Local Immersion Experiences as a Portal to Critical Reflection and Creative Response

Greg Baker, M.A., Mercyhurst College

The model of service immersion I will be discussing is nothing novel. Many colleges and universities, including my own, have been using models such as this for years. What I would like to do is offer what I think is a helpful framework for understanding and planning for local immersion experiences, with special attention given to how local immersion experiences facilitate critical reflection.

I should begin by admitting that my deepest wish is that every student who attends our institutions could experience an international service immersion or mission experience. My reasons are many. International experiences immerse us in other cultures and ways of life from which we are (temporarily) unable to escape. These experiences give many of our students one of their first tastes of what it is like to be a minority. International experiences burden us, stretching us far beyond our usual comforts for transportation, health care resources, shelter, sleeping, eating, drinking, showering and using the restroom. These experiences expose us to the sharp distinctions and inequities among social classes, which we can so easily miss in our own society. International experiences allow participants to bond and connect with peers in an intense and authentic way. Finally, these experiences offer unique opportunities for critical dialogue which accompany what I would call the disorientation, returning to one’s home and everyday life with the haunting reminder of what one has seen and witnessed. They lead to the realization so well expressed by Christian recording artist Brooke Fraser. After a mission experience in Rwanda she said: “Now that I have seen I am responsible. Faith without deeds is dead.”

We should never abandon the priority of sending students for international immersion experiences. In fact, I hope that an increase in local experiences will stir a renewed desire to offer more international experiences. Practically speaking, international immersion experiences can only be offered to a small number of students each year. These experiences are also often high-risk, expensive and logistically challenging. So, as we continue to find the resources to send more students overseas, I am proposing that we begin to whet the appetites of many more of our students through local immersion experiences. If we want to make an impact on a global level, let’s start locally!

What do I mean by a local immersion experience? By local I mean some place that is a reasonably short drive from campus; preferably no more than a half-hour. This place should be unfamiliar to the majority of students. If a majority of your students are suburban, then strive to give them an experience that is urban or rural. Similarly, if a majority of the students are urban, I would strongly suggest an experience that is rural, or an urban experience that will investigate an unfamiliar urban culture (for example, exploring a traditionally Hispanic neighborhood).

What Is Meant by an Immersion Experience

What do I mean by an immersion experience? I prefer to use this word in its baptismal sense. A baptism by immersion is one involving the whole body to symbolize, theologically speaking, baptism of the entire self. Immersion plunges us
into the unfamiliar; it is exhilarating and a bit unnerving.

My background is in lay ministry. When I imagine the ideal local immersion experience, I also imagine a model similar to a spiritual retreat. Retreats pull people into a separate space, a space where a different sort of personal integration becomes possible. Retreats often offer meaningful interactions with others, as well as rich moments of silence and solitude. Retreats unplug us from a posture of doing and foster an attitude of listening and taking in new perspectives. Finally, retreats are intentional. We make a prior personal commitment to be there because we trust that something important can happen within that space and time.

So, who might benefit from this local immersion, retreat-type of experience? In my experience, this works very well as the service learning component in a course. I offered such an experience this spring in my Religious Persons and Traditions class, allowing the students who attended to miss the class beforehand (the material from that class was being covered during the experience). I strongly encouraged my class to attend, but (recognizing that students’ schedules are busy and varied) allowed students an opt-out option wherein they attended the class the others missed and fulfilled service learning requirements in the traditional fashion. About half of the students were able to attend. I think this model will work well with other groups as well; for example, student clubs and organizations, athletic teams, campus ministry peer leaders, or teams of administrators or faculty who are looking for a meaningful, inexpensive and logistically feasible formation opportunity.

Before I get into the nuts-and-bolts of this model, I will reiterate why this sort of hands-on immersion model is becoming increasingly essential for our students. I suspect that I do not need to convince many of my colleagues of this fact. Today’s young people “look for the church to show them something...Someone capable of turning their lives inside out and upside down. Most of the time we have offered them pizza.”

