doing public health education in Ghana in 2005 influenced this change of career. Jake (India) continues to email his Tibetan friend, whom he met in 2002. This study was able to capture and describe the impact of the ISL course experience over time.

**Insights from the Researcher**

This is my first experience with formal research and, as a result, I was cognizant of my role in the process. As I interviewed and analyzed the transcripts, I became aware of different lenses with which I immersed myself in the participants’ experience. I was aware of being a researcher trying to decipher and synthesize the diverse experience of many people, like recognizing similarities and differences across stories. I was also aware of being a practitioner of ISL courses. As participants described safety issues, I had a reaction as a practitioner. Why did this young woman walk by herself in the dark to go to the pay phone? That wouldn’t have happened on immersion trips that I led. I love to hear other people’s stories, so there were times where I was aware of how much I enjoyed conducting interviews to talk with interesting people with interesting experiences. I was also aware of being a parent of children who will, I hope, have international education experiences someday. As Marie (El Salvador) talked about being robbed at gunpoint, I struggled not to put myself in the role of the parents of the students in that course.
Additionally, I struggled at times to find my place in this research. I was perhaps overzealous in bracketing my experiences. I did not want to overly influence the data analysis process and, at times, held the data at arms length. I wanted to hold participants’ stories with integrity and honor their experiences. It was difficult to settle on emergent themes because I wondered if the themes do justice to these rich, diverse, engaging experiences? It became important to honor the range of experiences that participants shared. For example, most participants described experiences of being stretched outside their comfort zone, for some it was manageable and expected and for others it was overwhelming and unexpected.

My understanding of social justice education continued to develop through this research. Prior to this study, I had professional and personal experience wrestling with and advocating for issues of justice. For example, as a master’s student, I interned for a year at the Intercommunity Peace and Justice Center in Seattle, WA. I gave presentations to school and church groups about Catholic social teaching, analyzing social issues with a systemic view, and responding to issues in the community with both a charity and a social justice response. I was comfortable analyzing social structures and brainstorming action steps. While working on my dissertation, I attended a conference hosted by the American College Personnel Associations Institute on Social Justice. This conference increased my awareness of a new element to social justice education: becoming aware of one’s own subordinate and dominant social identities and how they come to play in relationships with others. Through taking responsibility for and challenging unearned privilege, one can disrupt social norms and create a more just society. This is working for social
justice on a personal and interpersonal level. Mitchell’s (2008) description of
critical service-learning includes both the personal work of social justice with the
social action. Through immersing myself in the stories of critical ISL, my
understanding of social justice has broadened to include issues of power and
privilege in new way.

There is an element of the research process that keeps nagging at me, given
the study findings. I identified a gap between how the course faculty described the
critical focus of the course and how the participants described their experience. Of
the five courses from which I recruited participants, only one used the language of
social justice in the title of the course. The other four courses did not use the
language of social justice in the course title or summary description of the course.
In discussing the course with the faculty member and describing Mitchell’s (2008)
elements of critical service-learning, they agreed that their course contained those
elements. Even though these courses were vetted through a clear criterion, I am left
wondering if I labeled these courses as critical ISL when they may not have had a
strong focus in this area.

