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Made in America? Assumptions About Service Learning Pedagogy as Transnational: A Comparison Between Ireland and the United States

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Keywords

International service-learning, Ireland, Cultural transfer, Civic engagement, Engaged pedagogy

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Assumptions About Service Learning Pedagogy as Transnational:
A Comparison Between Ireland and the United States**

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Abstract

Using exploratory, qualitative interviews, the authors studied conceptions of academic service-learning in the United States and the Republic of Ireland in order to elucidate the ways in which culture and social context shaped practitioners' perceptions and practices regarding service-learning pedagogy. Participants articulated a shared understanding of service-learning, identified similar barriers to utilizing service-learning and institutionalizing its practice, and discussed tensions surrounding the purpose of service-learning. However, Irish participants distanced their practice from the historical and cultural context of U.S. service-learning, demonstrating the process of localization. We conclude that the overarching tenets of service-learning may be transferable but the social, cultural, economic, historical, and political conditions of individual countries define how these are to be achieved.

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Introduction

Service-learning in the U.S. emerged as a grassroots movement out of the 1960s and 1970s. Student activists, community organizers, and concerned educators began to describe the ways in which "a monolithic, teacher-centered" educational system was failing "to involve and serve an increasingly diverse population of learners" (Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999, p. 1). They believed in the potential for community service to reinvigorate and redirect learning. By the mid-1980s, with the creation of Campus Compact, service-learning in the U.S. had acquired a foothold in both higher education and in K-12. Many disciplines viewed action-oriented, problem-based learning as a valuable new approach (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996).

Nearly a decade later, the practice of joining formal education with community service began gaining recognition in many regions of the world (Berry & Chisholm, 1999). Efforts were fledgling and differences in institutional type and resources were vast; however, commonalities in purpose were often described (Berry & Chisholm, 1999) and some attributes of its pedagogical origins in the United States seemed shared (Silcox & Leek, 1997). Today, service-learning is being adopted by institutions of higher education in many

countries, including the United Kingdom, Hungary, Lithuania, Sweden, Spain, the Republic of Ireland, New Zealand, Taiwan, South Africa, Australia and others (Boland & McIlrath, 2007; Butin, 2006; Harre & Boshier 1999; Hatcher & Erasmus, 2008; Iles, 2007; Leung, Liu, Wang, & Chen, 2007; McIlrath, 2009; Murphy, 2006; Oakley West, 2004; Sanden, 2006; Shay, 2008), and often U.S. practitioners are situated as the service-learning experts (Silcox & Leek, 1997). Yet, the need exists to develop clarity about which curricular approaches are most effective so as “not to repeat the mistake of exporting Western ideas and practice methodologies which may or may not be relevant” (Taylor, 1999, p. 309).

This inquiry responds to a call by Silcox and Leek (1997) for practitioners and scholars to reflect on “the impact that this methodology might be having throughout the world,” something, they argue, few U.S. practitioners have done due to “isolationist tendencies” in curriculum development, teacher education, performance standards, and innovative teaching and learning strategies (p. 615; also Bates, 2007; Bracey, 1991; Crittenden, 1994; Hooker, 1961). According to Gribble and Ziguas (2003), “transnational education is becoming a key feature of the globalisation of higher education, as a growing number of internationally mobile programs operate as tradable services” (p. 206). In this paper, we describe the ways in which administrators and educators in two countries – the Republic of Ireland (here after referred to as Ireland) and the U.S. – conceptualized service-learning, and we explore the implications of international transfer of educational practices between systems with different, or even related, cultural contexts (Dimmock & Walker, 1998). Using an exploratory, qualitative design, we sought, through a pilot study, to elucidate the ways in which culture and social context shaped practitioners’ perceptions and practices regarding service-learning.

