



The Transformative Potential of Service-Learning in an African Religious Context

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The Transformative Potential of Service-Learning in an African Religious Context

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Critical reflection is essential for achieving desired service-learning outcomes, including transformative learning, as developed by Mezirow (2000). However, critiques of Mezirow's theory, particularly its focus on the individual learner and prizing of autonomy, raise questions about the relevance of a transformative learning framework for service-learning in diverse global contexts. This article describes a case study of an online service-learning program that resulted in transformative learning for students in East Africa. We offer a method of practical theological reflection that promotes individual and communal reflective praxis. This method contributed to students' transformative learning outcomes as realized in collective action for sustainable development. Rooted in Christian religious education scholarship, the method is adaptable to service-learning curricula informed by other or non-religious traditions and in non-Western communities. We invite educators to adapt this method to other sociocultural contexts and encourage further research to track longitudinal outcomes of collective action inspired by service-learning.

Keywords: *service-learning; critical reflection; Catholic social teaching; sustainable development goals; transformative learning*

El Potencial Transformador del Aprendizaje-Servicio Comunitario en un Contexto Religioso Africano

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La reflexión crítica es esencial para lograr resultados en el campo del aprendizaje-servicio, que incluye el "aprendizaje transformador" descrito por Mezirow (2000). Sin embargo, las críticas a la teoría de Mezirow, en particular su enfoque en el alumno individual y la valoración de la autonomía, plantean preguntas sobre la relevancia de un marco de aprendizaje transformador para el aprendizaje-servicio en diversos contextos globales. Este artículo describe un estudio de caso de un programa de aprendizaje de servicio en línea que resultó en un aprendizaje transformador para estudiantes en África Oriental. Se trata de un método de reflexión teológica práctica que promueve la praxis reflexiva individual y comunitaria y que tuvo como resultado un aprendizaje transformador de los estudiantes que se materializó en acción colectiva para el desarrollo sostenible. Aunque tiene sus raíces en la educación religiosa cristiana, este método es adaptable a currículos de aprendizaje-servicio en otras tradiciones, incluidas otras tradiciones religiosas, así como en comunidades no occidentales. Invitamos a los educadores a adaptar este método a otros contextos socioculturales y fomentamos más investigaciones en este ámbito para rastrear los resultados de la acción colectiva inspirada en el aprendizaje-servicio.

Palabras clave: *aprendizaje-servicio; reflexión crítica; enseñanza social católica; metas de desarrollo sostenible; aprendizaje transformador*

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Scholars of service-learning have reached consensus that guided reflection is critical for achieving authentic and transformative outcomes for students as well as communities served (e.g., Perry & Martin, 2016). Yet, questions remain as to the efficacy of particular reflection practices and the appropriateness of transformative learning goals for service-learning in diverse global contexts. This article argues that insights from the field of religious education, specifically arising from the Christian tradition, can apply to and enhance efforts at facilitating reflection and transformative learning in service-learning courses in non-Western contexts.

Indeed, the Loyola Institute for Ministry (LIM) has applied what it calls practical theological reflection in international settings for over three decades, and to international service-learning courses for the past decade (Loyola Institute for Ministry, 2021a). This article describes LIM's unique reflective model, adapted from the work of Lonergan (1978), and how it was applied to the design and delivery of a sequence of four online, asynchronous courses leading to a certificate in Catholic Social Teaching. Through a grant from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, LIM collaborated with congregations in East Africa to enroll 36 Catholic sisters in the online certificate program. The coursework culminated with students leading workshops addressing local needs in partnership with their communities.

We begin by reviewing literature exploring the relevance and efficacy of reflective practices and transformative learning for service-learning courses. We then describe LIM's unique approach to facilitating reflection among students, and how it can fill a gap by suggesting promising approaches for guiding students towards authentic and transformative service-learning experiences, for themselves and their communities, in non-Western contexts that embrace spirituality. We then present a case study of LIM's recent "Catholic Sisters in Partnership for Sustainability" project, and its application of LIM's reflective methodology and the outcomes achieved. We conclude with suggestions, drawn from LIM's experience, for how others can enhance international service-learning education and scholarship.

Reflective Service-Learning for Transformation

Service-learning has been broadly defined as:

[A] course-based, credit bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs, and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility. (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009, p. 112, quoted in Robinson et al., 2019, p. 68).

Reflection is thus included in the very definition of service learning, and endorsement of reflective practice is pervasive in service-learning literature, though the concept and process of reflection is not always clearly defined or understood (Camus et al., 2021). Indeed, Imperial et al. (2007) present reflection as a "best practice" and "critical factor" in the design of service-learning courses. They cite positive effects associated with reflection activities, including better quality relationships among students and faculty, improved identification of important social issues and consequences, and greater likelihood of pursuing future leadership roles.

Ash and Clayton (2009) have challenged a misconception that reflection is not rigorous, and advocated for *critical reflection*, meaning "a process of meta-cognition that functions to improve the quality of thought and of action and the relationship between them" (p. 27). When "carefully and intentionally designed," critical reflection "generates, deepens, and documents learning" (p. 28). It contributes both to student learning and to just practice. As VanLeeuwen et al. (2020) noted, critical reflection can promote positive outcomes and avoid perpetuating inequality and injustice in community-based learning. Transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2000) serves as a potentially useful framework for connecting the process of critical reflection to authentic and meaningful personal—and perhaps even community—transformation outcomes in service-learning contexts.

