

A lot of schools 'do' Service and some do Service Learning – but how can we ensure that it deeply touches the participant in a way that changes their world view, value system and creates an agency within them to be 'agents of change' within our world? The answer is linked to; quality experiences, reflection upon experience in the context of a credible ideology, the active presence of mentors and placing service within a wider context of curriculum, life and school culture – so it is not a 'one off' nor a tick and flick. Service Learning has the potential to be the yeast / salt / light and seed that will help us graduate young people who in the words of Gandhi want to 'be the change you want to see in the world!'

Transformation or Ticking Boxes; taking Service Learning Seriously.

Br Damien Price cfc PhD

A story

One night I was out on Eddie's Van – just next to King George Square here in Brisbane. Off to the side a student from the school – a boy of 16 – was deeply listening to a very dishevelled street person – matted hair everywhere, quite shabby clothing. The conversation had been going on for some time – and I was a little concerned for the student as the man appeared to be quite passionate about his topic. Our 'code' on the street van if the situation was 'risqué' was "a cup of coffee with six sugars please!" I went over to the lad and asked, "Would you like a Coffee Matt?" "No Brother," he replied – "all is fine!" Later that night when the conversation finally ended I asked, "Are you OK Matt?" Matt O'Gorman replied;

"I was chatting to Len – a homeless guy that I knew well. He came over to me quite disturbed. He told me to be careful as "they were watching us – they have cameras everywhere!" "Who are watching us Len?" "They are – the Government, the City council – the army – they are everywhere – they are on the top of every building and they have cameras watching our every move!" For the rest of that time Len was sharing with me his fears – and the fears we should all have – as our every move was watched. At one point – a small voice in my head clicked in, "Len is crazy – he has lost the plot!" Then almost as quickly – another voice in my head came into play, "No this is just Len's mental illness – it is part of his paranoia – part of his story of abuse and substance abuse and resultant mental illness. I will just be present to Len – to his story – to him – beyond the presenting mental illness!"

This is the transformation that Service Learning can help give birth to – one that our world so desperately needs.

Transformation

It was the famous founder of the Catholic Worker Movement - Dorothy Day – who in 1963 said, "The greatest challenge facing the world today is how to bring about a revolution of the heart!" In our own day – Pope Francis in so many of his reflections invites all Christian faithful to a 'culture of encounter!' Have you met Jesus? Have you deeply encountered your brother and your sister whose home is the streets? Have you encountered – and dialogued deeply with the stranger within you? Have you become vulnerable as you stand before the 'other' – in whatever form the 'other' may take – so as to be transformed by their presence? Have you encountered

love? Have you danced with the mystery of life and love – that deeply longs to hug you deep within? Have you been deeply moved by awe, by mystery, by love – by encounter? Have you gone beyond the head – to the heart – and to the heart with hands held open – ready to truly experience?

It is in encounter that we are transformed? Mother Teresa in her acceptance speech for the Noble Prize said, “Do not turn your back on the poor – for when you do you are turning your back on Jesus Christ!”

I often refer to Jesus as the Upside down Messiah. I point out that on every page of the Scriptures Jesus goes to the edge, to the broken and to brokenness – and in that sacred, liminal space – he comes as guest – is deeply present – is in relationship – and that from that encounter – both he and they go away transformed!

I know it can be so glib – but have you ever sat with a young person as they have shared with you that what they had experienced was a “life changing experience!” Something has moved. They are not the same. Their eyes have been opened. They see things differently. They critique things differently. They have been liberated from closed mind-sets that this is the way the world is and shall be ever more. They know the questions to ask to build the bigger picture. They know that story is unique and sacred – and is neither right nor wrong but just is. They have truly and deeply met – the other. They are no longer as afraid – they have found a meeting ground where their spirit and the spirit of the other have met. They are not as ‘reactive’, their world view has changed, they are not hooked by dualism – and are ever more able to critique and choose in an empowering way.

