

Western University

From the Selected Works of Jennifer A. Kozak

Winter January 1, 2016

ISL and Host Communities - Relationships and Responsibility

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Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/jen-kozak/1/>

Kozak, J.A., & Larsen, M.A. (2016). ISL and Host Communities: The Centrality of Relationships and Responsibility. In M.A. Larsen (Ed.), *International service learning: Engaging host communities*. New York, NY: Routledge.

CHAPTER 19

Conclusion: ISL and Host Communities: Relationships and Responsibility

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In the introduction to this book, Marianne Larsen outlined the need for a book such as *International Service Learning: Engaging Host Communities* to enhance our understanding about ISL and host communities. The 21 authors who have written chapters for this book have attempted to address existing gaps in the research literature and ISL practice by teasing out the complicated and complex impact and influence of ISL programs in global South host communities. To do this, *International Service Learning: Engaging Host Communities* brought together a wide range of individuals from a variety of countries, sectors (educational, non-profit, private), and backgrounds. This book would not have happened without the contributions of members of global South communities from the Caribbean, Central America, East, West, and Southern Africa who have reflected upon and shared their experiences, positive and negative, about hosting North American ISL students. Indeed, the goal of this book was to give voice to the communities hosting international volunteers, and their contributions provide us with invaluable insights about existing programs and what needs to be done to improve them. Their voices are represented in this collection as authors, co-authors, and participants in a wide range of research studies presented in this book.

This research has been carried out by a range of scholars, many of whom are new and emerging having just completed their doctoral research on ISL and host communities, as well as more established and experienced researchers who have also responded to the urgent need to enhance our understanding of the effects of ISL on host communities. In many ways, this ‘academic’ book stands out in challenging perceptions about whose knowledge counts in involving not only university-based scholars, but also those who have participated in ISL programs as hosts, practitioners and facilitators. Bringing together such a wide assortment of writers provokes us to think about the boundaries we construct around our roles as researchers, practitioners, students, and hosts. Many of the contributors in this book cross these imagined boundaries, adopting two or more ISL roles throughout their lives such as researcher/practitioner, host/practitioner, and NGO/researcher.

In this concluding chapter, we begin by summarizing what host community members consider some of the negative implications of ISL programs and we turn briefly to post-colonial literature to interrogate these disturbing aspects of ISL. We then shift our attention to what host community members have said are some of the positive effects of ISL programs, recognizing that the lines are blurred between what one person may consider a positive benefit and another, a challenge. With few exceptions, it would seem that most individuals in global South communities that host and facilitate ISL programs, would rather they continue than be discontinued. We review a few pragmatic suggestions presented in the book for improving ISL programs, and then focus,

in the second half of this conclusion, on the more substantive, worldview shift that needs to occur for ISL programs to be truly inclusive and ethical.

NEGATIVE IMPLICATIONS

Economic challenges

There are many economic implications associated with sending tens of thousands of privileged North American students abroad each year to engage in service work in economically developing countries. First, hosts spoke about the harmful effects of foreign students engaging in work that could be done by locals. In Chapter 11, for instance, Hernández wrote about negative consequences of having ill-prepared North American students engage in manual labor projects in Nicaragua and Ecuador as a part of their service responsibilities. Effects include slowing down construction projects, increasing chances of accidents, and robbing local citizens of economic opportunities.

Many of the authors point out the burdens local NGO partner organizations face such as the expectation to orient arriving ISL students and provide them with ongoing supports (e.g. translators) throughout their internships. In other cases, partner organizations are expected to act as cultural intermediaries between host-families and students. In Chapter 15, Mohamed, a Kenyan NGO Executive Director, noted the pragmatic motivations of local NGOs to accept ISL students who contribute income to the local organization in the form of fees partner universities pay per student, and also hopes that they (the students) would become future fundraisers for the NGO. This presents a dilemma for local NGOs who feel compelled to take on ISL students, not because doing so will benefit the community, but because there are short-term financial benefits for the organization, as Tembe, Uganda host country facilitator notes in the same chapter.