Service-learning literature has recognized the field's congruence with the aims of transformative learning (Camus, et al., 2021; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Hullender et al., 2015; Kiely, 2005). Service-learning

literature and transformative learning theory share a concern for promoting individual growth and social impact. They both have embraced reflection as one methodological component among many, but nonetheless an essential tool for achieving these outcomes. Transformative learning theory was initially developed by Jack Mezirow (2000). According to Mezirow, transformative learning helps adult learners become “more aware of the context of their problematic understandings and beliefs, more critically reflective on their assumptions and those of others, more fully and freely engaged in discourse, and more effective in taking action on their reflective judgments” (p. 31). These goals are achieved through the learning process in which learners transform “taken-for-granted frames of reference... to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective” (Mezirow, 2000, pp. 7-8). For Mezirow, “critical reflection” (p. 3) and “reflective discourse” (p. 10) are essential to the learning process. Transformative learning theory has a strong empirical research base, though its theoretical contours are contested, and attempts are underway to develop a unified theory in response to critiques (Cranton & Taylor, 2012).

Service-learning researchers have demonstrated that service-learning experiences with reflection can result in transformative learning (e.g., Eyler & Giles, 1999; Gardner, 2020; Hullender et. al, 2015). Eyler & Giles (1999) stated that critical reflection, or the “systematic examination of one’s fundamental assumptions” (p. 145), is “the process by which... transformation occurs” (p. 132). Structured reflection in service-learning can lead students to transformed perspectives and new reflective habits (Eyler & Giles, 1999). The centrality of reflection in service-learning emanates from the field’s foundation in John Dewey’s understanding of reflective learning (1933), including the assertion that learning proceeds from emotional “discomfort” or “disequilibrium” following experience (Sheffield, 2015, p. 48).

Kiely (2005) proposed a theoretical framework illustrating how students might attain transformative learning through service-learning experiences. Concerned with the service-learning field’s emphasis on cognitive reflection, a consequence of the strong influence of Dewey (1933) and of Kolb’s experiential learning theory (1984), Kiely presented a model incorporating both reflective and non-reflective elements, such as personalizing, sensing, and connecting. Simply “processing” a service-learning experience “has limited transformative impact...unless it is understood emotionally, viscerally, and affectively” (Kiely, 2005, p. 17). Kiely thus encouraged service-learning to move beyond a focus on self-reflection to foster social dialogue and affective learning, noting that engagement with diverse perspectives helps challenge participants’ assumptions. Gardner (2020) contributed to Kiely’s call for a more holistic understanding of growth in service-learning and demonstrated that practices like embodied learning and mindfulness foster transformation in service-learning participants. Hullender et al. (2015) used Kiely’s model to demonstrate evidence of transformative learning in a service-learning course, finding both reflection and dialogue to be essential for transformative learning outcomes.

Likewise, building on Dewey (1933), Schön (1983) posited that for reflective practice to be personally transformative, it requires action upon which to reflect, not only cognitively as Kolb (1984) suggested, but also affectively through attention to emotional responses (Kiely, 2005). In this way, individuals may identify and resolve discrepancies between their espoused beliefs and actions, thereby correcting invalid assumptions and prompting personal transformation to align them (Merriam et al., 2007, pp. 172-178). At the same time, through guided, rigorous reflection on action, individuals might develop the cognitive skills and reflexivity to engage in more continuous “reflection-in-action,” such that they are able to recognize surprise in the moment, experiment with different responses, and take more effective action within their context (Schön, 1983). In other words, through consistent reflective practice, individuals might meta-cognitively learn to direct their reflection in real time, taking ownership of their personal development while also enhancing individual and collective action that can contribute to transformation at the community level.

Transformative Learning in Non-Western Contexts

While transformative learning theory has demonstrated relevance as a framework for service-learning, critics have called into question its cultural sensitivity and applicability, particularly in non-Western contexts. Mezirow (2000) prized the individual learner and held autonomous thinking as the primary goal

of transformative learning. While some researchers have applied transformative learning theory in studying non-Western students (e.g., Mwangi, 2018, in Kenya), others critiqued Mezirow's approach as reflecting a "Western, cognitive, and rational orientation" (Merriam & Ntseane, 2008, p. 183). Mezirow acknowledged that sociocultural context is relevant to transformative learning, but this aspect of the theory has been understudied. Taylor and Cranton (2013) noted that transformative learning research has been primarily conducted by North American scholars, overemphasizes individual transformation, and lacks attention to "non-western ways of learning" (p. 34).

Several scholars have answered the call to discern transformative learning theory's relevance and applicability to non-Western contexts (e.g., Cox & John, 2016; John, 2016; Ntseane, 2011). Merriam and Ntseane (2008) illustrated the importance of cultural context to transformative learning outcomes and questioned the assumption that transformation results in greater autonomy and individual empowerment. In alignment with African cultural values and ways of knowing, the participants, Botswana adults, grew "more aware of their interdependent positionality" (p. 196). Ntseane (2011) asked how transformative learning theory can be made "culturally sensitive" (p. 307) and concluded that it can be responsibly leveraged in Africa when combined with an "Afrocentric paradigm" (p. 308). Her study attended to undervalued aspects of transformative learning highly relevant to the context in Botswana, including spirituality, gender, and communal knowledge production (Ntseane, 2011). Hlela (2014) demonstrated that an Afrocentric approach—namely, one that centers Africans and consciously reconnects to traditional African values like collectivism and spirituality (Ntseane, 2011)—is effective in a distance service-learning course. Hlela (2017) argued that Western adult learning models should not be uncritically imposed in African learning contexts, in a fashion akin to colonialism, without consideration of cultural relevance and sensitivity.

Other critics of transformative learning theory have questioned its adequacy for achieving complex social goods, such as sustainability, that service-learning might aim to address. In addition to its lack of attention to cultural context, the theory has been criticized as neglecting spirituality (Charinaya, 2012; Moyer et al., 2014). Moyer and Sinclair (2016) noted that while some scholars have tried to integrate spirituality on the process side of transformative learning, Mezirow's (2000) learning domains do not accommodate faith-related learning. They advocated for a new "introspective learning" domain in light of their study of faith-based organizations in Kenya (Moyer & Sinclair, 2016).