Our young adults have been largely sheltered and over-protected. They have been given too little meaningful responsibility and too little hands-on experience of the critical social issues of their time. While they are perhaps too well informed on many matters via today’s technologies, they seldom have a real face and real name to give to poverty, racism, hunger, sexism and so on. Meanwhile, a host of recent studies of youth and young adults and religion have shown that they believe in God, consider themselves to be spiritual, are already active in community service and have a very limited vocabulary for understanding and reflecting upon religious traditions. David F. White says:

Young people often find significant healing when they discover the powers of their minds. Especially in this culture, which tends to shape young people as passive consumers and in which learning is reduced to the function of securing a future job, our engagement of young people in playfully exploring the world through disciplined use of the mind constitutes a social healing.

Indeed this is what the local immersion can begin to address: the deep need for social healing, both in the internal world of our students and in the external context of the larger world.

Elements of the Local Immersion Experience

When I imagine a local immersion experience, I have four basic pieces in mind: (1) intentional burdens; (2) direct service centered on a particular critical social concern; (3) personal, gut-level sharing and (4) critical academic reflection.
Intentional burdening is my way of expressing a notion which is well-expressed in Albert Borgmann’s book *Power Failure*. To grossly oversimplify a portion of his argument, technology is neutral and offers tremendous opportunities for the betterment of humanity; however, left unchecked, technology can cause isolation and alienation, which is greatly detrimental to our social and spiritual wholeness. One of the solutions is that those of us who enjoy a life of plenty must choose to do things which are burdensome because of the inherent value in struggling and because of the skills and personal growth that come through stretching ourselves.

In the context of a local immersion experience, intentional burdening could be using local public transportation instead of personal vehicles, challenging students to shop for food at local corner stores instead of large grocery stores, carrying personal possessions (including sleeping bags) on one’s person, going without accustomed technologies such as cell phones, navigation devices, or computers, sleeping on the floor and living with a very limited personal budget. Students do the cooking and cleaning and ideally begin planning for food and logistics ahead of time as a way of becoming excited about and invested in the experience. Another way of understanding intentional burdening is to consider the spiritual discipline of fasting. People often fast in order to clear interior space for spiritual growth. Intentional burdening is the fasting component of the immersion experience. While we are stretched (sometimes annoyed) by these burdensome activities, something is able to happen within us which often does not occur in the midst of our fast-paced and convenient lifestyles.

The second aspect of the experience is direct service, which should center in a focused way upon a particular social concern. When I sat down with my colleagues Christine Brotherson, Assistant Director of Campus Ministry and Colin Hurley, Director of Service Learning, to dream about possible local immersion experiences we began looking at major social concerns which would connect with prominent academic major programs at the school. We also looked at prominent local needs. We began dreaming of immersion experiences which could, for example, expose criminal justice majors to the realities of the prison system or expose social work majors to the complexities of refugee resettlement. We discussed local experiences which would open up difficult topics like racism, ageism and sexism. We dreamt about exposing students to rural poverty and we dreamt of connecting our environmentally minded students with local experiences which could foster critical dialogue.

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...around environmental issues. Soon we recognized that, completely unintentionally, we had built a list of experiences which were nearly a replica of the critical concerns of the Sisters of Mercy. These global concerns are simply waiting to be tasted on the local level.

In the end it will be important that we identify local experiences which pull us out of our comfort zones, which offer us some tangible work to do (face it; we need to feel some sense of accomplishment) and which also offer spaces for listening and being with people and in places that are different and surprising.

The third aspect of these experiences is gut level sharing, which I imagine should always take place on three levels. First, these experiences can and should be facilitated in part by trained student leaders who help to coordinate the experience and who help to lead reflections during the immersion. These student leaders should be invited to share about their personal experiences during the immersion. My experience with youth and young adults has taught me again and again that very good things happen when students are freed to
share their thoughts and feelings in a personal and authentic way.

The second level of gut-level sharing is inviting local people to join the immersion for a while to share first-hand perspectives on the issues being discussed. When I investigated hunger and homelessness during my immersion experience this spring we had two gentlemen join us for dinner who had experienced significant periods of homelessness in their lives. Frankly, this dialogue lasted far longer than I had planned. The guests were eager to share and students were eager to listen. Many students commented that this was their favorite part of the immersion experience. How did I identify these local guests? I used the resources at my college. Our Service Learning Director, Coin Hurley, talked with administrators from a local agency who did a fine job identifying some people who could share powerful stories with the students.

The third and final level of gut-level sharing is to find means for students to unpack their experiences with one another. This process begins during the experience, but should certainly be extended through continued study and dialogue. I have found success in inviting students to identify film clips or songs to connect with their thoughts and feelings. If the context is appropriate, this is also the place in the experience to consider how prayer, ritual and sacramental opportunities can be included.