There are also costs associated with having North American students living in host family homes. These include additional expenses to buy and prepare food the students prefer, so that they could be “fed properly” as one participant noted in Chapter 4. Some host families indicated that the stipend they received for hosting students was insufficient to cover all of their costs forcing one of the families in Chapter 10 to find a way to “manage” due to their desire to participate in the cultural aspect of the home stay.

Although well intentioned, donations to the host community can also be problematic. O’Sullivan and Smaller in Chapter 4 explain how donations can promote charity, and lead to competition within communities to be chosen as host family, which in turn exacerbates tensions and inequality. Hernández also reviewed the deleterious effects of ‘well-intentioned’ students arriving with gifts to disperse to certain community members, recounting an unbelievable story about a student who was naïve enough to bring an inflatable swimming pool as a gift to his host family living in a community where water was a scarce resource. The lack of guidelines, or the failure to explain and/or enforce existing guidelines, around gift-giving and donations reinforces asymmetrical power dynamics that frame host community members as those in need and ISL students as being capable of addressing those needs.

Socio-cultural challenges

In the empirical data collected in this volume, we see numerous instances of cross-cultural misunderstandings based on deeply embedded stereotypical and in some cases, racist, ideas about the Other. In Chapter 6, Heron provides examples, drawn from her interviews with NGO staff from Guatemala, South Africa, Malawi, and Zambia, of the glaring, deficit-based misconceptions that Northern volunteers arrive with about their host countries. This theme is repeated throughout

the book, including Jorgenson's study (Chapter 9) about how Canadian ISL students exoticized Ghana, seeing the country as a place of difference and difficulty, as well as a place that they could fix.

Host community members across many different settings also spoke about culturally inappropriate behaviors amongst ISL students, including unsuitable ways of addressing elders, transgressing gender norms, public displays of affection, wearing inappropriate clothing, and accessories, refusing to eat local food host families served, and unseemly behaviors associated with drinking and smoking. Larkin, in Chapter 18, shares data from her research in Tanzania where ISL students participated in excursions to national game parks, flaunting their privilege before community members who had never had the opportunity to see these world-renowned sites within their own countries.

Host community responses to these inappropriate behaviors ranged from feeling perplexed, frustrated, and saddened by the unacceptable attitudes and conduct amongst ISL students visiting their country. In one case, the flagrant exhibition of privilege by ISL students caused the local students at a home for street youth to respond with a sense of 'privilege by association.' They felt they were exempt from the policies in the home where they lived causing an increase in misbehavior and drug use. Other host community participants reconsidered their involvement in these programs due to ISL student disrespect and cultural insensitivity. (Both examples are from Arends' study in Chapter 8).

Hernández as an insider writing about ISL in Guatemala and Nicaragua noted that some host community members expressed anger about the inappropriate behaviors amongst the ISL students. Eliciting these kinds of heightened emotional responses appeared to be more difficult in the research case studies carried out by outsiders unfamiliar with the intricacies and complexities of local cultural contexts. Hence, most of the concerns expressed by host community members were framed in the most polite and gracious ways, such as the claim by a Zambian participant, that things are simply done differently "in our culture" (Chapter 6).

Some of these issues relate to communication barriers such as the incapacity of ISL students to converse in the local language. Across the book we hear host community members talk about the obstacles and confusions created by language barriers. Beyond communication difficulties, host community members also spoke noted the lack of input and consultation with the local community about ISL programs, including the kinds of projects the ISL students were engaged in and decisions about student placement with host families.

INTERROGATING IMPLICATIONS

Like many of the authors in this book, we turn to post-colonial and related literature to make sense of these troubling aspects associated with ISL programs. A real and recurring concern for many of the authors of this book is the reinforcement of asymmetrical (neo-colonial) dependency relations through well-intentioned ISL programs. ISL and voluntourism slogans like, 'Give a year, save the world' contribute to the belief that global North students can not only alleviate global disparities, but also 'save' the world through relatively short-term charitable projects. The paternalistic nature and damaging consequences of the 'desire to help' has been explored by many authors throughout the book, who, building upon Heron's (2007) earlier work in this area, suggest that these desires are embedded in the much longer history of colonization's civilizing mission made possible by Othering discourses rooted in the ideology and practices of Orientalism (Said, 1978). What the contributions to this book point out are the effects on host

communities of ISL students who arrive with deeply embedded neo-colonial values and beliefs that position themselves as more civilized, knowledgeable, and superior to those who become their hosts during their sojourns abroad.