Implications for Research

I have identified six implications for future research. Broadly, these areas are
(a) comparing participant experiences of ISL and study abroad, (b) comparing the
experience of critical ISL to tradition ISL, (c) including the voice of the community
partner, (d) contrasting experiences of being connected and being an outsider, (e)
looking for spiritual transformation, and (f) examining different types of reflection
in ISL courses. Each of these areas for future research will be discussed below.
Comparing participant experiences of ISL and study abroad. An unanticipated demographic of study participants was that 11 (58%) had been enrolled in a study abroad course either before or after their ISL experience. I was surprised to find that so many of the participants had studied abroad. As this demographic began to emerge, I asked six participants to compare and contrast their experience of ISL with their experience of study abroad. I wondered if I would hear participants talk about the shorter or more intense nature of ISL or whether the service-learning component of ISL added to their experience in a different way. There was not a pattern in the six participants’ responses. Participants described their study abroad experience as acting more like a tourist, feeling more on their own, making friends their own age in the host country, being less intense than ISL, and being more transformational than ISL. Participants said that in the ISL course the language barrier was more challenging, the bonding with other peer students more significant, and they appreciated that the focus in ISL was on others instead of themselves. Given the pressure for higher education to internationalize (Plater, 2011) and the increase in ISL courses (Campus Compact, 2002 & 2009), there would be a benefit to comparing the experience and the impact of these two different international education opportunities. It would also be especially interesting to look at students who had multiple international education experiences to see if there is distinct educative value to each experience.

Comparing the experience of critical ISL to traditional ISL. The focus of this study was specifically to describe the experience of critical ISL. A review of the literature found that though there is quite a bit of debate about the role, form, and
appropriateness of social justice focused service-learning, there is very little empirical research on this specific type of service-learning practice. In an effort to address this gap in the literature, findings from this study were compared with Kiely (2004, 2005) and similarities and differences were identified. We need to know more about the experience and impact of critical service-learning for students, including which course elements lead not just changes in thinking and personal behavior, but also to social action.

At the same time, there was a challenge identifying critical ISL courses, and there were differences in the descriptions of the critical focus of the ISL course. It would be beneficial to know more about how critical ISL course experiences are different from traditional ISL course experiences. One avenue to differentiate critical service-learning from traditional service-learning is to compare and contrast the experience and impact of these two different teaching pedagogies.

**Including the voice of the community partners.** A gap in service-learning literature in general, and in ISL literature specifically, is examining the impact and experience of the practice from the point of view of the community partners. Kahn (2011) described the challenges of creating reciprocal relationships in ISL practice due to language and cultural differences, communication over long distances, historical relationships between countries, previous disempowering models of development and oftentimes, staggering differences in economic resources. Though not a specific focus of this study, participants described increased awareness of differences in economic resources. Some participants described experiences of unintended consequences, where their service or presence may have been
detrimental to a local person or the community. Especially in critical service-learning and critical ISL, where key elements include analyzing power differences and developing authentic relationships, more needs to be known about the experience of the community partner in the service-learning relationship. Through expanding our knowledge base about the experience of the community partner, service-learning can continue to improve its practice of developing relationships in the community based on authenticity and reciprocity.

**Contrasting experiences of being connected and being an outsider.** Participants of this study described experiences of feeling emotionally connected to their peers, the community, and the culture during their ISL course experience. For some, the ISL course experience gave participants a privileged look into the lives and culture of people across the world. They were surprised and felt grateful for this experience. In contrast, many participants had experiences of feeling like an outsider: being seen as a tourist or a rich White person. The contrast between these two feelings is curious to me. I would be interested in examining the ways that ISL courses allow students an opportunity to feel connected to a culture in a way that just tourism does not. Additionally, it would be interesting to explore more specifically the students' processes of understanding and navigating being both a friend and a stranger.

**Looking for spiritual transformation.** Kiely (2004) identifies six ways ISL course participants can experience transformation; spiritual transformation was one of those ways. In my study, only one participant described that her ISL course experience caused her to reevaluate her faith beliefs. No other participants used
any religious or spiritual language to describe their experience of an ISL course.

Bamber and Hankin (2011) also looked for evidence of Kiely’s transforming forms in their service-learning research and found evidence five of the forms, but not spiritual transformation. There is an opportunity for researchers to examine more specifically if and how participants of ISL courses experience spiritual transformation.

**Examining different types of reflections for ISL courses.** Kiely (2005) identifies “non-reflective” learning processes of personalizing and connecting as important affective visceral aspects of learning. Similarly, I found that participants in this study needed more than an intellectual connection to benefit from their experience. Participants needed to process their feelings as well as their thoughts. Much of service-learning reflection literature has focused on the rational process of reflection. There is an opportunity to expand our knowledge about non-reflective learning processes as well.

