

# Transformational Education through Intercultural Service Learning Immersions

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## INTRODUCTION

In our rapidly changing world, ministerial graduates need to be equipped to respond sensitively to diverse contexts. The challenges they will face necessitate the capacity to adapt and contextualise ministry and theology in a relationally focused way. Theological educators are searching for capstone events and units that will maximise formation and enable ministerial students to find their ministerial identity and style. Deep learning that is transformational will better prepare ministerial graduates for the contemporary challenges.

The selection of relevant and “fit for purpose” learning outcomes is guiding the shape of the formative experience at many theological seminaries. The contemporary context requires that cultural awareness and intercultural capacities be included in course outcomes. Avondale College, New South Wales, Australia, prepares eighty-five to ninety-five ministerial students in two degree programmes each year and has built these foci into their

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*Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry*

ISSN 2325-2847 (print)\* ISSN 2325-2855 (online)

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graduate outcomes as well as including the developmental and growth areas of personal and spiritual development, professional and pastoral sensitivity, and passionate and authentic spirituality.<sup>1</sup>

Avondale has found that intercultural service learning, where reflection is added as an integral facet of learning, provides the desired positive learning outcomes. We have trialled the use of intercultural service learning with selected ministerial students over the last three years to maximise the spiritual and professional formation of our ministerial students.<sup>2</sup> This intensive experience was designed as a “hothouse” of ministry development that could enable ministerial students to deepen their sense of calling and readiness for full-time ministry. Avondale modelled its intercultural service learning on its highly publicised international short-term service of nurses that has achieved significant outcomes for more than twenty-five years.<sup>3</sup> Avondale’s immersion of selected ministerial students in Fiji, the Solomon Islands, and Malaysia for eighteen days of service has now operated for three years and has included twenty-seven ministerial students. Local cultural spiritual leaders determine the type of ministry in which our students are engaged. This has included the equipping of church members for service, the discipling of youth in local churches, and the preaching of Jesus to the community and the church.

On a continuum from service through reflective immersion, Avondale has chosen to prioritise service in order to build ministerial skills through professional practice. However, each year we have increased the amount of reflection in order to deepen student learning. We have progressively added more opportunities for ministerial students to reflect as they serve and learn. In 2014 we added a time for students to come together, one month after their return, to share their overseas learning with other ministerial students. This enables deeper reflection, greater retention of mutual memories, and the vocalisation of the impact of the experiential learning.

Avondale has found that the ministry opportunities for service learning in an overseas context stretch our ministerial students’ communication and relational skills, requiring them to solve multiple problems by adjusting their attitudes, approaches, and ministry skills. The new context provides opportunities for learning not available in the classroom. Students say that they gain new insights into their classroom learning and into their style and attitudes toward others that now form part of their own ministry calling and formation. As a capstone event to their field education experience, it has ma-

tured their identity as ministers wanting to serve others with compassion and sensitivity.

Creators of intercultural service learning immersions that are truly transformational can be guided by models of learning and research that analyse the impact upon students of previous international and intercultural learning opportunities. We turn now to this framework.

### INFORMING THE DESIGN OF TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING

Capstone events for ministerial students should maximise personal and ministerial formation and transformative learning. Meizerow urges educators to facilitate transformative learning by helping learners “become aware and critical of their own and others’ assumptions.”<sup>4</sup> He suggests that imaginative problem-solving, participatory and interactive learning, group deliberation and group problem-solving, and participation in small group discussion to assess the reasons and to examine the evidence and arrive at reflective judgement are all factors that contribute to transformative learning.<sup>5</sup> Bamber and Hankin continue this thought:

Similarly, immersion in a SL [service-learning] context may act to challenge stereotypes and personal values as well as expose participants to surprising information that contradicts their previously accepted presuppositions. Through critical reflection the ministerial students undergo a process of “defamiliarisation” whereby they “break with the taken-for-granted and set the familiar aside.”<sup>6</sup>

Tortorici and Gale<sup>7</sup> have studied the impact of their short-term Mission Immersion Experiences for Wesley seminary students and for thirty-three other seminaries across North America. They have been informed by Meizerow’s and Deardorff’s models outlining the requisite skills needed for the development of intercultural competencies. These skills are respect, openness to learning, curiosity, and discovery. Deardorff points to the skills of listening, observing, evaluating, and relating based upon these attitudes. Informing and interacting with these skills are the individual’s knowledge, comprehension, and cultural self-awareness combined with a deep understanding of the knowledge of the new culture and worldview. When these are in place, the desired internal outcomes will be adaptability, flexibility, and empathy. The students’ communications will be effective and appropriate, and they will achieve their goals to some degree.<sup>8</sup>

As intercultural contexts supply ample opportunities for this learning, it is clear why Tortoric and Gale's research on student formation has been so positive. Intercultural learning involves a large amount of discovery as ministerial students solve and reassess their intercultural communications and relationships.