This article also contributes to the scholarship to teaching and learning. Faculty set out to do the scholarship of teaching and learning not only to improve the teaching and learning in their own classroom but also to improve teaching and learning beyond their local setting by adding knowledge to - and even beyond - their disciplinary field. Applied to service-learning scholarship, our aim is to view conceptions of service-learning as “community property” (Shulman, 1993), open to critique. Shulman (1998), on the scholarship of teaching, asserts “it should be public, susceptible to critical review and evaluation, and accessible for exchange and use” (p. 5). Thus, we believe that by asking questions, or what Hutchings and Shulman (1999) call “going meta,” we are extending an effort to not necessarily improve what happens in our, or any given, classroom, “but to advancing practice beyond it” (p. 13). In this spirit, we sought to understand how service-learning practitioners’ perceptions, in Ireland and the U.S., reflect consensus or disagreement about the values embedded in existing conceptions of service-learning.

Context: Service Learning in U.S. and Ireland

Service-learning in the U.S. emerged in the mid-1980s from a collision of factors: the leadership of Campus Compact, grant funding available through Learn and Service America, “an increased emphasis on active-learning strategies,” and a “resurgence of the public roles and responsibilities of American higher education” (Hatcher & Erasmus, 2008, p. 49). Further, Tonkin (2004) observed that service-learning has its roots in “the long established American belief in voluntary service...that lies behind the land-grant colleges of the nineteenth century” (p. 6). The scope of what counts as service learning has yielded “multiple monikers,” including community-based and field-based service; however, for our purposes, we are focused on academic service-learning that is a course-based, credit-bearing experience (Butin, 2003, p. 1676). In the early 1990s, service-learning was growing

around the world. A comprehensive review of how service-learning was gaining a foothold in higher education in many parts of the world is provided by Berry and Chisholm (1999); however, for the purpose of this paper, we will focus on the emergence of service-learning in Ireland.

Globally, there is a growing awareness of a need to promote active citizenship for the success and sustainability of democratic societies (Boland, 2006), and the government of Ireland has shown a renewed interest in “fostering active civic engagement in communities” (Daly, 2007, p. 157) with “particular emphasis on cultivating volunteering” (p. 164). The relatively recent emergence of academic initiatives aimed at promoting civic engagement in Ireland coincides with a widespread national concern about a perceived decline in volunteering (a common measure of social capital) and an increased awareness of the role higher education can play in supporting civil society (Boland, 2006). The Taskforce on Active Citizenship was established to advise the Irish government on steps that can be taken to ensure active civic participation continues to grow and develop (Boland, 2006). In 2007, the taskforce recommended that students in their Transition Year should have opportunities to participate in an active-learning community-based project; and that the Higher Education Authority (HEA) should lead an initiative to support service-learning and volunteering (Taskforce on Active Citizenship, 2007). The HEA turned to the Community Knowledge Initiative (CKI) at the National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG) to provide leadership for these civic engagement initiatives.

Endorsed by the Government of Ireland, part the mission of CKI is to mainstream service-learning and “to reinvigorate the civic mission of higher education and instil in students a sense of social responsibility and civic awareness” (*Service-Learning Academy*, 2006). More recently, in 2008, NUIG has provided leadership for the Campus Engage project, a new national Irish network “which will allow civic engagement activities to grow across the higher education sector in Ireland” (Taskforce on Active Citizenship, 2007, p. 39).

The CKI emphasis on “social responsibility and civic awareness” resonates with language circulating in the U.S. For instance, part of Campus Compact’s mission is to “promote public and community service that develops students’ citizenship skills” (Campus Compact, 2007). Additionally, the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ initiative, *Core Commitments: Educating for Personal and Social Responsibility*, focuses attention on the academy’s role in fostering students’ development of personal and social responsibility and helps campuses create learning environments that prepare students to fulfill their obligations in an academic community and as global and local citizens (*Core Commitments*, 2009).

While conceptual similarities, discussed above, are evident between Irish and U.S. higher education civic engagement initiatives, some important differences exist. For instance, service-learning program administrators and educators from other countries find that American service-learning models, more specifically their terminology, design, and stated outcomes, are not directly applicable outside the U.S. Boland and McIlraith (2007) advocate for localization when introducing new pedagogies into a culture, “whereby the philosophy, principles and practices of a particular curriculum innovation are adapted (or even subverted) to reflect and serve local culture, context and conceptions” (p. 83; also Shay, 2008).