**Implications for Practitioners**

I would like to suggest five implications for practice that spring from this research. The first is regarding issues of safety for students while they participate in an ISL course. Over half of the participants in this study experienced a time that they felt unsafe; four participants were involved in a physical altercation. One of the courses in this study has since been suspended due to issues of violence in the country. Participants did not seem overly concerned about safety prior to their travel, and none of these incidents prevented future travel. In reviewing the ISL literature, this is not a topic I found either from a research or a practice standpoint.
ISL course practitioners need to be aware of issues of safety for their students, preparing them to make smart decisions while abroad and to not put themselves at risk. At the same time, it is important not to scare the students into feeling unsafe, so they do not fully enter into the experience. University administrators would do well to also assess safety and risk for their students.

The importance of peer student relationships is a finding of this study. Participants relied on supportive and nonjudgmental peers to process their complex, intense experiences. For practitioners, this highlights the importance of participants getting to know each other prior to or during the early stages of the in-country experience. Three courses in this study held a weekend retreat prior to the travel portion of the course. The purpose of the retreat was to develop relationships and trust among the students. While an overnight retreat is not the only venue for this team building, practitioners should plan opportunities for not only cultural and academic preparation, but also interpersonal preparation as well.

In the same vein, findings from this study suggest that practitioners need to create opportunities for students to have individualized experiences during their ISL course. These individualized experiences could be home stays, cultural buddies, individualized service-learning opportunities, or English conversation partners. An individualized experience in the host country seemed to provide an opportunity for students to operate outside the, sometimes, insulating experience of a like-minded student group. Participants were challenged to struggle with language barriers, make individual connections in the community, and explore the host city. Based on
this finding, practitioners could examine their program structure and see if there are opportunities that allow their students to have individualized experiences.

Participants of this study described destabilizing experiences that unsettled them and shook up their frame of reference. Many of these experiences were not planned moments orchestrated by the faculty coordinator. They were organic experiences that were a result of being immersed in a different culture with different cultural norms and extreme differences in resources. Practitioners need to be ready to respond to and support students in these moments of confusion and distress and to facilitate opportunities for critical reflection and analysis. Grusky (2000) echoes this sentiment that unplanned moments in the host country can allow students to move beyond being tourists to understanding more about the complex realities of the country.

Study participants were asked if they remembered anything significant about their return to campus or follow up at the end of the course. Interestingly, for the Ghana, El Salvador, India, and Bosnia courses, very few participants remembered anything about course follow-up once they returned to campus. All of these courses had at least five meetings prior to the travel portion of the course, but the bulk of the course experience was in-country. Only the Mexico course had multiple planned course meetings after the immersion. Given the challenge of articulating the experience to others and the potential for changes in thinking and behavior, practitioners should be intentional about following up with students in formal and informal ways after the travel portion of the course. This is an important aspect of
the students’ reentry back into the U.S.; they need to continue processing a
sometimes intense and life changing experience.

Limitations of the Study

There are limitations to my study as it has been designed. The primary
limitation is the programmatic differences between the five courses. While all
courses met the selection criteria (credit bearing, adhere to service-learning best
practices, and evidence of critical focus), there were significant differences between
the programs, including the length of time participants spent in the host country.
The participants from the Bosnia course spent over eight weeks in the host country,
while participants from the Mexico course only spent 10 days. The varying time in
country may have an affect on the ISL course experience.

Secondly, only one data point was collected from participants, a phone
interview. Participants were asked to remember their ISL course experience and
what was significant about that experience. For almost half of the participants, it
had been over five years since they had been a student in the ISL course. All
participants were easily able to describe experiences from their ISL course, but I
wonder if reading the participants’ reflection journals or final reflection papers
prior to the interview if I would have allowed me to jog their memory about
experiences that had been significant for them in the moment.

