

**O'Sullivan, M., & Smaller, H. (2023).
*Decolonizing international service learning:
Pre- and post-COVID perspectives.*
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With global travel fully restored, international study and service-learning programs have resumed. *Decolonizing International Service Learning: Pre- and Post-COVID Perspectives* by O'Sullivan and Smaller presents timely and insightful perspectives on International Service Learning (ISL) that warrant consideration before ISL program planning. Based on the authors' decade-long research in ISL, this book has nine comprehensive chapters spanning 157 pages. O'Sullivan and Smaller explore ISL in depth, draw from evidence-based research, and make a compelling argument for decolonizing ISL.

The book follows a clear organizational structure. O'Sullivan and Smaller begin by examining historical and colonial aspects of ISL programs. They proceed to outline their research methodology, present the findings from their research, and discuss the impact of COVID on ISL. They conclude by offering perspectives on decolonizing ISL programs. Within each chapter, O'Sullivan and Smaller embed current literature and draw directly from their research, allowing readers to hear authentic voices shaped by their experiences with ISL. Also, throughout the book, the authors provide numerous thought-provoking concepts and questions about ISL, advocating readers—particularly those involved in ISL—to examine one's past and future ISL involvement thoroughly and critically. One main aim of the book was to understand and then pivot away from neocolonial dominating ISL models towards decolonizing ones.

Chapter 1 delivers an accurate and comprehensive overview of the history of service learning, providing specific references to highlight critiques and tensions associated with past (or traditional) service learning. It starts with a quote that sets the tone for the entire book: “[service learning] has the capacity to exacerbate inequality when done poorly, and to be a promising equalizing force when done well” (Grain & Lund, 2018, p. 3). This chapter, as with the rest of the book, revolves around unpacking this statement. Its relevance lies in illuminating the colonizing effects on of perpetuating neoliberal perspectives within ISL, which are usually unexamined, on ISL host communities.

Chapter 2 presents an outline of the authors' research methodology. O'Sullivan and Smaller detail their ISL involvement in a Nicaraguan village, explain how they selected the research participants, describe the location of the ISL program, and explain the research process and plan. The next three chapters delineate the authors' research findings from distinct experiences and viewpoints, which begin with the characteristics of the villagers or host families, followed by insights from program leaders, and conclude with the perspectives of a village that said ‘no’ to hosting ISL programs.

Chapter 3 offers insight into the experiences and viewpoints of the host community regarding the impact of ISL programs. Guided by their research, O'Sullivan and Smaller provide perspectives from host

families and the community, exploring the reasons behind hosting visitors and the associated benefits. The findings are positive, with participants highlighting contributions that brought about favorable impacts, including changes to the community and improvements in social and personal relations. The ISL participants also supported organizing ISL programs, emphasizing the authenticity of their experiences. Chapter 4 presents readers with the experiences and viewpoints of program leaders affiliated with different non-governmental organizations. The program leaders, who were mostly from Nicaragua, raised significant concerns about the benefits and dependencies stemming from ISL programs. These concerns encompass the timing of trips, the motivations guiding hosting and participant selection, the financial incentives for host families and the community, the impact on women within the community, the visitors' practice of giving gifts, and the resulting social and emotional effects on the host community. These factors could foster dependency among communities hosting ISL programs.

Chapter 5 acquaints readers with an alternate perspective from a village that said 'no' to ISL and discontinued its long-established hosting of ISL programs from the Global North. The discussions in this section are linked to viewpoints the program leaders expressed in the preceding chapter, shedding light on the persistent presence of a dominant neoliberal ideology within ISL programs. O'Sullivan and Smaller emphasize the significance of insights gathered from this community that discontinued ISL participation, reiterating the need for ISL programs to adopt a more transformative approach. The authors advocate for "an authentic shift, urging programs to be rooted in mutual solidarity and internationalism rather than charity and neocolonialism" (p. 89). Leveraging the response of this community, the authors continue to probe how ISL programs can be reconceptualized to offer participants a transformative experience. They introduce the pedagogy of place as a framework to explore this question. However, they acknowledge the challenge of altering deeply ingrained beliefs and values associated with the traditional notions of 'helping.' An excerpt from Andretti (2016) encapsulates the primary issue with ISL perspectives: "unconscious desires and (humanitarian) fantasies shape our thoughts and actions as modern subjects: we may not fully comprehend our vested interests in [ISL], global citizenship, or international development" (p. 104).

Chapter 6 details the outcomes of the authors' *encuentro*, a distinctive assembly comprising 27 delegates representing four villages engaged in a comprehensive three-day event. The structure and planning of this gathering offer valuable insights for readers interested in organizing similar research-based meetings involving ISL hosts and program leaders. The authors suggest the findings from the *encuentro* present a more critical perspective compared to their prior research described as a "sanitized version of ISL programs" (p. 107). Criticisms include the visitors' disregard for local protocols, the pressure on host communities to accept ISL programs without consultation, insufficient post-trip communication, and gender-related workload disparities. A pivotal insight from the *encuentro* highlights the significance of comprehensive planning and decision-making processes before and during visits to foster genuine expectations. ISL participants should know more about their host communities before travel such as gaining knowledge and respect for cultural norms and ways of life. Moreover, participants should be aware of broader historical colonization practices that have shaped the hosts' lives.