Magis

So many of our youth are longing for this encounter – longing to experience – ‘more’ – magis – for their crap detector KNOWS that there must be more. They long for meaning. They long for authentic experiences of the heart. Only two weeks ago I had the privileged of walking along the riverbank at West End – with a young man of about 30 who said to me, “Pricey I want to experience God! I want to encounter God!” The young man – a teacher in one of the Edmund Rice flexi schools for children at risk – had spent time in an Ashram, did Yoga – had experimented with drugs – all sorts of searching – but was still ‘empty’ inside.

We live in a plastic world. On one hand we are swamped in noise – in rush – in materialism – in things – I was working in Adelaide last year and I was early for an appointment – and as I waited outside a school a group of 4 young men – all about the age of 15 came walking along – mobile phone in hand checking text messages or Facebook – earphones in as they listened to their I-pod and take away coffee in the other hand. I wanted to take a photo but my working with children blue card stopped me!!! I used to live in Melbourne – and going to work on the train – there was not a sound – not a single human communication – as everyone stared blindly at their I Phone. Noise, rush, materialism, technology as an end in itself – are like a blanket that

closes over the eyes and ears – so we cannot truly see nor hear – and like a blanket that wraps a heart in comfort – preventing true encounter – and transformation.

On the other hand we live in a world desperate for encounter with the other. Our dualistic world rapidly – driven by sound bites from CNN, rating driven shock jocks on our own radio and Governance by opinion polls and market research – daily creates a world of win – lose, us – them, in – out, saved – damned, right – wrongall masking the human face and Earth face of the other – who is truly my brother and my sister. So we build ever higher walls; philosophical walls, economic walls, wealth walls, theological walls, cultural wallsand behind these walls we live denied the gift of difference as we protect our precious, narrow, tunnel vision view of the world, of life and of truth.

The Canadian media guru – Marshall McLuhan in 1964 coined the phrase the global village. The young people that we work with are citizens of this global village – but it is a village that is at war, is divided, is polluted and rapidly breaking apart. Only the week before last I was visiting some friends up at Noosa and the father of a young man I taught said to me, “Damien I don’t think I have ever seen our world so divided, so angry and sad!”

It would be my deeply held conviction that Service Learning has a privileged role to play in both transforming the human heart – and thus in turn - transforming the world I have just described.

Tick and Flick – Ticking the Boxes

Poverty Tourism

There is an increasing number of people asking – challenging the value of Service – or Service Learning. Is it Poverty Tourism – certainly they ask this of the Immersion experience in the Developing World country – but they are also ask it of those who ‘parachute in’ to a refugee centre in Melbourne or an Asylum Seeker detention centre or into the world of the homeless via a soup van or into the sacred life of the elderly in a nursing home. When we stare, when we parachute in, when we come with our gifts to their need, our answers to their unasked questions, our saving of their situations, our opinion of their sacred storycertainly – critics have every right to question.

We are busy

I have been teaching for almost 40 years so I know just how busy schools and Universities are. I know that for many – the Service Learning activity or planning for it is agenda item 57 in their day squeezed into their one and only spare period for the day – with a sporting team waiting to be coached that afternoon and a University Tutorial that night – for which the pre-reading can’t even be located yet alone read.

The reality - sometimes

So often – we say, “Wouldn’t it be good if our Year 9’s had some experience of service? St Finbars of the Holy Grail College has their kids visit a nursing home. Oh, there is a nursing home

two streets away and the parent of one of the Year 9's works there. We have Religious Education on last period Wednesday – so let's go down then. I'll book the 22 seater buses and get a permission slip done. They can talk to the little old ladies in the West Wing – they are so nice. Make sure someone gets a photo for the school magazine – especially if we do what St Finbars of the Holy Grail College did – they had their kids sing at the morning tea and got great photos of it.”