Thirdly, only one of the courses specifically used the term social justice to
describe the course in the syllabus. In conversations with the faculty from the other
courses, they agreed that the course had a social justice focus and were able to give
examples of that focus. But ultimately it was a label that I put on the courses as opposed to the course being created with an explicit social justice focus.

Finally, there was a low response rate for the number of people invited to participate in this study. A total of 151 study invitations were sent out to former students of the five ISL courses. Twenty-seven volunteers responded to the invitation, and 19 participants completed the Consent Form, screening questionnaire, and phone interview. I am left wondering about all the experiences from the former students who did not choose to participate. The study invitations were sent to the last known email address of the course alumni, but this could have been an email address the person no longer checks.

**Conclusions**

Critical ISL is an important educational opportunity for students to be stretched outside their comfort zone and to be immersed in a country and culture often very different from their own. As found in this study, participants report significant changes in their awareness, thinking, and behavior as a result of ISL course experience. Some of these changes took years to unfold, which was the benefit of interviewing participants years after their course. Practitioners of critical service-learning need to be aware that critical analysis and reflection is not enough, students must be challenged to put their learning in action as well. As demands for international education increase in higher education, critical ISL remains a significant academic experience for students to “travel with a purpose.”
REFERENCES


doi:10.1080/10665680701246492


Kahn, H. E. (2011). Overcoming the challenges of international service learning: A visual approach to sharing authority, community development, and global


doi:10.1353/jge.0.0016


Appendix A

Initial Participant Invitation Letter
Greetings!

My name is Becky McNamara and I am a student at Western Michigan University. For my dissertation, I would like to interview people who have participated in international service-learning, like your experience with (name of course). I have participated in and facilitated these types of courses and know they can have a significant impact on participants. I want to talk with you to learn about the significant moments of your international service-learning experience.

If you choose to volunteer for my study, you will be asked to sign a Consent Form agreeing to participate. Then I will schedule a phone interview with you that will last approximately 90-minutes. During the interview, I will ask you to reflect on significant parts of your experience with (name of course) and if this experience has been influential in your life. This interview will be recorded and transcribed by me; after it is transcribed, I will ask you to review the transcripts for accuracy. When you review the transcription, I will ask you to consider if it accurately represents your experience and what additional thoughts you may have about your experience. This process should not take more than 30 minutes of your time. After the interview, I may contact you by email to follow-up and clarify any questions I have after listening to the interview.

This research project has been approved by the Human Subjects Internal Review Board at Western Michigan University.

I would really love the opportunity to talk with you about your experience. If you are interested, please email me at (researcher’s email address) and we can discuss the next step in the process. I look forward to hearing from you.

Becky McNamara
Western Michigan University
(researcher’s address)
(researcher’s phone number)
(researcher’s email address)
Appendix B

Participant Invitation Letter – Snowball Sampling
Greetings!

My name is Becky McNamara and I am a student at Western Michigan University. I received your name from (name of person who recommended I contact them).

For my dissertation, I would like to interview people who have participated in international service-learning, like your experience with (name of course). I have participated in and facilitated these types of courses and know they can have a significant impact on participants. I want to talk with you to learn about the significant moments of your international service-learning experience.

If you choose to volunteer for my study, you will be asked to sign a Consent Form agreeing to participate. Then I will schedule a phone interview with you that will last approximately 90-minutes. During the interview, I will ask you to reflect on significant parts of your experience with (name of course) and if this experience has been influential in your life. This interview will be recorded and transcribed by me; after it is transcribed, I will ask you to review the transcripts for accuracy. When you review the transcription, I will ask you to consider if it accurately represents your experience and what additional thoughts you may have about your experience. This process should not take more than 30 minutes of your time. After the interview, I may contact you by email to follow-up and clarify any questions I have after listening to the interview.