An important element of localization is the development of a common terminology. Much debate, for instance, centers on the use of the word ‘service’ (Boland & McIlraith, 2007). Consider, by example, Oakley West’s decision to use the term community-based service

learning: "I use this composite formulation because I am uncomfortable with either of the more usual designations on their own" (Oakley West, 2004, p. 71). Similarly, Rhoads (1997) rejects the term service learning, in favor of critical community service, to describe how this pedagogical approach can support the development of critical consciousness (also Harre & Boshier, 1999; Naples & Bojar, 2002). Acknowledging that service learning has been adopted in Ireland as a "catch-all" term (p. 83), Boland and McIlraith adopt "*pedagogies for civic engagement*" (2007, p. 84, italics in original) while simultaneously advocating for a "suspension of any attempt at definition or labeling" (p.84).

In the U.S., commonly stated outcomes for service-learning correspond with a stated purpose of higher education: civic engagement, good citizenship and democracy (Dewey, 1966; Sanden, 2006). In European higher education (i.e. Ireland) there is also a strong emphasis on "the connection between knowledge and the surrounding world" and "freedom in the search for knowledge" (Sanden, 2006, p. 89). The "main difference between the two traditions," according to Sanden (2006),

seems to be different emphasis on the aspects of the learning process. The USA tradition points out the importance of transferring good values to the students through experience. In the European tradition, having critical, reflective thinking and freedom in focus, the university cannot point out what is good or bad, an open discussion is needed instead. (p.89)

This difference in learning traditions explains some of the cultural tensions experienced internationally as American service-learning pedagogical design is "exported," but social and political contexts are also significant. For example, Thomson, Smith-Tolken, Naidoo, and Bringle (2008), in their cross cultural analysis of service-learning in U.S. and African contexts, identified how the term "civic" is political in both contexts but in different ways, and how "service" does "not easily travel across contexts" (p. 15; see also Morris & Cogan, 2001).

While the conceptualization of service-learning and civic engagement garners debate from scholars, U.S.-based practices and definitions continue to be adopted throughout the world (Thomas et al, 2008). What remains under-explored is in what ways culture and social context shape practices and perceptions regarding service-learning. For instance, how is the seemingly shared language of social responsibility and citizenship interpreted and enacted across cultural boundaries? This inquiry sought to explore administrator and educators' thinking about service-learning in the U.S. and Ireland, with a goal of spurring further dialogue about whether, or to what extent, service-learning can be exported or adopted across cultural boundaries.

Study Design

This exploratory, pilot interview study was designed to compare service-learning in Ireland and in the U.S. More specifically, the research questions that guided this inquiry are:

- How do Irish and U.S. administrators and educators conceptualize and employ service-learning?
- How does culture and social context shape respondents' perceptions and practices regarding service-learning?

Participant Selection

The sample for this pilot study consisted of 8 participants, four in Ireland and 4 in the U.S. The only criterion for selection was that each participant assumed a role with responsibility for and perspective related to service-learning, volunteerism, or civic engagement. Initial subjects were identified using both personal and professional contacts, who were then able to identify potential respondents. Patton (1990) refers to such an approach as snowball sampling, relying on referrals from initial contacts to generate additional participants.

The Irish participants included Nora,¹ a university service-learning coordinator, Aidan, a university service-learning practitioner, Eamon, a college administrator and professor who serves as liaison to numerous civic-oriented student organizations, and Molly, an international coordinator for a college, who aids students with service interests.

Participants from the U.S. included Robert, the Executive Director of a Campus Compact state affiliate (in the Midwest), Jessica, program director for the same Campus Compact affiliate, Melinda, a service-learning director at a liberal arts college in the Midwest, and Scott, a professor of psychology at a different private liberal arts college in the Midwest who was instrumental in the creation of the service-learning program on his campus.