The service-learning field should take seriously the critiques of transformative learning theory's lack of attention to spirituality and non-Western cultures. A culturally-informed approach to transformative learning could begin to answer VanLeeuwen et al.'s (2020) challenge for the field to reconceive and decolonize community-based learning theory and praxis in order to be better rooted in distinctive and diverse settings and student experiences. They wrote that a decolonial approach "is not only an ethical stance for greater prosperity, justice, and equity in all societies and communities, but also a necessity if students are to be empowered to become critically reflective and competent citizens and community service professionals" (p. 14).

A Role for Religious Education Scholarship

Different methodologies exist for guiding reflective inquiry in service-learning contexts (e.g., Perry & Martin, 2016; Taylor, 2016), and religious traditions and affiliated partnerships have much to contribute to theory and the knowledge base in this area (e.g., Szaflarski et al., 2014). However, service-learning scholarship has not directly connected religious reflection to service-learning, even when spiritual development is a specific focus of inquiry (Sterk Barrett, 2016). We turn now to religious education scholarship for guidance in deepening the reflective practice and dialogue essential to transformative service-learning.

Loyola Institute for Ministry

The Loyola Institute for Ministry (LIM), located within Loyola University New Orleans, a Catholic and Jesuit university, has developed, tested, and refined a religious-based reflective methodology through

decades of experimentation with distance service-learning (Loyola Institute for Ministry, 2021a). LIM was founded in 1968 as part of Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans, moved to Loyola in 1978, and began offering its degrees on-site and at a distance through its extension programs in 1983. LIM began offering online courses in 2000 and fully online degrees in 2010. LIM's reflective methodology has evolved throughout its existence, adapting to the times as well as its faculty and administrators' expertise in experiential learning (Fleischer, 2000a). More recently, LIM has partnered with the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation to provide distance service-learning education to Catholic sisters in East Africa, a project we discuss at length below.

LIM's unique approach to guided reflection is broadly associated with the method of *practical theology* (Fleischer, 2000a). According to LIM faculty member Barbara Fleischer, practical theology "calls on communities to reflect on interpretations of cultural realities in conversation with interpretations of the Christian tradition (texts, symbols, story, and vision), with attention to what kind of world we should be creating together as agents in history" (p. 24). Within this broad movement, LIM faculty applied the scholarship of the theologian Bernard Lonergan (1978), who emphasized the importance of asking questions within community, since questioning prompts "conversion," which is related to "self-transcendence." Questions can reveal our present positions to be inadequate and can then move us beyond them. This process invites humility and openness to growth.

LIM applied Lonergan's (1978) insight to its own pedagogical model by privileging an inductive approach that prizes experience (Dewey, 1933; Kolb, 1984). The four-step method of theological reflection developed by LIM, drawing on Lonergan (1978), moves from initial understanding to insight and action, and involves (1) identifying a specific experience or concern in one's *ministry* on which to reflect (ministry being broadly understood as a domain of praxis and taking place within and outside of church settings), (2) giving one's initial understanding or interpretation of that concern by means of one's own experience, (3) testing that initial understanding through questions raised by research into four contexts of ministry—namely the sociocultural, personal, institutional, and Christian tradition contexts—and, (4) deciding on and implementing a course of action flowing from the contextual analysis in the testing phase. This process of experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding/acting (Fleischer, 2000a) is recursive, as the action taken in the fourth step becomes a new concern that prompts another round of practical theological reflection. This ongoing cycle of action and reflection is a form of praxis, consistent with other scholars' descriptions of reflective process intended "to gain deeper insights that lead to action" (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 173) and ultimately a capacity for seamless "reflection-in-action" (Schön, 1983).

Fleischer (2000a) explained the significance of Lonergan's (1978) insight, specifically in describing the interplay of experience and reflective interpretation in context:

What Lonergan invites us to do is to become more *aware* of how we attend to our experiences, how we articulate our initial understanding, and, crucially, how we put those initial understandings to the test by reflecting on them critically in light of other information and considerations as we arrive at our decisions. Within a Christian context, such a testing or judging of initial understandings calls for careful research and connection with the cumulative experiences and reflections of others in our community and of other Christian communities throughout the ages. In a larger cultural context, it calls for an informed consideration of experiences and insights from the wider world. (p. 33).

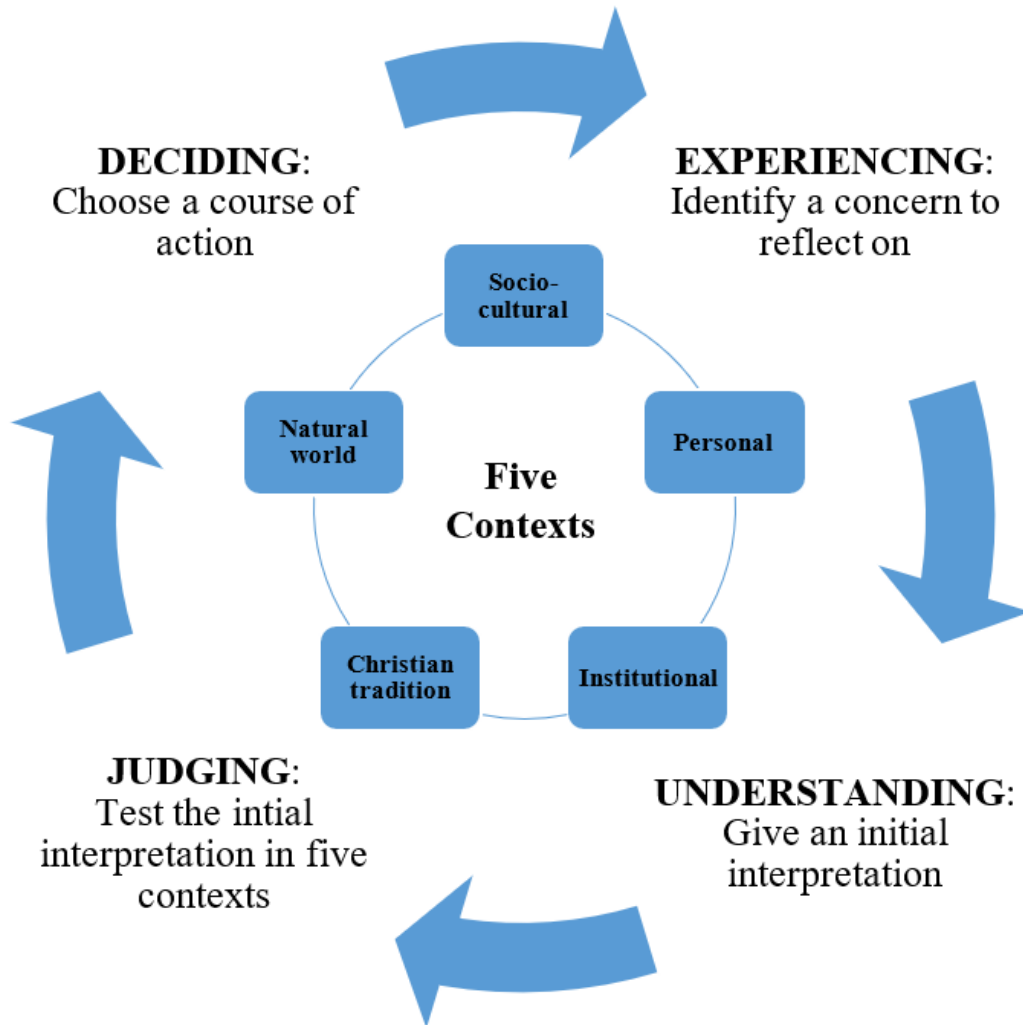
Guided and dialogical critical reflection, rooted in interpretation informed by contextual analysis, has the capacity to enhance a service-learning experience by instigating both humility (or openness to conversion) and personal responsibility for taking action that is responsive to situational demands.