Now I know I exaggerate – and I know that we are very well meaning in what we do but! Or we say, “Mangrove Swamp Grammar School takes their students to the Philippines every year. Last year they built ten new wooden huts for some poor families in a slum over a sewer. It cost them \$5000 for the trip - each but they raised the money selling tickets at the Rugby games. They got some great photos. Manilla is a mess – pollution everywhere and the traffic is horrendous – they almost missed their flight home as the traffic to the airport was so bad. Maybe we can do something similar?”

In many cases our ‘Service’ activities – or Community Engagement – or whatever your community calls your program that brings the life of your students into contact with the lives of the other – can be a ticking of the box.

“Every year we go to the Philippines.”

“Our Year 8's go to the Nursing Home.”

“We have great photos of the time with the Aboriginal Community in the Northern Territory in the school magazine.”

It feels good. We have ticked the box of ‘service’ – we have ticked the ‘Jesus’ box. It is what we should do and “the parents love it.” For me – ticking boxes means;

- It is often ‘one off’
- The experience is often in isolation – not part of a sequential program
- It is often not linked to the curriculum
- There is little to no quality work done on an Academic Experience prior to the experience
- We have not clearly articulated our goals and how this experience will be educational
- The focus is on the activity ‘in itself’ and is deemed successful if the participants feel good about it
- There is little to no quality pre-brief and de-brief during the experience
- There is little to no quality de-brief after the experience
- We have not assimilated the language and concepts from the community culture into the program from the program into the community

We could do damage

When our program is simply ticking boxes not only does true inner transformation much less likely to occur – not only is the experience more likely to be a ‘one off’ but deep psychological and values harm can occur.

When the focus is purely on providing ‘an experience’ we can;

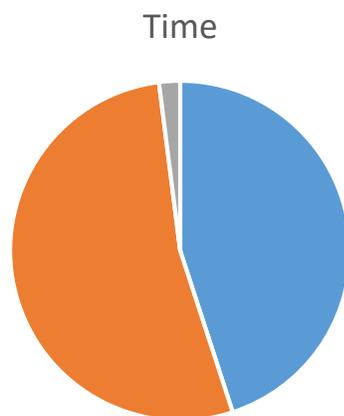
- Do psychological harm if there is a shock experienced in the form of violence or abuse or great poverty or a clash of values and beliefs
- Create blocks to future encounter because of fear or dissonance in its many forms
- Provide a situation where a stereotype is enhanced and left unquestioned – the limited experience may only enhance the prior belief
- Create a stereotype and or ‘single issue’ [where the learnings are not carried over]
- Channel psychological energy into anger – or fear – or resentment – or blame
- Cultivate a myth
- Create a honeymoon perception – “Oh, those people in the slum – surrounded by TB and unsafe water - are so happy!”

But not only can psychological damage occur – not only is the likelihood of transformation much less – all the research would also indicate that much less ‘learning’ of any nature will occur and – ultimately – most of us are from educational communities – and one of our key motivations for service would, I suspect, be learning in some way shape or form.

My experience is that the ticking box experience can look like this;

<p>Prior to the experience Planning – permission slips, fund raising, passports, booking travel, liaison with the partner organisation.....</p>	<p>During the experience The actual experience – full of activities – things we ‘do’</p>	<p>Post the experience Get the photos into the school newsletter, collect any other money, write a letter of thanks</p>
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In terms of time and effort – it could be graphed like this;



Blue = prior planning, **Orange** = Experiences during, **Grey** = post Experience ‘clean up’.

The adventure we are called to

How and where does transformation occur?

To understanding the potential for transformation we need to understand the psychological processes that are taking place in the service experience. The core psychological process that we need to engage in is the dance between what is held in the Semantic Memory and what is experienced in the Episodic Memory. This 'dance' is core to personal learning in all its forms.