Data Collection

Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Fontana & Frey, 1994), with an interview protocol set in advance to garner a greater depth of information regarding the participants' perceptions and practices related to service-learning. Interview questions covered the following: definition of service-learning, institutional support structures for service-learning, assessment, resistance, identification of community issues, and origins of service-learning. Detailed notes were taken during the interviews and the interview text shared with participants for their feedback on accuracy and clarity.

Analytic Process

The text of these 8 interviews was analyzed using established qualitative methods of coding and categorizing to identify broad themes. Findings presented here are the result of careful coding for *central categories*, defined by Strauss and Corbin (1998) as those that "appear frequently in the data." We tagged frequently used words and phrases. A vine of codes grew, as did the need to establish "pattern codes"—a way of grouping "explanatory or inferential codes" into themes, sets or constructs (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 69). We then brought our independent codes together to see how to subsume the "particulars into the general" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 245).

Limitations

One potential limitation of this study is researcher bias. As U.S. scholar-practitioners committed to service-learning, we have utilized service-learning in our teaching, been active in advocating for service-learning on campus, and studied service-learning, notably rooted in U.S.-based scholarship and conceptualizations. Thus, the lens through which we view this research risks being clouded by our insider's perspective. However, certain strategies, such as indicating how the analytic process includes checking the data and purposeful examination of alternative explanations, were employed to limit researcher bias in interpretation (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Another limitation is the sampling strategy. Participants were identified using both personal and professional contacts that were geographically convenient in the U.S. and temporally

convenient during [second author's] travel to Ireland. Our hope is that this pilot will contribute to additional sampling criteria for future research.

Findings

In this section, we present the central findings that emerged from our analysis. More specifically, participants articulated a shared understanding of service-learning; however, Irish respondents distanced their practice from the historical and cultural context of U.S. service-learning. All participants identified similar barriers to utilizing service-learning such as student, administrative and faculty resistance to active, experiential pedagogies, increased faculty and student workload (perceived or actual), and lack of reward and recognition in the existing promotion and tenure structure. While service-learning has developed differently in each country, both showed similarities in the struggle for institutionalization. Finally, participants all discussed tensions surrounding the purpose of service-learning, but common themes emerged such as improved teaching, civic engagement, and development of democratic citizens.

Defining Service Learning

When asked about their definitions of service-learning, respondents all shared a common understanding: a belief that service-learning "has the potential to generate development in the personal, academic and civic domains" (Aidan); that this "experiential pedagogy brings academic learning objectives to meet community needs and interests in order to further student learning and community growth" (Jessica); and that this "pedagogical methodology allows students to enhance their academic knowledge through community work and possibly allows for community capacity building" (Nora). While all pointed to experiences that connect academic and civic arenas, and their responses resonate with definitions in the literature (i.e., Bringle & Hatcher, 1995), the Irish respondents were quick to differentiate terms and concepts.

Irish respondents sought distance from the U.S. cultural context and historical origins. Eamon, for instance, drew a distinction between service-learning in Ireland and the U.S.: "Volunteerism is not ingrained in our culture like it is for Americans [who] grow up volunteering. It seems expected and respected, even enjoyed. It is not as deep in our history." He added that Irish students "want to help those less fortunate or maybe they are interested in how it might help them professionally. Some are passionate about what they see as injustice." But, he was quick to distinguish his students' efforts from the notion of social justice: "that is a term used more by Americans. The idea might be the same, but I doubt our students would use that term" (see Pinkerton & Campbell, 2002, on the contested nature of the concept of social justice in Northern Ireland).

Nora, too, differentiated between service-learning in Ireland and the U.S.: "Service-learning is highly contextualized in the US. In Ireland the term doesn't mean much and you'll more often find the use of the term civic engagement. In Ireland, 'service' has a relationship with punishment." Aidan also noted that "the whole concept of serving others seems hierarchical or related to penal servitude." Aidan further indicated that "anything dealing with ethical and moral development [which is a frequently cited learning outcome in the U.S.; see Eyler & Giles, 1999] would almost be scoffed at because of the recent decline of the church due to the scandals in the last 10-15 years. Anything connected to moral duty or pastoral responsibility is just not language that resonates with current Irish students."