Informed by the work of LIM faculty member Kathleen O'Gorman (2007), LIM enhanced its reflective model by incorporating creation, or the natural world, as a fifth context. By raising the importance of this cosmological, ecological context, perhaps even as a primary or meta-level context, LIM moved to decenter and diminish the perceived centrality of humanity. This shift aligns with Pope Francis' (2015) calls to reject anthropocentrism and recognize that all creatures derive from a creator and so are drawn together to live in solidarity. LIM's approach to practical theology thus prompts students to critically reflect on their culturally-based assumptions. These five contexts pose challenging questions for students of any or no faith

who strive to act on critical social issues. Figure 1 summarizes LIM's model, which is consistent with other scholars' conceptualization of reflective practice as comprising "a deliberate slowing down to consider multiple perspectives," openness to new understandings, active processing and meta-cognition, and critical examination of "beliefs, goals, and practices" (Merriam et al., 2007, pp. 172-173); and augments those stages with articulation of individual behaviors to implement and five specific contexts in which to question one's interpretations of the situation at hand.

Figure 1

LIM's Model of Practical Theological Reflection



Applying LIM's Method for Transformative Learning

LIM's method of practical theological reflection is congruent with the process and goals of transformative learning theory, including applications in service-learning experiences. The method thus serves as a resource for service-learning educators in diverse contexts aiming for transformative learning outcomes. LIM's approach builds on transformative learning theory but also addresses some of its identified

shortcomings that could, unaddressed, limit its effectiveness in service-learning (Fleischer, 2000b, 2006; Lamont, 2020). LIM's approach shares with transformative learning theory an emphasis on reflection, commitment to dialogic communities, and praxis orientation (Fleischer, 2000b). Our project, to be discussed, illustrates how these dimensions of transformative learning theory can be leveraged in practice for service-learning.

Service-learning literature has supported critical reflection for development in interiority that is ultimately realized in action (Ash & Clayton, 2009), a shared commitment of Mezirow (2000) and Lonergan (1978), as well as other scholars of critical reflection (e.g., Merriam et al., 2007; Schön, 1983). LIM faculty Fleischer (2000b) has illustrated congruence between Mezirow's theory and Lonergan's theology, noting that Lonergan's concept of conversion "necessarily involves what Mezirow calls a transformation of learning perspectives" (p. 157). With its "specific strategies for fostering and sustaining critical reflection," the literature for transformative learning "provides a praxis-oriented complement to the dialogical work of practical theology" (p. 223).

Streetman (2015) applied Lonergan's (1978) model to explain how a service-learning action research program resulted in transformative learning. By encouraging tools and habits of critical reflection, service-learning "distinctly develops the interiority of students who engage whole-heartedly in it" (p. 46). Service-learning, at its best, prompted "what seems essential to the transformative process," that was, "the ability to reason, analyze, reflect on new information, and reconfigure one's perspective in light of that new knowledge" (p. 42). Service-learning experiences and Lonergan's learning theory each insisted that "the individual reflect on new information and his/her role, acting in the world as a conscious and conscientious bearer of that knowledge" (p. 42).

LIM's development of Lonergan's (1978) theory has added contextual richness and specificity, enabling its application in diverse contexts for learning. LIM's approach demands, and Mezirow (2000) encouraged, dialogical communities that foster reflection. Fleischer (2000b) wrote that "the assistance of a trusted group of companions who both challenge and are open to challenge can greatly help the process of exploration and creative transformation" (p. 220). For LIM, both community and spirituality are inherent in the reflection process and resulting transformations. Mezirow did not, himself, deeply explore the spiritual implications of his approach to transformation (Roberts, 2009), nor did secular scholars of reflective practice discussed above (Merriam et al., 2007). Yet for many students, spirituality has informed meaning-making, and thus is highly relevant to transformative service-learning and one of its primary tools, critical reflection. In a study of graduate education students, Streetman (2015) proposed that service-learning can result in transformation, in the form of changing the content of one's consciousness, or a "spiritual shift" (p. 36). African critiques of transformative learning theory also have insisted on respect for the role of spirituality in meaning-making (Merriam & Ntseane, 2008; Ntseane, 2011).