There are some instances of the internalization of the binary discourses whereby host community members claimed that they were less knowledgeable, hardworking, and punctual than the ISL students visiting their communities. (See chapters 6, 7 and 8 on this point.) Some host community members felt they had much to learn from ISL students with respect to these traits. A Guatemalan participant in Heron's study (Chapter 6) noted the desire to "better ourselves in matters of punctuality", a need expressed by Tanzanian participants in Larsen's study (Chapter 7) as well. Some view the Western trait of punctuality as having more value than the Southern conceptualizations of time, not recognizing that these assumptions are culturally constructed.

However others, especially individuals working in local NGO partner organizations, did not subscribe to these binary discourses. For instance, Father Nelson working with La Parroquia, an ISL partner organization, challenged the idea of local Nicaraguans being "the poor people" and suggested that there was much more in common between Nicaraguans and U.S. ISL students than different (Chapter 3). Unsurprisingly, most of the global South authors in this book and those whose voices appear as 'data' in research studies, challenge the taken-for-granted deficit-based Othering discourses and suggest that they can play a role in educating ISL students about the realities and complexities of their communities, rather than the stereotypes.

POSITIVE IMPLICATIONS

While there are various aspects of ISL that have been shown to be problematic, most if not all of the host partners who contributed their perspectives to this book agreed that the programs have value and that they should continue. In this section we explore some of the positive benefits stemming from the presence of North American ISL students in global South communities.

Economic Benefits

Economic contributions to the community are generally accepted as a positive result of ISL programs and take several forms. First, as noted above, there are economic benefits that accrue to partner NGOs who often receive a stipend from the partner university. Second, host families also receive stipends per student and as Toms Smedley argues in Chapter 5, the economic benefits are viewed as being necessary and indispensable for community development. In her study of 3 communities in Costa Rica, she shows how the revenue from ISL students benefitted host families, as well as the broader community. Ways in which ISL students contribute to stimulating the local economy are also noted by Smaller and O'Sullivan (Chapter 4), Heron (Chapter 6), and Larsen (Chapter 7).

Other direct economic contributions included material donations such as building supplies. Donations made to the collective infrastructure (such as school and medical supplies) can be distributed evenly and benefit the entire community. In Chapter 12, Dear and Howard refer to one program that attempts to address issues of sustainability by making a yearly financial donation to the host organization to be used for general operations and another that donates outdoor and sports equipment to the University of Havana enabling the university to offer programming that it would otherwise be unable to provide.

Free labor represents an indirect economic contribution, assuming that the student workers are not replacing more qualified workers as discussed previously, in the form of effort which is

then converted into capital. This 'capital' often takes the form of a school, a library, community center, or other physical edifice for the host community. When building materials or other material donations are to be made, making purchases locally whenever possible can stimulate the local economy and becomes both a direct and an indirect economic benefit to the community.

The value of economic benefits such as these should not be under-estimated, especially given the fact that nearly all of the ISL programs reviewed in this book take place in subsistence or developing economies where, in many cases, there is limited access to clean drinking water, latrines, electricity, and material resources. Furthermore, due to economic disparities, in many of these communities there are few job opportunities, especially for younger generations and women. Countries such as Haiti are still dealing with the after-effects of natural disasters, and like Guatemala and Nicaragua, tenuous strife ridden historical relationships with the United States. Thus, the economic benefits that ISL bring to host communities need to be understood within the wider context of a profoundly unequal, post-colonial world, and consider the implications of this for future ISL program planning and research.