Aidan, citing as an example how Hawaiian educators are using their native language rather than trying to translate new words, argued for drawing upon Irish words and concepts. For instance, as an alternative to the U.S. concept of reciprocity, Aidan proposed the word “meitheal that means neighbors coming together to work on the land, so a ‘learning meitheal’ is a word Irish people would understand.” He also offered some criticism of the term reflection. “It works; it’s more rigorous than mulling over stuff” (Aidan). However, he suggested instead the Irish word “machnamh, which means contemplate or contemplative learning” (Aidan).

Pedagogical Tensions

All respondents identified pedagogical challenges that emerged for faculty who were implementing service-learning, an instructional strategy that is in stark contrast to “traditional” teaching practice. The scholarship on teaching and learning advocates a paradigm shift from an instructor-centered, teaching model, to a student-centered, learning model (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Higgs, 2009). Yet, teaching practice continues to remain dominated by instructor-centered teaching; what Freire (1970/2000) and others refer to as the “banking model” (hooks, 1994). Service-learning, by contrast, is a collaborative, experiential pedagogy (Brown, 2001; Schneider, 2001). Aidan best illustrated this collaborative approach in his description of how he co-constructs course components with his students and community partners: “We’ll start by developing learning outcomes and then ask the community for input on what their needs are. We will also ask the students what their personal learning goals are. We will then generate a project that will satisfy all three participants’ needs.” However, he and other respondents acknowledge that such an approach is unfamiliar to students and not suitable for every course.

Student exposure to this pedagogy has been limited so far. I have pitched the idea through presentations to our current second year students but they have pushed back ... Moving from the “sage on the stage” is scary for students as well as faculty because it is the system that they are used to. They both lose their security. The responsibility for the learning is on the student and that is contradictory to how they’ve been taught for the previous 14-16 years. (Aidan)

They [students] resist the experiential form of learning as opposed to the traditional banking model that they are used to. They resist taking more responsibility for their education. These are the same things that we see in institutional resistance. Institutions and faculty resist moving away from the banking model towards active pedagogies that advance the common good. (Jessica)

Robert too noted that service-learning is “a different way of teaching and engaging students more fully in academic work,” but suggested that under-use of service-learning is rooted in lack of faculty preparation.

In PhD programs and in faculty orientation, it is still the traditional path to publish, research, teach, service to campus that is emphasized. Until graduate and new faculty programs train faculty with a civic component we are going to need to retrain them as they become involved in the field. (Robert)

Training after-the-fact hinges upon faculty interest in or receptivity to constructivist and experiential approaches to teaching and learning. Further, investment of faculty time in service-learning pedagogy is not typically recognized or rewarded.

Another challenge identified by some respondents was that service-learning takes time and this may be another reason not to use this instructional approach. For instance, Molly, who arranges the service components (in Ireland) for a U.S. community college's international service-learning course on Irish Culture, stated "It's good for them [the U.S. students who travel to Ireland] because they actually get out of the classroom and see Irish society," but she added, "I'm not sure how they [U.S. instructors] fit all of that in to the rest of their curriculum. There isn't any room for teaching it in the [Irish] curriculum. They [Irish teacher candidates] don't have time with all of the other requirements and exams" (Molly). Scott noted "There has been some [resistance] from students when the service is a required component. They claim it takes too much time and that they have no interest in it."

Respondents also noted that faculty who employ this approach – in the U.S. and in Ireland – encounter real and perceived risks. Faculty appointments, and more specifically the process by which junior faculty earn tenure, are determined based on teaching and research productivity. Determinations of good teaching are based on student evaluations of teaching, which, Robert noted, are overwhelmingly "using traditional forms that focus on in-class teaching... and may be detrimental to faculty [who use service-learning]." Robert added that some faculty may use the "institutional form" for the "traditional classroom" and a supplemental evaluation to assess "experiential learning." However, Robert noted the potential risks involved: "the lack of good assessment [of teaching] causes faculty to hesitate to use the pedagogy, especially if they are junior." Melinda, too, indicated her institution considers service-learning an "innovative pedagogy," but "It is not counted under service, which is considered service to the college. However it can count under scholarship if the faculty member is engaging in community based research."