Fleischer (2000b) hoped that just as practical theology can draw on the pedagogical practice of transformative learning theory, transformative learning educators can learn from faith traditions:

Christian life embraces rational discourse but it is not limited to the realm of rationality... Transcendent epiphanies shed surprising new light on ordinary events and transform their meanings in extrarational ways. Art and music both express and awaken ancient echoes of wisdom with us... Transformative learning, as a model of education that seeks more holistic human perspectives, might well draw from the kaleidoscope of human experience found in Christian and other faith traditions. (Fleischer 2000b, p. 223).

Service-learning educators and students may find that engaging with the spiritual and extra-rational can help achieve the vision of transformative learning advanced by theorists and educators (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 215).

Another way that LIM's approach to learning goes beyond Mezirow's (2000) theory is in its insistence on an expansive and cosmological view. While LIM's approach draws on the pedagogical insights of Mezirow's theory, it also recognizes its inadequacy, wherein, for example, its primary focus on cognition reflects a cultural bias limiting its effectiveness for anti-racist teaching and learning (Lamont, 2020). In its capacity for tolerating and encouraging ambiguity and diverse particularity, LIM's model of reflection can

help educators and learners to move beyond the dualistic and individualistic. The method, practiced in a dialogic community, encourages transformative learning away from individualism towards conversion realized in liberative, collective praxis. Service-learning experiences that privilege critical reflection in community can advance the same goals for learners and the communities with which they engage.

Case Study: Catholic Sisters for Sustainability Project

The remainder of this article describes a service-learning curriculum developed and implemented by LIM in East Africa, with funding from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation. The project, titled “Catholic Sisters in Partnership for Sustainability,” exemplifies the application of LIM’s reflective methodology to service-learning. We describe the broader context and conceptualization of the project, then delve into specific elements as they relate to teaching reflective practice and outcomes, especially in terms of students’ transformative service-learning and community-oriented praxis. We conclude with a preliminary assessment of the reflective methodology and program, and suggestions for how these insights might inform secular or religious service-learning curricula in diverse global contexts.

Case Study Context

The Loyola Institute for Ministry is known internationally for its commitment to practical theology and to justice in service of the common good (Loyola Institute for Ministry, 2021a). Rooted in a Christian vision of God’s graciousness to all creation, the mission of LIM is to inspire diverse learners through the method of practical theology to develop intellectually and spiritually, so they can serve and renew their communities and the world (Fleischer, 2000a). LIM fulfills its mission by preparing women and men for ministry in and beyond church settings through on-campus and distance education programs. In fidelity to its mission, the Institute seeks an integration of knowledge of the Christian tradition, a sensitivity to the dynamics of institutional structures, an appreciation for the times and culture within which one works, reflection on personal experience, and attention to the natural world.

In support of its mission, LIM began partnering with the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation on grant-funded service-learning projects for Catholic sisters in 2014. The Hilton Foundation was founded in 1944 as a family trust with a mandate to “relieve the suffering, the distressed and the destitute,” and currently holds assets of \$6.3 billion (Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, 2021). The family foundation was established by the founder of Hilton Hotels Corporation but is now unconnected to Hilton Worldwide. The Hilton Foundation launched its Catholic Sisters Initiative, its largest portfolio, in 2013 “to build their capacity to carry out ministries to the vulnerable and the poor” (Center for Religion and Civic Culture, 2018, p. 3).

Project Overview

‘Catholic Sisters in Partnership for Sustainability’ was a project developed by LIM and funded by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation from 2017 to 2020 (Loyola Institute for Ministry, 2021b). The grant aimed to connect congregations of East African Catholic sisters to *Catholic social teaching* (CST) and promote collaborative action in service of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (U.N. SDGs), both described below. The project had the following specific objectives:

- Increase the leadership skills of East African sisters, especially with respect to their ability to communicate and partner with other organizations addressing the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals.
- Leverage the partnerships that already exist in sisters’ ministries in service of sustainable development.
- Publicize the work of participating congregations on behalf of the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals as understood in terms of CST and their charisms.

Catholic social teaching refers to the body of teachings of the Roman Catholic Church related to social issues, peace, and justice. For example, CST affirms the dignity of each person, advocates for a preferential

option for poor and vulnerable persons, and promotes care for creation (Massaro, 2016). The vision of CST for a just and peaceful world finds resonance with the 17 U.N. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), an ambitious sustainable development agenda to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all by 2030 (United Nations, 2015). The goals can only be achieved by committed groups and organizations working in partnership.

Motivated by their congregational charism (a unique spirit and framework for mission, distinctive to each congregation) and faith commitments—including CST and, for some, traditional African concepts, such as ‘abundant life’ (Magesa, 2014)—Catholic sisters in Africa are working on a wide range of projects that contribute to the outcomes the SDGs envision. The project ‘Catholic Sisters in Partnership for Sustainability’ posits that, whether they use the language of SDGs or not, sisters are already helping to accomplish these goals. Furthermore, sisters could do so more effectively if more stakeholders in their ministries knew about the SDGs and their relationship to CST and their charisms, and if they could partner more widely to develop resources and build capacity for working towards sustainable development.

However, Catholic sisters face myriad barriers to learning and action in becoming agents of CST, particularly in East African contexts (Center for Religion and Civic Culture, 2018). Sociocultural challenges affecting girls and women in East Africa include limited educational access, which circumscribes sisters’ agency and leadership opportunities. Further, Catholic social teaching has not generally been included in the formation (i.e., training and professional development) of Catholic sisters in East Africa. The Catholic bishops of Africa acknowledged in 2009 that women are “often given an inferior role” in local faith communities, calling the practice an “injustice” (Synod of Bishops, II Special Assembly for Africa, 2009a, section 61). The bishops called for “greater integration of women into Church structures and decision-making processes” and for the formation of girls and women, including the ongoing formation of Catholic sisters in the social teaching of the Church (Synod of Bishops, II Special Assembly for Africa, 2009b, sections 47 and 18). LIM’s project aimed to answer this call by offering opportunities for transformative service-learning to sisters in East Africa.