Furthermore, the recent study by Zimmerman and Neyer explores the nature of the personal growth enjoyed by students experiencing long-term international education.<sup>9</sup> In his "Trends and Insight Report," McGourty summarises Zimmerman and Neyer's 2013 findings:

After study abroad, students indeed show more accelerated development in some of psychology's standard "Big Five" personality traits—*openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism*—and that is a refreshing insight into the "transformational experience" so often talked about in the field.<sup>10</sup>

Although the data refers to students who have spent at least five months on an international sojourn, it is clear that the socialisation in new international relationships is that which most affects personality development. The Zimmerman and Neyer study is especially helpful in detailing the differences formed in students from the longer stay of thirteen months. These data show their intercultural experience has even an even greater impact; these students achieve a level of mastery not available to those who only stayed for five months.

The usual seminary immersions of three weeks or less have not been studied by Zimmerman and Neyer. Anthropologists have labelled shorter stays as being inadequate to move participants beyond the "tourist perspective." Culture shock comes to those who stay six months or more.

So, short eighteen-day Ministry Immersion Experiences cannot provide an opportunity for a high level of intercultural mastery and transformation. Shorter-term immersions can, however, provide opportunities for students to enjoy new experiences and socialisation. They can open the door to new experiences and learning and begin the lifelong journey of adapting ones' relationships and communications to diverse contexts. More research needs to focus upon the impact of quality conversations with peers and local people while students are in a short-term cultural immersion.

Service learning research can also inform the design of Avondale's intercultural ministry opportunities. Bamber and Hankin's research shows the advantage of service learning for personal transformation. Their design of service learning experiences within the United Kingdom has realised "some

unexpected learning outcomes."<sup>11</sup> They describe the development of values and attitudes that include changes to students' perspectives:

Furthermore, it has been argued that citizenship education should help students develop skills of prospective consciousness in a globalised world: they learn to, "approach judgements and decision-making with open-mindedness, anticipation of complexity and resistance to stereotyping."<sup>12</sup>

Bamber and Hankin continue:

Immersion in a SL [service-learning] context . . . seeks to transform students' perspectives through action learning, where they face a dilemma they must resolve: how to communicate world issues to younger people. Essentially, it turns on them being forced to take responsibility for their own learning rather than "banking" education mediated to them by others.<sup>13</sup>

Moon's comprehensive work on learning journals<sup>14</sup> provides an additional rationale for the extension of the reflection component of service learning in an intercultural context.

Writing a journal enables a learner to go back over material that she has learned and expand the ideas or the linkages between ideas in relation to the original learning, explore internal experience (the sum of prior experiences), the way in which external experiences relates to internal experience, how the "meaning" of an event or an object to one person is related to that meaning for the writer—and so on.<sup>15</sup>

Moon explores how journals enhance students learning and reflection.<sup>16</sup> The exercises in learning from journals<sup>17</sup> and the variety of styles of learning journals enables a diversity of learning styles to use their creativity and own their learning.

So, the design of a capstone event that maximises student learning will include service learning in an intercultural context where opportunities for social interaction maximise personal transformation and reflection will deepen the learning and insight for students. Learning journals will deepen reflective practice and personal development. Students will need to actively problem solve, seek new learning, and apply previous learning in a new context. Outside of the classroom they can experience a global education that can equip them for a global ministry.

## HOW AVONDALE ORGANIZES ITS INTERCULTURAL SERVICE LEARNING IMMERSIONS

Ministerial students who have completed at least three semesters of field education through Avondale are sent in pairs to serve in selected local areas within an overseas island country. They are assigned to a local pastor and a team of church members who care for the students, working with them and selecting ministry tasks for them. These local leaders model ministry, spirituality, and leadership. Their interactions with our students have proved mutually beneficial, and our students have modified their social interactions and ministry on the basis of the feedback they have received from this nurturing group of leaders. Our ministerial students eat, work, and pray with these teams, learning how best to engage with the local people. Students are often used by the local teams to preach to the church and/or community. Students are supported and encouraged by an Avondale coordinator who travels with them.

### HOW WE CONDUCTED THE RESEARCH

The following data reflect the combined responses from the three cohorts totalling twenty-seven students. Each student that returns from an intercultural experience responds to eighty-one questions that intentionally measure their achievement of deeper spirituality and transformational learning, maturation of their views on their readiness for ministry, their sense of calling, and any growth in their ministerial identity. We also measure any improvement in the student's commitment to mission and their awareness of growth in various ministry skills. For the last two years, we have collected data on their awareness of personal growth and changes in their perspectives.