Semantic and Episodic Memories

The Semantic Memory is where we hold our experiences, our meaning memory, our learnings, our expectations, our world view, our value system, our reaction filters and more. Coming to this conference I did not have to think a lot of how to get here – whereas Lyn Moten from Adelaide would. I saw Elizabeth Street – I knew where Elizabeth Street was, I had been here many many time – I knew what the nearest train station was and how to get from it to this venue. All of this was held in my Semantic Memory. No new learning occurred for me – when I looked at the Conference Program and saw where the venue was. I did not even experience any new learning in getting here as I knew – held in my Semantic Memory – that there were frequent train services going through Eagle Junction from several lines.

The Episodic Memory holds our immediate experience. The people, the faces, the noises, the meanings, the feelings, the reactions, the responses, the thought processes, the associations etc – all that takes place within myself – in the experience.

And a dance occurs – a dance that links what is experienced in the Episodic Memory with what is held in the Semantic Memory. When that dance focuses on – centres on – a particular aspect, a pertinent aspect of the Episodic Memory through the lens of particular matter held in the Semantic Memory – learning occurs – new learning.

Our task

Our first job – as professionals – professionals who want our young people to experience transformation – world view change – personal agency – is to **deliberately and systematically engage the Semantic Memory with what we need to have there**. I think of it as picking up a whole assortment of coat-hangers and drawers that I will furnish my room with – that in time – I will hang my clothing on and store clothing in.

Our second job – as professionals – is **to skills participants with a variety of reflection upon experience skills** so that they can make best use of the dance between the Semantic and Episodic memories. Firstly we need **skills of awareness** – for we need to be 'attentive to' particular stimuli. The process that takes place is that we 'attend' to particular stimuli that we are invited to hold as we enter the Episode – the experience. For example – let's stop right now – close your eyes – what can you hear?

I would imagine that some of what you just heard – you were not attending to three minutes ago? A combination of the silence – my not speaking – and your deliberate attention – meant that you became aware of and attending to that which was already present. So we engage our participants with skills of ‘seeing’ – of ‘hearing’ – of ‘becoming aware of culture’ – ‘of rituals and symbols’ – ‘of pecking orders’ – ‘power plays’ etc. We also have **awareness skills linked to our feelings** – for our feelings will be a key doorway to meaning – to deeper meaning.

Secondly we need **skills of reflection upon experience**. Skills of Social Analysis, skills of Theological Reflection, skills of cause and effect, skills of separating the person and the behaviour, skills of listening to the response that comes from within – holding it lightly and then attending to any deeper feeling or response and more.

Learning Theory

All of this is grounded in solid learning theory – especially in the learning theory associated with Experiential learning – learning from experience. There are many theorists in their field and all of them agree on several core aspects of the process.

Prior Learning / Prior World View / Values and Meanings

Cone and Harris, Green, Kolb, Seider, Le Cornu – all of these key writers in this field know that we begin with where the participant is at. What is their present world view? What has been their life experience? What are their hopes and expectations? What are their present attending concepts?