This research project has been approved by the Human Subjects Internal Review Board at Western Michigan University.

I would really love the opportunity to talk with you about your experience. If you are interested, please email me at (researcher’s email address) and we can discuss the next step in the process. I look forward to hearing from you.

Becky McNamara
Western Michigan University
(researcher’s address)
(researcher’s phone number)
(researcher’s email address)
Appendix C

Initial Participant Invitation Letter – Second Reminder
Greetings!

I contacted you two weeks ago about participating in a study for my dissertation. I am interested in learning more about the experiences people have with international service-learning, like you did with (name of course). I have participated in and facilitated these types of courses and know they can have a significant impact on participants. Would you consider talking with me about your experience?

If you choose to volunteer for my study, you will be asked to sign a Consent Form agreeing to participate. Then I will schedule a phone interview with you that will last approximately 90-minutes. During the interview, I will ask you to reflect on significant parts of your experience with (name of course) and if this experience has been influential in your life. This interview will be recorded and transcribed by me; after it is transcribed, I will ask you to review the transcripts for accuracy. When you review the transcription, I will ask you to consider if it accurately represents your experience and what additional thoughts you may have about your experience. This process should not take more than 30 minutes of your time. After the interview, I may contact you by email to follow-up and clarify any questions I have after listening to the interview.

This research project has been approved by the Human Subjects Internal Review Board at Western Michigan University.

I would really love the opportunity to talk with you about your experience. If you are interested, please email me at (researcher’s email address) and we can discuss the next step in the process. I look forward to hearing from you.

Becky McNamara
Western Michigan University
(researcher’s address)
(researcher’s phone number)
(researcher’s email address)
Appendix D

Consent Form
Western Michigan University  
Department of Educational Leadership, Research and Technology  
Principal Investigator: Donna Talbot, PhD  
Student Investigator: Becky McNamara, MA

You have been invited to participate in a research project entitled “The Experience of Critical International Service-Learning.” This research is intended to study how participants describe their experience of international service-learning over time. This project is Becky McNamara’s dissertation project.

Your participation is voluntary. Please read the information below, and ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether to participate. If you decide to volunteer to participate, you will be asked to sign this form. A copy of this completed form will be sent to you.

In this study you will be asked to complete an initial survey providing general information about yourself and your international service-learning experience. Not all volunteers will be selected to participate in the study. The final participant pool will represent different years of service and different international service placements. Upon completion of the survey, you will be notified within two weeks about your selection into the study or not.

You will be asked to participate in one 90-minute phone interview with Becky McNamara. During the interview, you will be asked to remember and describe significant parts of your international service-learning experience. This interview will be audio-recorded. You will have a chance to review the transcripts from the recording to assess their accuracy. When you review the transcription, you will also be asked if it accurately represents your experience and what additional thoughts you may have about your experience. This process could take another 30 minutes of your time. After the interview, you may be contacted via email for follow-up questions.

This study has minimal risks and does not involve any physical risk. You might remember experiences that make you feel uncomfortable. Western Michigan University does not provide medical services or financial assistance for injuries that might happen because you are taking part in this study. Additionally, there is a potential inconvenience for participants of scheduling a 90-minute block of time for the interview. The researcher will make every attempt to arrange a time that is mutually convenient.

One way in which you may benefit from this activity is having a chance to talk about and revisit your experience with your international service-learning course. Through the interview process, you may have new insights about your experience and its influence in your life.
All information collected from you is confidential. That means that your name will not appear on any papers on which this information is recorded. You will be asked to select a pseudonym (a made up name to represent you) that will be used on all forms. A separate master list with the names of participants and the corresponding pseudonym will be kept in a locked file; once the data are collected and analyzed, the master list will be destroyed. All other forms will be retained for at least three years in a locked file in the principal investigator’s office.