Inductive Aspects of the Immersion Experience

When I was recently playing with my 1 year-old daughter my wife said to me, "Why don't you try playing with her portals?" To my surprise we had toys called portals in my house: small partially transparent circles which allow a child to see the world in a red tint, blue tint or through slightly warped plastic shapes. These toys expressed to me the simple reality of an immersion experience. They are temporary vehicles for seeing the world differently and are therefore temporary spaces which are particularly rich for academic discussion.

The approach I am discussing is very inductive. We begin with a tangible hands-on experience after which the sights, sounds, smells and stories linger with us. Our friends in Latin America have offered much wisdom in recent decades about how to do this sort of reflection effectively. We begin by seeing, we proceed to make critical judgments and we conclude with informed action. As the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire expressed so eloquently in Pedagogy of the Oppressed: "Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world."6

I considered my Spring 2010 immersion experience to be an experiment. I set out with three simple outcomes in mind: (1) students will be exposed to a few of the burdens and realities of impoverished and homeless persons, (2) students will express a greater desire and openness for week-long national and international immersion experiences and (3) students will be able to identify the critical concerns of the Sisters of Mercy. So, how did it go? Out of thirteen who attended, seven said they would definitely participate in a week-long domestic or longer overseas experience (three said maybe, three said no). I was shocked by which students said yes. Ten out of thirteen were able to identify the critical concerns of the Sisters of Mercy after the experience. The majority of students (eleven out of thirteen) who attended said the experience made them enjoy the class more as a whole. The written feedback I received was also surprisingly positive:

It is easy to sit in a classroom and take notes about religion and society. Then you just walk out of class and your focus is on friends and activities. Service Learning exposes you to the real life connection between religion and the conditions of society. It becomes concrete to you, not just notes on a PowerPoint.

Often times I take for granted the simple things in life with which I have been blessed, some of those being the use of a personal vehicle, having a bed to sleep in and a home in which I can keep my belongings. I gained a whole new
aspect of respect towards people who deal with this in their daily lives. I also learned that homeless people are not simply homeless due to laziness and other aspects, but are unfortunately often victims to layoffs and other setbacks in their lives which put them in these situations.

Orientation Questions

If you are convinced that your students would benefit from a local immersion experience, you are probably already accumulating a list of practical questions. Allow me to offer a list of questions to help you get started. As you answer each of these questions the experience will naturally take shape.

- Which critical concern will you use?
- Which location/service agencies will best assist you? If you don’t know, who can help you find out?
- Who will be your student leaders?
- Which colleague can join you?
- Who will be your guest speakers (who have experienced first-hand the social concern being investigated)?
- What will be your vehicles for critical reflection and sharing?
- What about money? To this last question I will tell you that my typical budget includes: food (five to ten dollars per person), stipends or donations for speakers (thirty dollars each) and donations to agencies (fifty to one hundred dollars).

If you still have trouble picturing a possible local immersion experience, allow me to share with you a local immersion experience centering on racism which I plan to coordinate this winter:

Saturday
- 4 PM: board local bus to Hispanic outreach center
- 4:30 PM: tour and visit with guests at Hispanic outreach center
- 6:30 PM: dinner with local guests who have experienced racism first-hand
- 8:30 PM: Each student shares a song about racism for reflection (assignment given beforehand)
- 9:30 PM: Movie: *Crash* (with reflection)

Sunday
- 8 AM: breakfast
- 9 AM: academic teaching/reflection
- 10 AM: attend local Baptist (historically black) church
- 12:00 PM: lunch at church followed by activities with children from the church and neighborhood
- 2:00 PM: local bus back to campus

Follow-up conversation continues through e-mail evaluation, short-answer questions and discussion in class.

I hope that this paper offers a helpful framework for you in planning for local immersion experiences. I am only beginning to realize the impact these experiences can have on our students. I hope that many of my Mercy colleagues will join me in engaging students in the critical dialogue – and action – which this world so desperately needs. Enough with the pizza; let’s teach our students to digest the real world.

NOTES

3. Two of the most prominent studies include: *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* by Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton and the UCLA study: “Spirituality in Higher Education: Students’ Search for Meaning and Purpose.”