Skills development

Host community members also remarked upon the skills they acquired and developed by having ISL students live with them. These included computer and other ICT skills such as such as how to more effectively use email and Skype. Tanzanian women were able to improve their basic business skills, including accounting, customer relations, marketing, and investigating opportunities for product packaging (Chapter 7). Due to cultural and social norms, it is unlikely they would have been able to better these skills if not for their interactions with the ISL students. Some host community members valued opportunities that ISL students provided to practice English and felt less self-conscious about their own efforts to speak English due to the communication struggles shared with ISL students. In some communities the students even organized English lessons for local community members who were interested in attending.

Co-education: Cross-cultural understanding

Many host community members whose voices are heard in this book enjoyed taking care of the students and teaching them about their community. They were firm in the belief that cultural exchange and learning about others was one of the reasons they participated in these programs. Often host community members spoke of how they had learned about the day-to-day lives and the mundane details about the home countries of the ISL students and how the experience altered some of the preconceived notions they had held regarding life in the North. Since the majority of global South partners are unable to travel as easily as the volunteers can, these interactions are often seen as an opportunity to experience other cultures. In Chapter 10 the host families saw opening their home to the ISL students, who were volunteering at the local schools, as an opportunity to demonstrate alternative “ways of doing things” which in turn would motivate their children to study harder and to take their schooling more seriously.

However, cross-cultural understanding was not viewed as a one-way process. Rather, host community members considered themselves as co-educators (and co-learners) along with the students. Many host community members interviewed viewed the time together with the ISL students as an opportunity to promote cross-cultural understanding, to work together in solidarity, and proudly share their country’s natural beauty. As one respondent said in Macdonald and Vorstermans’ study (Chapter 10), “we will learn something from them and they too will learn something from us.”

Appreciation for local culture

In some cases, host community members were struck by how much the visiting ISL students appreciated their communities especially the things that they took for granted. One community member stated that working with the foreign students renews her appreciation for the local community and made her realize what was taken for granted on a daily basis. Hernández notes the trend in Nicaragua amongst young people who view their own community as backward and immigrate to large cities. Often after interacting with the ISL participants they are able to see the value in their own communities, which they had not previously appreciated. In other instances host communities are proud of, and surprised by the admiration that the ISL students show for the solidarity, sense of community, and friendship shown amongst neighbors that is generally lacking in their home countries (Chapter 11). In Ghana one of the host mothers relayed the dismay that her son showed at not having enough time to teach the ISL students about the local dances. In this way experiencing one's own culture through the eyes of an Other has the potential to renew one's appreciation and pride in that which is otherwise taken for granted.

MOVING FORWARD: A FEW PRAGMATIC SUGGESTIONS

Drawing upon the reflections and research findings in *International Service Learning: Engaging Host Communities*, we briefly summarize here some of the more pragmatic changes that need to be implemented to address the challenges and burdens global South communities face in hosting ISL students.

Improving pre-departure orientation for students and ISL facilitators

A common finding across the chapters in this book is the need to improve pre-departure orientation for students and, as Baldwin, Mohamed, and Tembe (Chapter 15) argue, for those who facilitate these programs. There was agreement that instruction in the local language was necessary to decrease misunderstandings and foster deeper relationship building. Others spoke about the need to teach students about cultural differences and to closely examine their own culturally-determined expectations about cleanliness, ownership and punctuality (Arends, Chapter 8). A number of host community members expressed the need for ISL students to learn more about the history, economics, and politics of the host country before arrival. According to Robenson Luceus, an international NGO representative in Haiti, there was a pressing need to develop ISL students' cultural capacity to engage with Haitians and this included understanding Haiti's post-colonial historical context (Murphy, Chapter 13).

Improving/implementing pre-arrival orientation for host community members

A number of host community members also expressed a desire for either improving or implementing pre-arrival orientation sessions for themselves. For example, Duarte (Chapter 17) wrote about how often host communities are not included in lessons in foreign culture or language, included in excursions to sites within their own community, training on reflection, or potential to take positions of leadership. Murphy's respondents claimed that orientation sessions for local Haitians should promote dignity, that the students are not coming to solve your problems, and that the ISL students are "just like you" (Chapter 15).