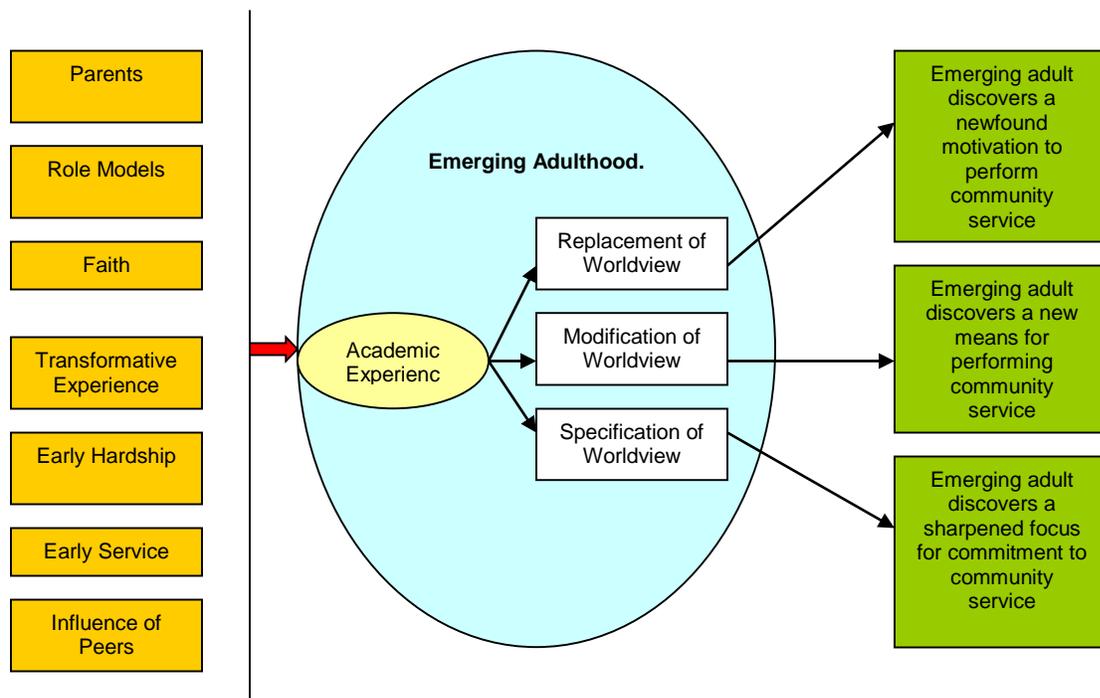
Scott Seider in particular has much to offer in this area if we are to ‘transform’. Seider and many other theorist focus on the **‘Academic Experience’**. The Academic Experience is that body of work that we engage in to prepare the students prior to the experience. It is the tilling of the Semantic Memory soil – it is the planting into that soil the concepts, processes and skills that we will need to reap a harvest. For Seider – the harvest comes in the form of a **replaced worldview** [the Muslims are not all bad – the homeless are not all lazy – we are all part of the problem etc], a **modification** of the worldview or a **specification** of worldview. All of these will then equip the participant with a great agency to engage their world with – a greater and deeper sense of ‘I can’ – I can be agent of change in this global village.

Other theorist refer to this element of the learning and transformation process using other terms [Kolb – Abstract Conceptualisation, Cone and Harris – conceptual tools, perceptions and categorization, Green – Facilitated Learning] Whatever you call it – this is the time where you and I as educational professionals prepare the ground for learning. You know that true learning is not jug – mug. We also know that **while we might place a student into an experience – that the experience in itself may not lead to learning**. The Academic Experience, Concept Map, Course Content, Preparation, Pre-brief – provides the boundaries, the language, the concepts, the ideas, the ideology, the sign-posts that we hope the learner will bounce off, engage with,

depth experience through – and so learn – but not just learn – but learn in a transformational way!

At the Conference dinner you will listen to Lucas Patchett and Nick Marchesi – two young men who founded the Orange Sky Laundry. Key to what Nick and Lucas did was to come up with an initiative that would honour the innate dignity of the homeless. Prior to their personal involvement with a Service Learning program they were probably not aware of the importance of hygiene – having your clothing washed – being able to put on a freshly laundered shirt – as a key element of self-worth and dignity – it was probably not a part of their worldview.

Framework Experiences: Impact of Academic Experiences that led to replacement, modification and specification of Worldview, (Seider, 2007, p. 629).



One of the first tasks for Service Learning professionals – if the experience is to be transformational – is to identify the **key concepts** that you will want the participants to engage deeply with.

Agency, powerlessness, power, empower, guest, presence, everyone has a story, cause – effect, innate dignity, home, Namaste, homelessness, rights, freedom, difference is gift, reciprocity, relationship, solidarity, advocacy, charity, change, forgiveness, person – behaviour, gifts and personal talents, essence, worth / value, poverty, illness, mental illness etc.

These concepts will change according to the focus of your Service Learning. The concepts I would engage participants with as we prepared to work with elderly people in a nursing home would be slightly different to those I might employ working with newly arrived refugee and asylum seeker children.