In 2014, students also completed several reflection instruments and a reflection paper to provide further opportunities for their learning. Each student in 2014 was also debriefed in an individual interview, and students met together to debrief and share their learning with the other team members. Transcripts of these interviews and group sharing have been analysed to discover consistent themes related to student learning.

## MINISTERIAL STUDENTS' RESPONSES

*Personal Development*

Students' responses underscore the personal development that occurred outside of the classroom setting. These include:

"This was an incredible experience that really helped me learn about myself when thrown into the deep end of ministry."

"It was life changing."

"I need to be more honest with myself and build processing systems and boundaries that help me evaluate my actions and thoughts in dealing with others, ministry and myself."

"I found strengths that I did not know I possessed. . . . God was revealing things to me about my personality that I'm not sure why I did not see back home. . . . The trip helped me to place priorities."

There have been consistent personal changes in students' perspectives and self-awareness in each of the three cohorts. Students have rated this experience as being worthy of inclusion for every student in our bachelor of ministry and theology programme. The partnering with other students and with ministry teams from within a new culture have all been opportunities for improved student learning and personal growth. The hothouse of ministry in an intercultural setting does provide time and opportunity for personal maturation and changes in values and priorities. Students speak of a "new sense of responsibility" and a need to adjust "their view of others."

*Intercultural Development*

The growth of intercultural skills by our students is limited by the brevity of their stay. However, we have opened the door for students to intentionally seek intercultural learning, see the importance of learning the local languages, and to become sensitive in their ministry by adapting as directed by the context and the local people.

Students' responses from the 2014 trip to Malaysia include:

"When I got to know the village family more it just made the whole experience complete. I felt like I met my long lost family far far away. I felt

at home with the local church. . . . The villages and the churches were all happy that I ate their food. I understood from when I was a little boy that food was the language of love. I ate their food freely in order to gain their favour so that I can share with them the gospel for Jesus."

"It is equally important to connect with the local hosts and follow their direction and advice when ministering in a cross-cultural context. I know that I need to be more adaptable to situations over which I have no control and to allow God to work in spite of these circumstances."

"I have learnt that our Ministry needs to be sensitive to culture."

"The people were all so loving. They were just so grateful for us to be there, and appreciated any personal interaction we did with them."

### *Spiritual Development*

We have measured the impact of the intercultural mission experience upon students' spirituality by asking them if this experience caused growth in their prayer life, their trust in God, their closeness to God, and the impact upon them as they watched the Holy Spirit work in the lives of others. Students' spirituality has grown in all these areas as a result of their intercultural ministry. Student responses include:

"We all felt spiritually ignorant. None of us have seen this (prayer commitment) in Australia."

"Fiji (2012) has not only been memorable, but has allowed me to wrestle with God over the weaknesses in my life."

"I have been stretched in every sense of the phrase. My dedication to my faith has been stretched and challenged; the experience of love for another has been deepened to a new level. My emotions have been subject to an unending rise for as we see new challenges and walk by faith, willing to live with the unexpected. . . . Never in all my days have I been a witness to the direct and obvious power of God, remodelling the lives of people. My very eyes that have the privilege to see so many lives throw themselves into the arms of the living God. . . . My body has shuddered at being in the presence of God Almighty as he moved and has spoken through the lives of others."



"I learned that the power of prayer cannot be ignored, cannot be treated superficially, and that the more prayer is present in the life of the church, the better."

"This experience and many others showed me once again that we serve a God, who blesses us more than we deserve."

"There were times that the stress almost seemed overwhelming, but I found that when leaning heavily on God, and sharing my stresses with peers, I was able to deal with it and push through."

"Despite my own misgivings on this, God showed me very powerfully that he had it all under control and that I was exactly where I needed to be. . . God has taught me to roll with the unexpected and trust him in situations that I feel I'm completely out of my depth."

### *Professional Skills*

Avondale's service learning in these intercultural contexts enables students to explore their skills in a safe setting and in a setting that stretches their abilities and attitudes. Avondale has also looked at various professional skills that have been honed in this hothouse experience of service.

"I saw issues of human trafficking, genocide, people forced or strongly persuaded to join in the state religion, child abuse etc. If this something God wants me to explore for my ministry I certainly would like to help in any way if I can."

"This is where theory became real."

"I really learnt the value of good preparation and knowing your audience as well as the major issue of their culture."

"The value of building relationships and loving people was really enforced on this trip as I don't believe we would have been half as effective if we haven't really worked hard on fostering relationships with a lot of people there."

"I am not accustomed to working with teams and at times I found it challenging."

### *Readiness for Ministry*

Avondale is indebted to the many pastoral mentors in these overseas cultures for the impact they have had upon our students. Their modelling of just-in-time learning has equipped our students. The positive responses of students are clearly evident.