You may refuse to participate or quit at any time during the study without prejudice or penalty. You may end the interview before completion, refuse to answer any questions, and refuse to participate in follow-up emails. If you have any questions or concerns about this study, you may contact either Becky McNamara at (researcher phone number) or Donna Talbot (researcher phone number). You may also contact the chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at 269-387-8293 or the Vice President for Research at 269-387-8298 with any concerns that you have.

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Do not participate in this study if the stamped date is more than one year old.

Your signature below indicates that you have read and/or had explained to you the purpose and requirements of the study and that you agree to participate.

__________________________________________  ______________________
Signature                                      Date

__________________________________________
Print Name

Consent obtained by:

__________________________________________  ______________________
Initials of researcher                         Date
Appendix E

Letter for Study Volunteers
Dear (participant’s name):

Thank you for your interest in participating in the research project to learn more about the experience of international service-learning. I look forward to hearing about your experience.

For me to schedule a time for an interview with you, I need you to do two things. First, I need you to read and sign a Consent Form, which gives me permission to interview you. The Consent Form is attached to this email. The Consent Form describes the research project and how I will maintain your privacy in the research process. The signed Consent Form can be scanned and returned to me via email at (researcher’s email address), faxed to (primary research fax number) to the attention of Donna Talbot, or can be sent through the mail to: Becky McNamara, (researcher’s address).

After completing the Consent Form, I am asking you to complete a short questionnaire about you and your specific international service-learning experience. For this study, I will interview 15-20 participants. If I get more volunteers than that, the questionnaire will help me to select participants that represent diversity in year of participation, country of service, and gender. You can access the questionnaire through this link: (link to questionnaire).

After I have received your signed Consent Form and completed questionnaire, I will contact you to arrange a time for our 90-minute phone interview.

Thank you again for your continued interest in this study. I really look forward to speaking with you and learning more about your experience. Feel free to contact me regarding questions about the interview process or the research project at any time. I can be reached via email at (researcher’s email address) or phone at (researcher’s phone number).

With kind regards,

Becky McNamara
Western Michigan University
(researcher’s address)
(researcher’s phone number)
(researcher’s email address)
Appendix F

Letter for Study Volunteers – Second Reminder
Dear (participant’s name):

I received your initial email indicating that you were interested in participating in my research project regarding the experience of international service-learning. I would like to schedule a time to interview you about your experience, but I need you to do two things first.

For me to schedule a time for an interview with you, I need you to do two things. First, I need you to read and sign a Consent Form, which gives me permission to interview you. The Consent Form is attached to this email. The Consent Form describes the research project and how I will maintain your privacy in the research process. The signed Consent Form can be scanned and returned to me via email at (researcher’s email address), faxed to (primary research fax number) to the attention of Donna Talbot, or can be sent through the mail to: Becky McNamara, (researcher’s address).

After completing the Consent Form, I am asking you to complete a short questionnaire about you and your specific international service-learning experience. For this study, I will interview 15-20 participants. If I get more volunteers than that, the questionnaire will help me to select participants that represent diversity in year of participation, country of service, and gender. You can access the questionnaire through this link: (link to questionnaire).

After I have received your signed Consent Form and completed questionnaire, I will contact you to arrange a time for our 90-minute phone interview.

Thank you again for your continued interest in this study. I really look forward to speaking with you and learning more about your experience. Feel free to contact me regarding questions about the interview process or the research project at any time. I can be reached via email at (researcher’s email address) or phone at (researcher’s phone number).

With kind regards,

Becky McNamara
Western Michigan University
(researcher’s address)
(researcher’s phone number)
(researcher’s email address)
Appendix G

Email to Arrange Interview Time
Dear (participant’s name):

I have received your signed Consent Form and completed questionnaire. Thank you! I really look forward to speaking with you.

At this point, I would like to schedule a time for a 90-minute phone interview with you regarding your experience in an international service-learning course and the impact of the experience after the program.