Nora noted efforts underway to get service-learning in Ireland worked into the faculty promotional structure "but that will take some time." She added that the university president would say that service-learning is weighted "under the category of 'other' when considering teaching, research and other for promotion," but she disagreed, saying that putting it in under other "is not clear and not enough" (Nora). Scott also shared: "I received it [resistance] from other faculty that did not think people should get credit for experience. This occurred when I was trying to get the Social Responsibility course approved. They questioned the educational validity of experience.... [For one faculty member] learning took place only in a classroom" (Scott).

Institutionalization

As described previously in this article, service-learning in the U.S. and Ireland have very different histories. Yet, whether a nearly 25-year grassroots project in the U.S. or a more top-down initiative in existence for less than a decade in Ireland, respondents shared similar challenges related to institutionalization. For instance, Robert observed that institutionalization of service-learning on U.S. campuses "is the great long term outcome, but few campuses are there." Further, he noted, one "president could be very supportive and is [then] replaced by someone else with different philosophies. Long term commitment is a challenge." Robert lamented that "Sometimes it feels like we are spinning our wheels" which he attributed to changes in senior administrators: "as people leave we have to start all over." Further, he cautioned that "because budgets get cut and unfortunately civic work is not as valued as academic work, [service-learning programs are] still on the fringes and in danger of being cut."

Nora too shared her frustration with "the rhetoric versus the reality." For instance, she noted, "the president supports service-learning verbally but is still unwilling to embed it across the [university] curriculum. ...If it is to become nationalized there is the concern of

sustainability; will there be enough resources to sustain it? ... The upcoming recession causes concern for continued funding."

In addition to concerns about funding and leadership, respondents shared apprehension about pedagogical consequences to institutionalizing service-learning. Jessica, for instance, observed that it has "become more watered down, more palatable. It's less edgy and experimental." Nora echoed this concern when she shared, "this is a counter-normative pedagogy in Ireland and there is concern that it will lose its excitement and effectiveness if it is to become normalized." Melinda too noted that service-learning, as it "has become institutionalized within our curriculum... it's become outcomes-driven, professionalized." However, she believes there is also space for a "critical voice now because it has been institutionalized. We are free to discuss the problems and tensions."

Competing Purposes: In the Service of What?

Service-learning pedagogy continues to gain currency in higher education. In the U.S., the mission of a college or university typically emphasizes educational objectives that align with learning outcomes for service-learning. In Ireland, the government is endorsing an initiative to reinvigorate the civic mission of higher education. Yet, evident in respondents' descriptions of learning outcomes and the purpose of academic service-learning are tensions between the demands of the marketplace and expectations of an educated citizenry in a democracy.

Robert noted that every campus seeks to develop students who will "become better citizens." Jessica observed that the development of an educated citizenry is foundational to education, and that service-learning is a key mechanism for cultivating citizenship: "I believe in an educated citizenry and that an educated citizenry will take better care of each other. It's at the core of education; that there must be something greater than individual development" (Jessica). Melinda also identified "both attitudinal and cognitive" learning objectives that are tied to the academic core and mission of the college." She elaborated that students

grow more appreciative of diversity, increase their cross cultural awareness and become more willing to be allies to different others. Their skills in leadership, advocacy and citizenship increase. They become community problem solvers who understand their social responsibilities. (Melinda)

Aidan further asserted that a main objective for using service-learning is "to change the world," and this pedagogy has the potential to create "a generation of change agents." Nora stated that service-learning is important because

academia...[has] a responsibility to share our resources with our neighbors. We are concerned about the decreasing level of student engagement and ...are worried about the democratic system in Ireland. We need to increase student engagement ...This is vital work for the survival of democratic life.