"I experienced guiding in my sermons to say things that weren't scripted, to remember things that weren't rehearsed, and to have the right things to say when answering questions and in conversations with audience members."

"The major thing that I've learnt from all of this is not to limit myself to what I think is possible for what I think I can do. God is so much bigger and this planet so much bigger than what I could ever possibly see. Despite my misgivings, God showed me very powerfully that he had it all under control and I was exactly where I needed to be."

"I also believe that my ability to reach and relate to new groups of people, and to discuss spiritual issues with them, has been enhanced by my cross-cultural experience."

"I also learned the importance of leaning on God through prayer in the series. There were so many supernatural things that could only have happened as a result of prayer."

## REFLECTIVE LEARNING BY STUDENTS

After three years we have seen some weaknesses in our intercultural service learning. The students are clear that they have insufficient time to fully reflect and process all their new learning. In addition, there have been times when students have been so busy simply "doing ministry" that their tiredness has affected them. The addition of long travel times combined with long periods of service and the need to form new relationships has emotionally and physically drained some of the students. However, they have thoroughly enjoyed being used by God and seeing the Holy Spirit work in peo-

ple's lives and this has encouraged them to recommend that future students have a similar experience. The positive results of them practising their ministerial skills in another culture have resulted in such important outcomes that with minor adjustments, Avondale believes their intercultural service learning programme should continue for all its graduating students in 2015 and 2016.

### AREAS FOR FUTURE STUDY

What is it about the experience of serving God overseas that creates an impact? The study by Zimmerman and Neyer indicates that the major impact in longer overseas stays comes from socialisation with people holding diverse worldviews. Avondale has not been sufficiently researching the impact upon our ministerial students of the local people and leaders. Instruments that more adequately measure this influence need to be created.

Avondale needs to explore how more of the multicultural elements within the classroom can be maximised, as Deardorff suggests. This would further the cultural competency of Avondale's ministerial students without additional expense. This resource has been largely underexplored. In addition, after three years Avondale can now refine and expand its goals and processes more intelligently as informed by its research and the research of Deardorff, Meizirow, Zimmerman and Neyer, and Bamber and Hankin. Moon's definitive work on Learning Journals provides rationale and insight into the extension of our students' learning. Carefully designed and individually friendly instruments and processes need to be created to further enrich student-centred learning.

Given the relatively short timeframe of our intercultural experiences, Avondale needs to be more realistic in its expectations of the depth of students' learning of intercultural skills. The constantly challenging assignments of day-to-day ministry, hour after hour, that our students enjoy on these overseas service learning experiences provide opportunities for the student to test their style and develop new ways of approaching questions, ministry, and communications. The experiences provide students with a new context that highlights for them the need to prioritise their time and energy in ministry.

## CONCLUSION

The intercultural ministry context requires Avondale College ministerial students to self-direct their learning and make their own adaptations. Their previous attitudes, knowledge, and skills are seen by them to be inadequate for successful communication in the new context. They have clamoured for new insights to help them engage the surprises of the new culture. Continued discussion within their teams has enabled reflection and change to their previous frames of reference in relation to intercultural attitudes and skills. Students who have been open to and aware of their need for new learning have grown personally and professionally in this new context. They are better equipped to go on to succeed in new contexts in their future professional lives.

## NOTES

1. Avondale is a Seventh-day Adventist Seminary that offers a bachelor's degree in ministry and theology and a two-year graduate diploma in ministry and theology. It also offers masters and doctoral degrees.
2. Students who apply are prioritised on their communication abilities and intercultural experience. Four students in three years have been not been sent because of Avondale's financial constraints.
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9. Julie Zimmermann and Franz J. Neyer, "Do We Become a Different Person When Hitting the Road? Personality Development of Sojourners," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 105, no. 3 (2013): 515–30.
10. Richard McGourty, "Does Study Abroad Accelerate Personal Growth?" in *NAFSA: Association of International Educators* (April 2014), accessed June 26, 2014, [http://www.nafsa.org/Explore\\_International\\_Education/Trends/TI/Does\\_Study\\_Abroad\\_Accelerate\\_Personal\\_Growth/](http://www.nafsa.org/Explore_International_Education/Trends/TI/Does_Study_Abroad_Accelerate_Personal_Growth/)
11. Bamber and Hankin, "Transformative Learning through Service Learning," 194.
12. Ibid. and Merrifield, M. and Duty, L. (2008), "Globalisation", in Davies, I. and Hahn, C. (Eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Education for Citizenship and Democracy*, SAGE, London. pp 87–88.
13. Ibid., 194–95.
14. Jennifer A. Moon, *Learning Journals: A Handbook for Reflective Practice and Professional Development*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2006).
15. Moon, *Learning Journals*, 24.
16. Ibid., 26–43.
17. Ibid., 159–81.