O'Sullivan and Smaller emphasize the imperative to avoid the neocolonial pitfall of perceiving ISL as a means 'to help the poor'. They advocate that the purpose of ISL should "revolve around respectfully learning from host communities, acknowledging their strengths, resilience, and determination rather than engaging in acts of charity (pp. 108–109). This chapter poses critical questions about the ties of ISL to charity, aid, and dependency creation that serve as a way forward in its reorganization and planning. In essence, ISL programs emerge as a potentially beneficial and detrimental paradox, and this conclusion echoes the quoted text from Grain and Lund (2018) at the beginning of the book. Ultimately, changes rest upon everyone involved in ISL programs.

Chapter 7 explores the impact of COVID-19 on existing ISL programs. While the pandemic significantly disrupted ISL programs by halting travel, it also prompted a deeper contemplation of current methods and potential alternatives. A notable outcome was exploring whether exchange opportunities could exist without physical travel, mainly through virtual means, which has led to examining the advantages and disadvantages of past ISL practices. This section discusses "the prevailing top-down decision-making approach in ISL programs, often dominated by Northern perspectives" (p. 116), concluding that it is problematic. According to O'Sullivan and Smaller, the pandemic offered a space for "reimagining the field, emphasizing the necessity to decolonize both the ideology and practices within ISL

programs” (p. 124). This conclusion paves the way for the next chapter.

In Chapter 8, the authors discuss decolonizing ISL practices and emphasize the need to pursue equitable relationships despite having different yet shared outcomes. O’Sullivan and Smaller propose “to foster a relationship between two communities [ISL programs and participants and the host communities] benefiting equally from mutually agreed-upon, albeit undoubtedly different, but shared experiences” (p. 127). In this section, the authors scrutinize past practices perpetuating dominant colonial ideologies within ISL programs, stressing the significance of acknowledging one’s positionality as a starting point for decolonization. To achieve this, they propose steps that include establishing a clear anti-colonial vision, challenging participant assumptions through heightened consciousness, and fostering a less superficial engagement with global citizenship among program leaders and participants.

The discussion moves toward the fundamental principles essential for decolonizing ISL. Central to this is cultivating partnerships and relationships, prompting sending institutions and organizations to re-evaluate their recruitment strategies to move away from the charity-based ‘helping the poor’ model that merely satisfies participants’ gratification and potentially fostering host dependency. Instead, O’Sullivan and Smaller advocate for a shift toward learning experiences that offer participants “the opportunity to be exposed to an analysis that is intellectually stimulating and personally transformative” (p. 142) within a decolonial framework.

In Chapter 9, the authors conclude by highlighting that decolonizing ISL involves time-intensive efforts to unlearn, relearn, and reconstruct program practices and to transform participant recruitment approaches moving away from the dominant neocolonial ideology of ‘helping the poor.’ The focus should shift toward “a service model offering all participants intellectually stimulating and personally transformative opportunities through a decolonial learning context” (p. 142).

Overall, this informative and engaging book will help readers reflect on their own experiences in ISL or assess their capacity to be involved in ISL. It will especially benefit those who are currently engaged in ISL activities or contemplating implementing ISL programs within their organization. Moreover, the ISL concepts and arguments tackled in the book can easily be applied to various learning environments, offering a path away from dominant neocolonial service learning toward a decolonized approach.

Decolonizing International Service Learning: Pre- and Post-COVID Perspectives raises points and provides insights that resonate with my own experiences as an ISL program leader. To further decolonize ISL, I suggest shifting the focus from partnership to *ownership*. When host communities own their ISL programs, they are empowered to determine program processes and procedures while requiring compliance from participants in the Global North. However, this approach presents a significant challenge in aligning the expectations and schedules of those in the Global North with those of the host communities. Further research on ISL programs, especially on the theme of decolonization, will help identify solutions to such challenges.

Much like any compelling book, this resource from O’Sullivan and Smaller leaves readers keen on learning more. I am eager to become versed about decolonizing ISL programs and to gain more insight into the perspectives of ISL program participants and the critical role program leaders play in guiding decolonizing efforts. The authors’ assertion that decolonizing ISL depends on the participants’ dedication and motivation made the absence of participant narratives noticeable, as the latter are pivotal in understanding the past and future outcomes of ISL.

Reflecting on my own ISL experiences, I pondered several points. First, regarding the age of ISL participants (e.g., 16 to 18), how might their limited life experiences influence their grasp of the historical depth and complex concepts central to understanding power dynamics, colonization, and decolonizing efforts? Second, what level of being uncomfortable would participants be willing to endure in the learning process? I also questioned the significant influence of program leaders and wondered about the potential consequences should they operate within a non-decolonizing framework. Considering the authors’ insights on social and emotional interactions, especially the alternative communication methods during COVID-19, would raising expectations for a higher level of commitment from participants (before, during, and after the program) redirect the narrative away from the ‘savior complex’ often associated with ISL toward a more genuine and potentially decolonized engagement? For example, prerequisites such as a foundational understanding of the host language or a comprehensive course on the history of the ISL region might reshape perspectives, fostering a more nuanced understanding of colonization,

power dynamics, and the challenging process of unlearning deeply rooted colonial beliefs and values. These lingering questions make me anticipate the possibility of an insightful sequel dedicated to exploring and presenting research findings on tested decolonizing ISL practices.

References

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