Project Elements

The grant from the Hilton Foundation supported 36 Catholic sisters in completing online coursework to earn Loyola’s Certificate in Catholic Social Teaching. LIM established partnerships with eleven congregations of Catholic sisters in East Africa – in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and South Sudan – to recruit students for this project. The program began with in-person orientation workshops in Kenya and Tanzania in March 2018. In these workshops, LIM staff introduced students to the themes of the project, including partnership, Catholic social teaching, and sustainable development. Online coursework began in May 2018. Students who completed four courses earned LIM’s Certificate in Catholic Social Teaching. The four online certificate courses were:

- *Introduction to Practical Theology*: Introduced LIM’s method of practical theological reflection, which students applied to a concern in their unique contexts.
- *Jesus & the Christian Tradition*: Provided an in-depth treatment of Jesus and the Christian tradition, with an emphasis on theologies of grace and partnership. Students refined their skills in the contextual analysis that drives practical theological reflection.
- *Catholic Social Teaching & Sustainable Development*: Linked CST and the SDGs to congregational charisms and to students’ ministries and taught strategies for communication and partnership with ministry stakeholders and secular organizations.
- *Developing Partnerships for Ministry*: Required each student to complete two major service-learning capstone projects, a workshop and a partnership, as described below.

To be more specific, the first course presented LIM’s method of reflection and a contextual model through which students view their ministerial activities, based upon Lonergan (1978) and O’Gorman (2007) as discussed and summarized in Figure 1 (Loyola Institute for Ministry, 2016). Students moved through practical theology’s four steps: (1) identifying an experience or concern, (2) articulating an initial

understanding of the experience, (3) testing that understanding, and (4) deciding on and undertaking action. In the third step, students tested their initial understanding in terms of five ministry contexts, or from five perspectives: the Christian tradition, sociocultural, personal, and institutional contexts, and the meta-context of the natural world. Coursework focused on the Christian tradition (in particular, Catholic social teaching) and how it interacted with the other contexts in relation to sustainable development.

Each course was designed to lead asynchronous online discussion groups through dialogue and experiential exercises to link their own experiences with course content (Loyola Institute for Ministry, 2016). Class sessions were led by Loyola faculty, who co-participated in online discussions. Faculty assisted students to create a climate of trust and openness in engaging course content and applying it to personal experiences. To promote reflective online discussion, students completed a Learning Agreement that pledged their commitment to communication norms, including cooperation, openness, and confidentiality. This course contract contributed to authentic discussion within a community of reflective learners in the asynchronous online environment. The faculty kept the reflective process on track and guided respectful communication. They also asked reflective follow-up questions to engage students more deeply in understanding the content. Faculty modeling of practical theological reflection and provision of feedback aimed to cultivate students' skills for both self-reflection and dialogic or social reflection.

The practical theological reflection process and associated lenses for each step were reinforced with course assignments. LIM faculty guided students in writing reflective essays on their experiences and projects. For example, one assignment required students to test their initial understanding of their concern by interviewing *wise practitioners* (Fleischer et al., 2020), persons closely involved with the situation. Students submitted interview reports that explored how this dialogue transformed their understanding. Students were also encouraged to maintain a free-form learning journal for capturing initial reactions and reflections, as well as to engage in daily prayer and self-reflection through a guided set of questions.

Inculturation for East African Students

African theologians and development experts informed the cultural adaptation of course materials and assignments to students' unique contexts within East Africa. Students constructed and revised understandings of their experiences with explicit grounding in their particular sociocultural, political, historical, and institutional contexts. The wise practitioners assignment described above (Fleischer et al., 2020) encouraged students to honor local wisdom and ways of knowing. In an assignment that prompted engagement with African sociocultural and political concerns, students wrote in response to their choice of one of two articles written by Teresa Okure (1992, 2009), a Nigerian religious sister and professor of theology. Students first identified an initial understanding of a Scripture passage. They then reflected on how Okure's analysis shifted their initial understandings and described the implications of their transformed insights for their ministry. LIM faculty did not dictate the focus of student work; rather, LIM's process of practical theological reflection invited learners from diverse social locations to identify, understand, and respond to localized ministry concerns in dialogue with those affected.

Service-Learning

In the final course, which represents the culmination of the service-learning experience and practical theology's fourth step of deciding on and implementing a plan of action, each student developed and led a workshop to educate ministry stakeholders about CST and the SDGs, with the goal of empowering them as agents of sustainable development. Students created educational materials for their workshops, in local languages as needed. Each workshop led to at least one tangible action taken in service of development, led by sisters in partnership with local community members. Additionally, each student established a new organizational partnership to advance sustainable development. Throughout the course, students received online coaching and support from Loyola faculty and staff, including support in the application of the model of practical theological reflection. Examples of these projects and their impact are discussed in the following section.

Case Study Methodology

By the end of 2019 when the project coursework concluded, 25 East African sisters representing ten different congregations had completed all coursework and requirements and earned Loyola's Certificate in Catholic Social Teaching. Non-completing students most often discontinued participation due to lack of time or health issues. An external evaluation was conducted by the second author employing a holistic case study of the project's short-term outcomes for participating students and their communities (Martinson & O'Brien, 2015), based on pre/post student surveys, focus groups with students, and a review of student project reports and other project-related documentation such as course materials and records (Mumford, 2019). Case study implementation was consistent with ethical research obligations and Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements of the second author's institution (Mumford et al., 2016).