In-country support for host community members

In addition to orientation and preparation sessions for both students and local community members, there is also the need to provide support for host community members during the ISL student internships. MacDonald and Vorstermans (Chapter 10) and Agudey and Deloughery

(Chapter 14) discuss Intercordia's ISL mentor system, in which an individual mentor provides not only supports for ISL students, but also acts as a liaison between ISL partner organizations and local host families. This appears to be a strong model upon which to base in-country support for local community members, especially when local partners on the ground are consulted about what kinds of supports they need.

ISL STANDARDS OF PRACTICE FRAMEWORKS

Most authors in this book, and indeed much of the literature in the field, agree that good intentions are not sufficient to ensure that all stakeholders are receiving equal benefit from ISL programs and even more importantly that no harm is being done. While chapters in Part II of the book offer valuable recommendations on how to improve ISL programs through principles such as interdependence, mutuality, and reciprocity, two authors present standards of practice frameworks: Eric Hartman's framework for ethical global partnership and Gonzalo Duarte's framework for reciprocal public benefit. Both strive to assist sending organizations, intermediaries, and host community partners in the implementation of programs that no longer reinforce the colonial distribution of power and benefit. The former offers principles, standards, and a rubric by which to gauge the quality of international education and service partnerships while the latter offers a means by which to make the subtle shift from programs that strive to achieve mutual private benefit, cooperation which favors the Northern participants; to ones with the potential to achieve reciprocal public benefit, collaboration which builds the capacity and agency of individuals and communities in all aspects of the partnership.

PARADIGM SHIFT

While the above strategies and standards of practice are important to consider in reforming ISL programs, those need to take place, as many of the authors in this book argue, within a broader paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1962) from our primary focus on students to the communities that host them. There is ample evidence of the highly problematic, damaging, neo-colonial consequences of sending North American students to learn through service to global South communities. In solidarity with individuals in these communities that work in ISL partner organizations, non-profit and private, host families, and all others that engage with ISL students in their daily lives, we suggest that there are alternative ways to research, reflect upon, and construct ISL programs. First, the center must shift from ISL students to the communities that host them. What happens when we shift the center and start our conversations about ISL with the community at the center? The significance of the service component of ISL is diminished, while the importance of developing relationships is privileged. This shift suggests possibilities for re-forming ISL lay in the relationships that we develop with one another and that our subjectivity is bound up with ethical relationships and responsibility for each Other.

ISL: A RELATIONAL APPROACH

We turn to the ideas of the French philosopher, Emmanuel Lévinas whose work is concerned with human subjectivity and is based on the ethics of the Other, which is understood to be a relation of infinite and unconditional responsibility to the Other. Lévinas does not try to understand what the subject is, but rather how subjectivity is formed in and through our subjection to the Other. He challenges Western philosophical ideas of the subject becoming human through consciousness; the subject concerned primarily with herself and only then, perhaps with the Other. Rather, Lévinas (1989a) argues that our subjectivity arises through encounters with the other and

that the subject is already engaged in a relationship “with the other ...right from the beginning!” (p. 206).

This is reflective of Salem Mohamed’s comment in Chapter 15: “Everything we do is about relationship”, which he makes when discussing the roles of ISL students and higher education partner institutions. For Lévinas, the Other may be a neighbor, colleague, or co-worker, but also those who are distant from one’s self. In this way, we can think of the ways in which host community members may consider the ISL students as the Other. Ethics derives from the experience of the encounter with the Other. Simon Critchley (2002), writing about Lévinas, explains what happens when our interactions are not underpinned by ethical relations to the Other: “then the worst might happen, that is, the failure to acknowledge the humanity of the other” (p. 13). And this we see evidenced throughout this book with examples of the damaging consequences of ISL students’ deeply embedded stereotypes about the Other, which prevented them from seeing the humanity of those who hosted them during their sojourns abroad.