(Specific arrangements will be made with each participant regarding time of interview and phone number.)

Thank you again for your continued participation in this research project. I look forward speaking with you. Feel free to contact me regarding questions about the interview process or the study at any time. I can be reached via email at (researcher’s email address) or phone at (researcher’s phone number).

With kind regards,

Becky McNamara
Western Michigan University
(researcher’s address)
(researcher’s phone number)
(researcher’s email address)
Appendix H

Email to Arrange Interview Time – Second Reminder
Dear (participant’s name):

I have received your signed Consent Form and completed questionnaire. I am checking in with you again about setting up a time for a 90 minute interview regarding your experience in an international service-learning course and the impact of the experience after the program.

(Specific arrangements will be made with each participant regarding time of interview and phone number.)

Thank you again for your continued participation in this research project. I look forward speaking with you. Feel free to contact me regarding questions about the interview process or the study at any time. I can be reached via email at (researcher’s email address) or phone at (researcher’s phone number).

With kind regards,

Becky McNamara
Western Michigan University
(researcher’s address)
(researcher’s phone number)
(researcher’s email address)
Appendix I

Letter for Study Volunteers Not Selected
Dear (volunteer’s name):

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research project about the experience of international service-learning. My hope was to interview 15-20 people who had an experience of international service-learning. I had more than 20 volunteers. Based on the information I received from you and the other volunteers, you have not been selected to participate in this research project.

My goal is to interview people that represent a variety of years of participation and diverse international service-learning experiences. The initial questionnaire that you completed allowed me to select study participants that represented this diversity.

Thank you again for your interest in participation in this study. I will keep your name and contact information and may contact you in the future regarding a follow-up study.

Feel free to contact me regarding questions about the selection process or the study at any time. I can be reached via email at (researcher’s email address) or phone at (researcher’s phone number).

With kind regards,

Becky McNamara
Western Michigan University
(researcher’s address)
(researcher’s phone number)
(researcher’s email address)
Appendix J

Interview Protocol
Interview Protocol

Introductory Questions

1. Demographic information:
   a. Current contact information (confirm address, phone number, and email address)
   b. Gender, age, and race
   c. Religious affiliation, if any
   d. Year of graduation, undergraduate major/degree
   e. Were you an undergraduate when you were enrolled in this course? What was your class standing (freshman, sophomore, junior or senior) when you participated in this course?
   f. Are you multi-lingual? Is English your first language? What other languages do you speak? How would you describe your proficiency level in that/those language(s)?

2. Think back to your decision to apply/register for the (name of course). Why did you decide to apply?

3. Can you tell me a little bit about your international service-learning experience? When did you participate in (name of course)? Where did you do your service? What community agency did you work with? What did you do with them?

4. Prior to your experience with the (name of course), had you traveled internationally? If yes, where had you traveled to and what was the nature of the travel (i.e., vacation, service trip, study abroad)

Remembering and Describing the Experience

The next set of questions will ask you to remember your experience with this international service-learning course. When I ask you to remember your experience with the course, think of the course in its entirety – the preparation classes or retreats on campus, the travel and service in the (name of host country) and any follow up meetings, assignments or presentations when your returned back on campus.

5. Please select something that stands out for you and that captures your experience of (name of course) and tell me about it. Why was this significant for you? How did you feel about it at the time? How do you feel about it now?
6. Is there another story about a person, place, or event that captures your experience? Why was this significant for you? How did you feel about it at the time? How do you feel about it now?

7. What stands out to you about your preparation for the international service-learning experience? Why does that stand out to you now?

8. What stands out to you about your time in *(name of host country)*? Why does that stand out to you now?

9. What stands out to you about when you returned home? Why does that stand out to you now?

10. When you think about your experience in the *(name of course)*, what was most challenging for you? Why was it challenging? What support did you get in facing this challenge?