Note that the case study was designed as a project evaluation to inform LIM and its funder, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, about project outcomes and opportunities for improvement, in line with grant requirements. As such, it was not designed specifically to test the efficacy of LIM's reflective model or to produce generalizable knowledge (Flybjerg, 2011) and did not include a comparison group of non-participants. All data on project outcomes were self-reported by participants and may reflect socially desirable response bias (e.g., Benenson & Moldow, 2017), although survey data were collected confidentially by the external evaluator to mitigate this. Evaluation results relevant to the project's reflective model are discussed below, but they should be viewed as preliminary, exploratory, and suggestive, pending more rigorous study of the model's implementation and longer-term contribution to student and community outcomes sought by service-learning projects. Although questions were not specifically asked about the reflective model and its impact on student learning, some project participants mentioned it unprompted in open-ended questions, providing the direct quotes shared in the section below.

Pre- and post-project online surveys were collected from students at two time points: February to March 2018 prior to project launch, and August to November 2019 as students completed their final service-learning course and certificate. Surveys asked students to self-assess their knowledge and confidence at each time, as well as satisfaction with program elements in the post-project survey, through a series of close- and open-ended questions. All 25 graduates completed the post-project survey, and responses were matched across both surveys for 19 of 25 graduating students, for a robust 76 percent response rate. Quantitative responses on four-point Likert scales (ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" with each statement, with no middle option) were averaged and compared across time using paired samples *t*-tests (Newcomer & Conger, 2015). The relatively small sample size precluded sub-group analyses.

Qualitative data consisted of responses to open-ended survey questions, as well as an anonymized summary of a focus group conducted by LIM's Project Manager (this article's first author) with six students that took place in Nairobi in June 2019. The second author, in his capacity as external evaluator, provided guidance on focus group procedures and questions, but the summary of themes was produced by the first author. In addition, the second author co-developed and reviewed workshop action reports submitted by graduating students to document and reflect on their final service-learning experience, and specifically early actions and results associated with their service-learning workshops and partnerships. Note that not all service-learning projects had been completed at the time of data collection. Qualitative data from each method were coded and summarized into emergent themes by the second author (Goodrick & Rogers, 2015).

Case Study Results

In the post-project survey ($n = 25$), large majorities reported satisfaction with the overall project experience (76% were "extremely" satisfied and 24% were "satisfied") and each of the four courses (percentages who were "extremely" satisfied ranged from 72% to 80%). The vast majority also reported they "strongly agree" that the project (96%) and Catholic social teaching (96%) are relevant to their ministries, their ministries are connected to the sustainable development goals (88%), and, as a result of the project, they see

themselves as agents of sustainable development (100%) and CST (92%) and are committed to working towards both (92% each).

According to preliminary data from the evaluation, the project inspired and empowered sisters to become more collaborative, visible, and powerful leaders for sustainable human development and, in so doing, contributed to the achievement of Hilton Foundation Catholic Sisters Initiative's strategic goals. Large majorities of graduates "strongly agreed" that their ministries have been made more effective (84%) and that they were able to be a more effective leader (80%) as a result of the project. Results of the external evaluation suggest students achieved desired individual-level outcomes. On average, respondents matched across pre- and post-project surveys ($n = 19$) reported statistically significant growth in self-reported knowledge in terms of their ability to explain the long tradition of CST (average of 2.26/4 on the pre-project survey vs. 3.68/4 on the post-project survey, $p < .001$), and their familiarity with CST (2.53/4 vs. 3.74/4, $p < .001$) and the sustainable development goals (2.79/4 vs. 3.95/4, $p < .001$).

Through an open-ended question on the post-project survey, graduates were asked, "What do you consider the most significant personal accomplishment(s) or change(s) you experienced as a result of participating in this certificate program?" Students noted growing in spirituality, self-reflection, and self-confidence. Students endorsed the impact of the project on their personal, intellectual, and spiritual development, and credited their Loyola education for inspiring more effective and compassionate ministries. One student shared in the final evaluation survey, "This program was very good as it helped me personally to reflect more deeply about my responsibility as a Christian to care for the planet and also to care for my brothers and sisters." Although the question did not specifically ask about LIM's reflective model embedded into coursework, another respondent shared:

I feel enriched spiritually because of the weekly reflections we had during each course. This course has helped me understand myself better and discovered some of my capabilities I was not aware of. I am able to reflect before I make decisions which has helped me in doing sound decisions. The course was of great help and has transformed me as I go to work with others.

In workshop action reports, sisters reported establishing 24 new partnerships in service of sustainable development with local, national, and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), universities and schools, and religious clubs and associations. That said, graduates reported their least satisfaction with the program's partnership requirement (just 60% were "extremely satisfied"), and reported relatively less improvement in their partnership skills compared with other areas (just 56% "strongly agreed" their skills for partnering with organizations beyond their congregation improved as a result of the project), perhaps in part because this element of the project was not acted on until the final course and required ceding control over timelines to community partners. It is possible that satisfaction and skills in this area improved after data collection was completed, when many graduates more fully implemented their planned service-learning workshops and partnerships.

Nevertheless, by the end of the project, students reported leveraging partnerships to achieve tangible benefits for sustainable development, including financial support for and expanded capacities in their ministries. For example, according to workshop action reports submitted by graduates, a sister who manages a home for children with disabilities in Kenya shared that her partner organization sponsored school fees, funded the purchase of assistive devices, and empowered the home to increase their staff and expand their reach to three times more parents and guardians.

To fulfill the service-learning assignment of the final course, sisters led 25 workshops about Catholic social teaching, educating nearly 700 people. In these workshops, sisters engaged participants in communal reflective processes to discern local needs and how to address them. They then mobilized participants to take concrete action for sustainable human development. For example, several sisters led action for environmental protection. One facilitated six tree plantings that engaged students and members of her religious community, taught about tree conservation and sustainable energy sources, and established a secondary school's Environment Club. Many service-learning projects supported vulnerable youth, for example, through partnerships with schools. To promote health and sanitation, sisters led a collaborative

effort to repair a road to improve access to a health center, organized donations to fund home water tanks, enrolled people in health insurance coverage, and provided health education to women.