One of the gifts in this area is that when you engage with a concept over time and over several different Service Learning experiences it grows in strength, in its flexibility and in its power to truly inform the participant's world view. In the world of neurolinguistics – one might say that the concept gains a **psycho-cognitive strength**. For example if the student has engaged with 'guest' as they prepare to work with elderly people at a nursing home and reflect upon their experience – when they come to experience the 'story' of newly arrived refugees two years later – the concept would be firstly more quickly engaged with, more easily retrieved from the Semantic Memory to use to make more sense of what they are experiencing and more able to facilitate learning and meaning. When that same concept is then used on a soup-van with the homeless in Year 11 and or on an Immersion to Timor Leste in Year 12 it will be nuanced yet again and truly become part of the participants world view. Then 'guest-ness' is part of **THEIR** world view – transformation is taking place.

These concepts mirror – or should mirror the overarching ethos – ideology of your community. They should reflect your community culture 'at its best' [Br Marcellin Flynn fms – Culture, the way things are done around here!] For transformation to occur – the language and concepts of the Service Learning program must intimately reflect your community's core values, its seminal stories – its sacred stories. When this happens – something magic happens – there is a synchronicity within the community – a seamless garment between what is taught in the curriculum and what is experienced within the culture of the community – and the crap detectors of young adults cease going off.

But it is not only concepts that we plant into the Semantic Memory – to frame and deepen what is experienced episodically. As educators we also equip participants with **skills, relevant content and processes**. These elements will change as the focus / audience of our Service experience changes;

- The nature of mental illness
- The cycle of substance abuse
- The cycle of violence
- The elements of cultural shock
- The facets of ageing
- Why we fear difference
- The psychology of racism etc
- The cycle of poverty
- The elements of culture and sub-culture
- The dynamics of relationship
- The nature of reciprocal relationship
- The nature of empowerment
- The nature of powerlessness
- The cause and effect matrix
- The nature of and importance of awareness, advocacy, solidarity and action. etc

A classic example of such an element of the Academic Experience may be **internal and external attribution or 'in' and 'out' groups**. The ability to name and reflect upon 'in' and 'out' groups suggests a deeper and more sophisticated level of reflection upon experience and connection to course content. Individual (internal) attribution attributes the poverty experienced within the social context of the Service Learning experience to personal characteristics of the poor [greed, laziness, lack of talent etc]. Structural (external) attribution will look to social factors external to the individual [discrepancies in the economic system, lack of political power, educational inequalities etc] to explain the identified behaviour / situation (Rockquemore & Schaffer, 2000, p. 19).

The importance of this element of the internal processes going on in the midst of the service experience is that its identification provides the participant with another tool for self-awareness and reflection.

People tend to make individual attributions to explain other people's failures, yet make structural attributions to explain their own. In addition, existing research illustrates that individuals are likely to make individual attribution to out-groups (groups of which they are not members of), and to make structure attributions for in-group members (Rockquemore & Schaffer, 2000, p. 19).

Our role – as mentors and the role of reflection upon experience is to raise the awareness bar and to focus the awareness. To prepare the participant to 'be more aware' – to conscientise the participant to various elements of the experience – NOT to tell them what they are thinking or should think – not to tell them what they should or could feel – or what response is right and what is wrong. Our goal is for the participant – the potential learner – to enter the experience more 'conscious' of reciprocity, of guest-ness, of the nature of mental illness – and so as they relate and interact with the experience there is this level of the experience – at the back of their mind – that they bounce [directly and indirectly] their actual experience off; this is where learning occurs. This is where and how the participant is taken beyond where they are at. Hopefully this is where – transformation takes place.

Reflection upon Experience

None of the above will take place – like a wallflower – you will not be out on the dance floor of meaning making and transformation unless you engage effectively in reflection upon experience. It is in the reflection upon what has been experienced in the Episodic Memory through the lens of what is held in the Semantic Memory that learning – true learning occurs.