In Chapter 8, Arends asks: “What does it mean then to be ‘right relationship’, especially between global North and South members in a post-colonial context?” Drawing upon Lévinas again, we might substitute the phrase ‘right relationship’ with ‘ethical relationship’. Key themes emerge through this book that address Arends’ question. These include notions such as collaboration, interdependence, mutuality, and reciprocity. Fostering ethical relationships also require humility and vulnerability in the face of the Other. This means acknowledging what we do not and cannot know. In Chapter 18, Larkin discusses this turning to the ideas of Sharon Todd who suggests that vulnerability is at the core of ethical relationships with the Other. Admitting what we don’t know, acknowledging our lack of certainty and vulnerability, “can be the beginning of trust” (Critchley, 2002, p. 26).

This notion of long-standing trust comes up repeatedly throughout the book as being crucial for engaging with the Other. What is essential for the development of trusting relationships are face-to-face encounters in which both the similarities (proximity) and differences (distance) of the Other are strongly felt. The Other, according to Lévinas (1969), “precisely reveals himself [sic] in his alterity not in a shock negating the I, but as the primordial phenomenon of gentleness” (p. 169). This helps us to understand why so many host community members in this book talk about the desire for the long-term physical presence of ISL students, as well as being able to speak the same language with them. Writing about the Nicaraguan context, Reynold and Gasparini (Chapter 3) suggest that relationships based on physical presence and shared austerity should be privileged over service projects. Other Nicaraguan participants in O’Sullivan and Smaller’s (Chapter 4) study, Ghanaian participants in MacDonald and Vorsterman’s study (Chapter 10), Murphy’s Haitian partners (Chapter 13), Agudey and Deloughery reflecting upon their ISL experiences in Ghana (Chapter 14), and Dear and Howard writing about interdependence in ISL relations (Chapter 12), all emphasize the importance of developing trusting, sustainable long-term relationships with ISL students and partner organizations. The chapters co-written by ISL partners from the global North and global South (e.g. Agudey and Deloughery; Baldwin, Mohamed and Tembe; Reynolds and Gasparini) are evidence of the potential of long-standing, trusting relationships.

Dear and Howard’s chapter on interdependence and ISL relationships is particularly important here. They suggest that the importance of long-term commitments between ISL partners reflects the belief in the relational conception of ISL. They turn to the Andean concept of Ayni, which like the African philosophy of Ubuntu that Larkin discusses in Chapter 18, is a continuous

cycle centered on interdependent relationships. This notion of interdependence also draws our attention to the relational dimension of ISL.

According to Lévinas, ethical relationships are formed through banal acts of civility, hospitality, kindness, and politeness. Such everyday acts are reflective of the phrase, “Après vous, Monsieur” [After you, Mister], which Simon Critchley (2002) claims sums up Lévinas’ whole philosophy. Hence, we hear throughout the book examples of host community members reflecting positively upon ordinary encounters with ISL students in their homes, over meals, outside in their community, and at night watching the stars together. Through such ordinary encounters, host community individuals in this book spoke about coming to understand the common humanity of the Other. However, it is not simply that the individual comes to know the Other, but that the individual’s own subjectivity arises. This is a key point in Lévinas’ philosophy and alerts us to the ways in which subjectivity arises in ALL who engage in fostering ethical relationships, students, hosts, and staff in partner organizations and institutions. In this respect, the Other is all of us.

This is never an easy process as many authors in this book point out, and the idea of focusing on relationships is not one shared amongst all host community members. As participants in Toms Smedley’s chapter point out, ISL is not about building relationships, but about building economic opportunity. In resource poor communities, we cannot neglect to understand the importance of bringing in money and other material resources. However, ISL does not need to become a choice between addressing the material and resource needs of host communities and the development of ethical relationships. Indeed, being attentive to the material needs of the communities that host ISL students can be considered a manifestation of our responsibility to the Other.

Ethics, as Lévinas asserts, is a relationship of unconditional and infinite responsibility for the Other (and even for his/her responsibility). Gert Biesta, who draws upon Lévinas’s work in his discussion of education as a creative act, explains how the subject acquires meaning through an encounter, which constitutes the relationship of responsibility. The relationship that develops is an ethical one, “of infinite and unconditional responsibility for the Other” (Biesta, 2013, p. 19). This, Biesta (2013) asserts is a new theory of subjectivity that claims that the subject is a “being endowed with certain moral qualities, capacities, or response-abilities” (p. 20). We are urged then to understand subjectivity in terms of being made responsible and taking up one’s responsibility, as well as recognizing the responsibility that Others have taken for us.