Women also benefited from sisters' creative advocacy efforts, advancing the fifth SDG of gender equality (United Nations, 2015). One sister mobilized her parish community to advocate for education, facilitated access to counseling for victims of violence, and successfully negotiated contracts that pay just wages for parish employees. Another sister organized her congregation's novices to visit parishes and creatively advocate for an end to domestic violence through songs they composed and performed. A sister working with vulnerable youth mobilized their mothers to participate in an entrepreneurship course and micro-lending groups. These examples of project impacts demonstrate that students' service-learning projects attained outcomes beyond the student for the broader communities served; for instance, a student reflected:

Actually, it was an awakening moment for workshop participants who realized that the Catholic Social teaching is not about Catholics, but a call for all people to participate in the sustainable development of the whole human being, that is body, mind, and soul.

Student testimonials provided early evidence that the coursework, and specifically reflective and service-learning activities, resulted in transformative learning outcomes, although more rigorous study of long-term project outcomes is needed. On the post-project survey, one program graduate described internalizing LIM's methodology for critical reflection: "I am able to reflect before I make a decision which has helped me in doing sound decisions." Another graduate described program outcomes as "personal growth, conversion, transformation and transcendence towards self, God and others." Two additional quotes from graduates' open-ended responses to the post-project survey provide additional evidence of personal transformation, bolstering collective action and outcomes:

I have been transformed to think deep about being compassionate to my students, my colleagues in the workplace and friends, compassionate especially in the care for creation. I have been challenged to find time for spiritual reflection at least every day.

I have experienced inward personal growth, through inward transformation and conversion which has helped me to transcend my personal relationship with God and his people. I have gained more understanding on all contexts and more zeal to serve God. I have become an agent of change myself.

Discussion

LIM's grant-funded service-learning project described above demonstrated preliminary evidence of and potential for positive, transformative outcomes at both the individual and community levels. Students' self-reported responses indicated a statistically significant growth in appreciation of the SDGs and improvements to their own leadership ability and self-efficacy as a result of their participation in the project. They also reported through qualitative responses transformative learning outcomes, such as development in spirituality, self-reflection, and self-confidence. At the community level, students fostered collective transformative action with partnerships, workshops, and other service-learning projects promoting sustainable development. Indeed, the SDGs necessitated collective action, and sisters reported achieving specific and tangible benefits for sustainable development. Of course, as noted above, these assessments are prone to common measurement challenges like selection and social desirability biases (e.g., Benenson & Moldow, 2017), and more rigorous evaluation of long-term individual and collective outcomes—especially as they relate to personal, spiritual, and community transformation and are promoted by LIM's reflective model—is needed.

What elements may have contributed to the project's apparent success? Certainly, the long-term relationship-building across four courses adapted to East African contexts was a factor in motivating student engagement. Importantly, a model of guided reflection was built into the curriculum (see Figure 1), taking students through a recursive reflective process of experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding/acting (Fleischer, 2000a). This model attended to multiple contexts through reflective questions, and incorporated

individual reflection (through journals and daily prayer), but also instructor support (Perry & Martin, 2016; Merriam et al., 2007; Sterk Barrett, 2016) and student learning groups to facilitate dialogical reflection. Before the service-learning projects were initiated, foundational coursework asked students to practice identifying social issues and engaging in critical reflection that leads to transformed thinking and action. Students were then able to apply this same transformative process in their workshops and partnerships through reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983), thereby engaging in critical reflective dialogue in community contexts and inspiring collective action. The projects that resulted from these processes were relevant to community needs and accountable to community stakeholders. Further study is needed to determine if these student and community-level outcomes have resulted in enduring transformation, but individual graduates' testimonials suggest that at least some of them were able to internalize LIM's reflective model and develop as reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983).

Conclusion

Service-learning with effective practices of critical reflection can promote individual and social transformation. While transformative learning theory offers resources for service-learning, theorists and educators should consider valid critiques of how transformative learning has been conceived, particularly the framework's individualistic bias, emphasis on cognition, and lack of attention to spirituality and diverse cultural dynamics. LIM's reflective model and experiences with implementing it in diverse service-learning contexts may help to partially respond to these critiques and move the field of international service-learning forward in its capacity to incorporate culturally-relevant critically reflective praxis and attain meaningful transformative learning outcomes for students as well as communities served.

Indeed, we suggest that educators can pursue transformation with their students, particularly in international and otherwise culturally diverse and non-Western service-learning contexts, by discerning and applying a culturally relevant method of reflection. To that end, we offer LIM's approach, a model of practical theological reflection that attends to context, including sociocultural, spiritual, and ecological factors. We have demonstrated how this approach may contribute to transformative learning of students and social change in their communities in East Africa. Religious education programs, like LIM, can offer the service-learning field methodologies for deepening reflective practice (Merriam et al., 2007) to advance transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000).

That said, students of service-learning often represent diverse faith communities, lacking the common Catholic foundation of LIM's participants. There may be reticence among faculty and community partners to incorporate explicitly faith-based approaches to service-learning. Nonetheless, the underlying reflective process and mechanisms developed by LIM are adaptable to secular coursework, especially the behavioral prompts initiating each stage and questioning in five contexts displayed in Figure 1 (e.g., by replacing the Christian tradition with democratic values). The model is also, as discussed above, readily adaptable to diverse global contexts, as the process is driven by students' unique contextual dynamics and accountability to their communities.

More rigorous study is needed to explore the efficacy of different reflection models and how they interact with student characteristics and contexts to achieve results, including transformative learning in service-learning courses. Likewise, more practice and study are needed with adapting LIM's model to different contexts, whether through virtual and/or in person instruction, including to secular or different faith traditions, and to different cultural contexts around the globe. Some of this work is ongoing through subsequent iterations and adaptations of LIM's coursework, funded in part through an additional grant from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, as well as longer-term follow-up with graduates of the particular project described here. We hope this article inspires a critical appreciation of transformative learning theory's potential for promoting sustainable change when attentive to spirituality, sociocultural context, and diverse ways of knowing and learning, and the potential contributions of guided, culturally responsive reflection within transformative international service-learning experiences.

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