You here today do not need me to tell you how to engage students with skills of reflection. What I will say though is that **the techniques of reflection upon experience must be user friendly**. It is not good – on a hot and humid night in India after a day working with Mother Teresa's Sisters to have the participants writing a 5000 word reflection on what happened that day or to sit cross legged for two hours chanting a sacred Ancient Sanskrit Mantra. It may be as

simple as a 'word from your day' – 'a standing next to a feeling word from your response – and write one sentence – why you think that feeling arose' – doing continuums and more.

I sometimes refer to 'pre-de' – prebrief / debrief – prebrief / debrief – prebrief / debrief. The prebrief is that tilling of the soil, the sowing of the seed – debrief; the attendance to what has been stimulated in the Episodic Memory. The result is the deeper learning, the 'ah-ha' – the light-bulb moment – the personalisation – the awareness of story – the ownership of the concepts and more. When it happens – it is magic. This process – like all the others in Service comes to a point where it 'takes off' – where it is so owned by the participants psycho-cognitive energy that it becomes part and parcel of their world view, their mind set and their way of making sense of stimuli. That is a point of true freedom.

In Points

I have no doubt that I will go to my grave frustrated at the inability of the faith community to lead its youth into an EXPERIENCE OF GOD. My former Superior General – Br Philip Pinto used to say – talking about what motivated the founder of the Christian Brothers – Br Edmund Rice – “you can call it what you like – but what motivated a man – at the age of 40 to leave everything behind and to set out on an adventure that he knew nothing about and was not prepared for – nothing but an experience of God.”

Recently I was asked by a past student to speak at his wedding but I was not to mention 'God' as he and his wife did not believe in 'God' as such. What a challenge! So on the wedding day – in a beautiful hall in Bright at the foot of the Victorian Alps – I invited them to deliberately engage individually and as a couple – with awe, with mystery, with life, with loveI invited them to engage with that which is unsolved in their hearts – with the tensions as they struggle to dream together – and dance their love together – but to see this energy, this awe, this mystery, this life and this love – as personal – as real – as alive within them and around them.

Then after some time – I broke their rule and said – “Some call this dance – God!” It – God – love – awe – does not necessarily need a name – but to dance with it, to invite it is and around is where the magic will happen. I concluded my reflection by saying – and – Greg and Charlotte – may the Force be with you!

I mention this silly story because if we are to be transformed by Service – it is NOT just in the quality of the experience – though this is important. I always say – make the experience people centred – people before things, people before complex events – people truly meeting and sharing story. It is not just in the reflection upon experience – that we will be transformed. It is not just in the quality of what is sown in the Semantic Memory from our course program or Academic Experience.

The rituals and symbols – the sacred spaces – the silence and more – all of these will be what I call 'in-points' – points of entry for 'God' to enter in – for awe to take over – for mystery to

whisper 'more'. When you are involved in Service Learning – you don't just gather and 'debrief' as if you were a team of basketball players with a low percentage of successful free throw shots – gathering to work out 'why'. The Service experience is a sacred journey – for it is a journey of people, with people, for people – freeing people. So we wrap the experience – intersperse through it – ritual and symbol, times of silence, times of affirmation, times of grieving and celebrating.

One of my most powerful experiences was to sit in a shed at the Tennyson Playing Fields with a group of Year 10 boys who had just spent three days working with the children from Glenala Special School. It was 9 pm at night and we were coming to the end of our day. I invited each boys to write the name of their partner from the Special School on it – the lights were out – and each boy picked up a cupcake holder with a T-Light candle in it. They sat in silence – gently 'holding' the sacredness and dignity of that special person they had come to know. The silence was powerful. The darkness – and the light were powerful. I then played number 469 from the Jesus top 500 – I will never forget you my people – based on the prophet Isaiah – Isaiah 49. Slowly I invited the students to place their candle – their special buddy around the large Christ candle in the middle of the room and then form a circle – with arms linked.