Yet, this conceptualization of service-learning as participatory, change-oriented, and designed to "advance the common good" (Jessica) is in contrast with Barber's market-driven conception of service (in Crabtree, 1998). For instance, Nora juxtaposes her comments above, regarding a commitment to democracy, with a desire "to make the university more attractive to students in a competitive global higher education market." Aidan, too, observed that "In order to sell it [service-learning] to students you have to show what's in it for them" and he added that because Ireland doesn't have "a history of service,

you have to sell it differently here" (Aidan). Robert also noted that administrators have realized students are "coming to campuses with more service experience and are looking to continue that service" adding that campuses have "jumped on this as a marketing tool. Students want to make a difference and contribute more, and campuses have met this need."

Discussion and Implications

Our findings illuminate some ways in which the international transfer of service-learning is resisted (i.e. seeking distance from particular U.S. terminology and using instead more culturally relevant terms). We also describe how some concerns and challenges are shared (i.e. pedagogical issues, frustrations and barriers related to institutionalization), despite different historical and cultural contexts. In light of these findings, we offer some suggestions for teaching and future research.

While conceptions of service-learning are shared, specific terminology, perceived as a U.S. commodity, was questioned by Irish respondents. For instance, Aidan suggested the Irish word "machmamh," meaning contemplative learning, instead of the term "reflection." While we concur that the identification of culturally-specific concepts and terminology is critical, one should be cautious of implying a monocultural experience for Ireland or the U.S. For instance, Aidan articulated strong feelings about Irish students completing their service-learning projects in an Irish-speaking environment, noting that the "future of the Irish language depends on it." Thus, his desire to translate U.S. words is rooted in his belief that "the Irish language must be common to all projects" (Aidan). Yet, according to 2002 Irish Census, only 42% of the population of Ireland has the ability to speak Irish, and Irish is the household language for only 3% of the country's population (*Statement on the Irish Language*, 2006), suggesting that a translation of words may not resonate equally with all Irish students. Cultural context is not only applicable at the national level, but also operates regionally, institutionally, and programmatically (Boland & McIlrath, 2007; Shay, 2008). Further research is warranted on the cultural transferability and universality of concepts and terms, both between and within countries.

Arguments for the inclusion of an international perspective in university education are persuasive (Nagy & Falk, 2000). In particular, interest by university educators in global learning can be attributed to the ways in which colleges and universities prepare students "for a workforce that requires inter- and multi-cultural competencies that ensure success in dealing with the serious social, political, and environmental threats that have come about from the advance of globalization" (Bremer, 2006, p. 40). Coupling cross-cultural content in various disciplines with international and trans-border service-learning continues to grow in popularity, and is cited as a key mechanism for preparing graduates for a global marketplace (Cabrera & Anastasi, 2008; Grusky, 2000; Silcox & Leek, 1997; Tonkin & Quiroga 2004). However, the infusion of international content and cross-cultural experiences into curriculum may unwittingly fall short of its intended goals through failure to complicate culturally-situated knowledge that is taken-for-granted as universal (McIntosh, 2005).

Critical of efforts to make "global education into a content-bounded domain," Bragaw (2001) observes "we have sometimes tried to make global education into...the study of things foreign and international... [Students] were learning about another culture, country, or geographical region of the world...[but] the trouble with this conception is that it is... simply too narrow and incomplete" (pp. 1-2). Nussbaum (2002) adds that colleges and

universities must facilitate learning about “differences [in order] to recognize the common aims, aspirations, and values, and enough about these common ends to see how variously they are instantiated in the many cultures and their histories” (p. 9). Grusky (2000), then, calls for service-learning educators to unveil the “exploitative aspect of experiencing poverty for a life-enriching experience” and interrogate issues of cultural arrogance (p. 867).

Yet, by design, in academic service-learning,

the primary recipients of community service are those who society has deemed disadvantaged in some way, be it through their social class, race, ethnicity, ability, or any combination of these. Those who do community services at colleges and universities, on the other hand, are generally young people who have more advantages than those they are serving (Nieto, 2000, pp. ix-x).