Responsibility is not just what we do, but an unbounded and total responsibility for the Other. As Lévinas (1989b) explains, “My responsibility for the other man...extend[s]...even to responsibility for his responsibility” (p. 245). Responsibility “is not a debt that can be limited by the extent of one’s active commitment, for one can acquit oneself of the debt of that sort, whereas, unless we compromise our thought, we can never be clear of our debts to the Other. It is an infinite responsibility, a responsibility which does not suit my wishes: the responsibility of a hostage” (Lévinas (1989a, p. 206). Transcendental responsibility, which according to Lévinas (1996) “is only possible when the Other (Autrui) is not initially the fellow human being or the neighbour; but when it is the very distant, when it is Other, when it is the one with whom initially I have nothing in common” (p. 27).

When asked in an interview what he meant by responsibility, Lévinas responded, “The other concerns me in all his material misery. It is a matter, eventually, of nourishing him, of clothing him” (Quoted in Robbins, 2001, p. 52). This conception of responsibility which positions

the one to whom we are to be responsible as being poor and marginalized is reflective of liberal humanist perspectives, in which responsibility is interpreted from the center in terms of the agency of a privileged few towards distant others. This idea of responsibility has underpinned the colonial enterprise and contemporary neo-colonial development practices whereby those in the global South have been placed outside of the possibilities of responsibility (Noxolo, Raghuan & Madge, 2012). Moreover, it does not account for responsibility that the marginalized may feel towards those considered more privileged, such as the deep sense of responsibility that host families felt towards some of the ISL students living in their homes.

Post-colonial theorists have problematized this kind of top-down, unilinear idea of responsibility towards distant others that focuses on individual responsibility, rather than collective action. Doreen Massey (2004), for example, draws our attention to the political implications of “power-geometries” within which responsibility in an unequal global world is played out. Gayatri Spivak (2008) has also argued that responsibility and accountability are always bound up in asymmetrical processes and that responsible action is never outside of these inequalities. There are implications of this for well-meaning ISL students (and program facilitators) that talk about responsibility while the conditions that allow them do so are complicit in exploitative relationships.

Others working from within the post-colonial paradigm advance a more nuanced, context-driven analysis of responsibility that focuses on the contested and complicated relations of responsibility. Building on the work of Spivak and other post-colonial theorists, Noxolo et al (2012), suggest that we need to recognize that responsibility can be risky and enigmatic. Making ourselves responsible involves being open and vulnerable to those aspects of the Other that are not shared or which make us uncomfortable. Furthermore, being responsible means accepting the idea that those to whom we desire to be responsible may refuse to accept our responsibility. As Noxolo et al. (2012) explain, we need to think about responsibility:

in terms of a goal of answerability, i.e. being vulnerable to questioning...[I]t is also about being open to listening for what may be unexpected, painful or confusing questions from an ‘other’ who may not only ‘call’, but may (or may not also accuse, demand, interrogate or refuse dialogue in our terms, laying down terms of their own. (p. 425)

Thus, rather than abandoning the idea of responsibility in the process of developing ethical ISL relationships, we need to accept that responsibility to the Other exists within a profoundly uneven, post-colonial world. These are salient ideas for moving forward in re-envisioning ISL practices. ISL students, practitioner/facilitators, researchers, and host community members need to work collaboratively to ensure that our pedagogies and related practices provide opportunities for ethical engagement with one another. We need to be open to the possibility of our subjectivity emerging through situations in which we take responsibility for and with the Other, who may be each and every one of us. We (in the global North) are complicit in power-laden relationships of responsibility centered on the unfounded belief that we can ‘save the world’ through service. What is necessary is a recognition of this and that our commitment to responsibility within ethical ISL relationships involves complexities, risks, and a humble acknowledgement of our own individual fragility and vulnerability.

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