11. What did you learn, if anything, as a result of your participation in *(name of course)*?

12. Reflection is a part of service-learning. Can you tell me about your experience of reflection as a part of your experience with this *(name of course)*?

13. *(Name of faculty member or program coordinator)* describes *(name of course)* as having a social justice focus, where students learn about and analyze the larger social structures that are at the root cause of the issues you encountered in the host country. Would you describe *(name of course)* as having a social justice focus? Is there an example that stands out to you that exemplifies this focus?

**Meaning of the Experience Now**
This next set of questions will ask you about how you think of your experience with international service-learning now.

14. What does your participation in the *(name of course)* mean for your now? Are there ways that the *(name of course)* experience has translated into your life after participation? Has this experience made an impact in your life? If so, in what way?

15. When I read about international service-learning, people often talk about how these experiences can transform the participants. Does this apply to you? If so, how?

16. Have there been any significant life events for you after your participation in *(name of course)* that may affect how you think about this experience?
17. Is there anything else about your experience that I did not ask you that seems important for me to know?

**Conclusion of Interview**

18. I will be using a pseudonym for you when I write up the transcripts for the interview. What would you like your pseudonym to be?

19. I will listen to our interview and write up the transcripts. In a few weeks, I will send the transcripts to your email address and ask you to read them over. I will also ask to your respond to a few reflection questions about reading the transcripts.

20. I am still in the process of recruiting participants for this study. Do you have contact with other students who participated in this course? Would you be willing to share names and email addresses with me?

**Interview probes:**

- Can you tell me more about....
- I am interested by what you just said, can you tell me more about what you meant by “______”?
- That’s a phrase I haven’t heard you use yet. Can you tell me what that means?
- I want to make sure I understand you right. Can you give me an example?
- Do you recall what you meant by “______”?
Appendix K

Letter Sent to Participants to Review Transcripts
Dear (participant’s name)

Thank you for allowing me to interview you regarding your participation in (name of course). As we discussed when we spoke, I audio-recorded our interview and have transcribed the interview into a document. The document, which contains the text from the interview, is attached to this email.

Over the next two weeks, please take time to review the transcripts. Once you have read the transcripts, please respond via email to the follow three questions:

1. Does this transcription accurately reflect your experience during the (name of course)?

2. Is there anything you would like to add or clarify about your experience?

3. What stands out to you as you read the transcription of your experience?

You are not required to review and comment on your transcripts. If I have not heard back from you within two weeks, I will send you a reminder.

Thank you again for your continued participation in this study. I appreciate you sharing your time and stories with me.

Becky McNamara
Western Michigan University
(researcher’s address)
Kalamazoo, MI 49006
(researcher’s phone number)
(researcher’s email address)
Appendix L

Letter Sent to Participants to Review Transcripts – Second Reminder
Dear (participant’s name)

I am checking in with you again about looking over the transcripts of our interview. I am really interested in your reaction to the transcripts and whether you have more insights about your experience with (name of course).

The interview transcripts are attached to this email. Once you have read the transcripts, please respond via email to the follow three questions:

1. Does this transcription accurately reflect your experience during the (name of course)?

2. Is there anything you would like to add or clarify about your experience?

3. What stands out to you as you read the transcription of your experience?

You are not required to review and comment on your transcripts, but your thoughts will continue to help me understand your experience. If I do not hear from you within two weeks of sending this email message, I will assume that you are not interested in providing any comments on your transcript.

Thank you again for your continued participation in this study. I appreciate you sharing your time and stories with me.

Becky McNamara
Western Michigan University
(researcher’s address)
(researcher’s phone number)
(researcher’s email address)
Appendix M

Participant’s Pseudonym and Country and Year of ISL Course
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Appendix N

HSIRB Approval
Date: June 2, 2011

To: Donna Talbot, Principal Investigator
    Rebecca McNamara, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number 11-05-32

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled “The Experience of Critical International Service-learning” has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you may only conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: June 2, 2012