Thus, we believe educators seeking to engage in international service-learning must initiate discussion of these advantages and disadvantages, to extend discussion of disparities and difference to include an awareness of “the privileging conditions that put a college student in a community service organization as a volunteer in the first place” (Jones, 2002, p. 13). Equivalently, we suggest service-learning educators participate in reflective dialogue about privilege and power with colleagues; and offer that a learning community model lends itself well to facilitating such inquiry process (Hoyt, Myers, Powell, Sansone, & Walter, 2010).

Such critical dialogues can elicit “a powerful confrontation between self and other, privilege and obligation” (Jones, 2002, p. 14), and facilitates reciprocity, a key ingredient which ensures equitable benefit for all parties involved (Ramsdell, 2004), and elevates service-learning from a pedagogical strategy to a philosophy of education (Stanton, 1990). Yet, ensuring reciprocity within the learning triad of student, academic, and community partners is the most intractable challenge within service-learning (Boland & McIlrath, 2007). In order to enable cultural reciprocity, service-learning must be situated within a shared cultural context. Porter and Monard (2001), in their international service-learning course that includes a Spring Break trip to Bolivia, prepare their students through pre-trip readings on the Andean and the North American meanings of reciprocity, and after their return back to the U.S. they continue discussion and collaboration with their colleagues and partners in the Andes. Constant and mindful attention to *ayni*, the Andean term for reciprocity, requires “mutual giving and taking for the act to be accomplished” (Porter & Monard, 2001, p. 16).

Kalyanpur and Harry’s (1997) “posture of cultural reciprocity” provides a useful framework to examine the cultural underpinnings of the specific beliefs from which our ideals arise. Harry, Rueda, and Kalyanpur (1999) posit that, first, educators must identify normative beliefs are imbedded in our interpretations; next, “seek the cultural underpinnings of those beliefs, rather than assuming that they represent universal values that should be shared by others” (¶ 7); then, acknowledge any cultural differences and biases rooted in individual, institutional, and/or programmatic assumptions; finally, compare differing beliefs and work towards collaboration, drawing upon and recognizing strengths of indigenous context. Through a posture of cultural reciprocity, mutuality, respect, and cultural humility can be achieved.

Conclusion

This inquiry sought to understand the ways in which culture and social context shaped practitioners’ perceptions and practices regarding service-learning, but also, as a pilot, we sought to raise questions about assumptions embedded in the practice of academic service-

learning. In particular, this project illuminated the ways in which service-learning is “messy, indeterminate, provisional and situated practice” (Trigwell & Shale, 2004, p. 526). Consensus and clarity, then, may not be our goal. As Butin (2003) notes, “the quest for definitional certainty has the potential to constrain rather than foster emergent practices” (p. 1687). He further observes that “to overemphasize the legitimacy of particular modes of enacting service-learning is to normalize and stigmatize alternative modes and potentially produce yet another doctrinal methodology” (Butin, 2003, p. 1688). Thus, in order to strengthen the pedagogy, educators may instead need to examine assumptions about service and learning in a multi-cultural society (Nagy & Falk, 2000). Otherwise, taken-for-granted assumptions about service-learning as transnational risk erasing the need for localized and contextualized understanding of the role of culture on service-learning practice (Kalyanpur, 1996). The over-arching tenets of service-learning may be transferable but the social, cultural, economic, historical, and political conditions of individual countries define how these are to be achieved. Differences in language and goals for service-learning pose challenges and opportunities for service-learning both locally and internationally (Grusky, 2000).

It is our hope that the findings from this study will inspire further dialogue about the cross-cultural dimensions of service-learning. However, given that this exploratory study represents qualitative findings from a small sample, there are limitations to the transferability of findings. While differences between Ireland and the U.S. exist, we recognize the similarities between these two countries. Thus, further research is warranted, especially in countries where language, culture, and geography differ more widely, and will enhance educators’ abilities to design and implement international service-learning.

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¹ Pseudonyms are used to refer to the participants.