When they reflected on those three days – many of the boys said that was the moment when it all made sense. I have had some of those young men – 10 years later recall it – with reverence and awe.

An 'in-point' is that energy space – where the participant is psychologically ready to go deeper in the meaning making process and the form / nature of that point assists this. From my experience of working with youth – some in-points are;

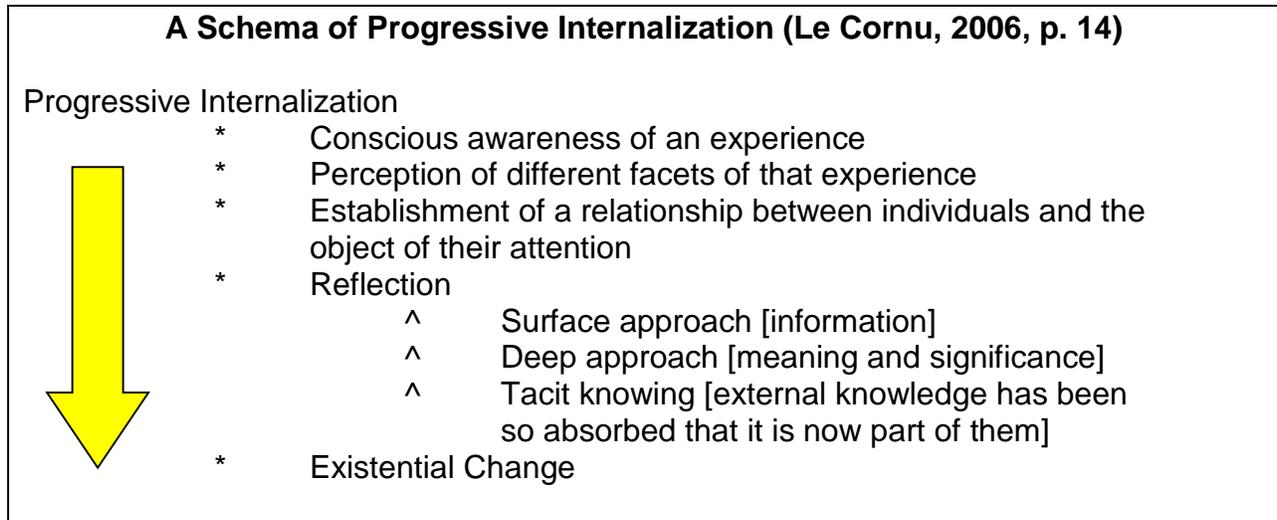
Darkness – Light	Significant life experiences; love, birth, death, illness. Experienced of being loved – being forgiven or forgiving.
Good ritual	Service
Good liturgy	Sharing of story
Silence and stillness	Nature
Critical thinking	Sense and experience of community
Questions that come from within – and are attended to	A mentor
Meditation	
Service linked to spirituality	
Having 'self' and your story honoured and taken seriously	

Time Points

In more recent years I have come to realise that key to transformation through Service are also 'time points'. My own Doctoral work and the anecdotal evidence from my years in ministry have suggested to me that when a participant has authentically engaged in a service experience – with active mentors, reflection upon experience, a good academic experience and all

wrapped in a credible ideology / theology – they will exit that experience at a deeper meaning making level.

Alison Le Cornu and others have broken open this concept of meaning making through experience. In her Schema of Progressive Internalisation Le Cornu suggests that we will progress from a Surface level of meaning making to deeper to tacit knowing arriving – hopefully – finally – at existential change [transformation].



From my own work I have observed that if, for example, a participant engages at age 13 with the clients in a nursing home – with good processes of reflection upon experience and a rich concept pool linked to ideology / values / theology and ‘exits’ the experience making deeper meaning from the experience – they will more quickly come to a deeper meaning making level in their next service experience. If the skills of reflection and critical analysis continue to deepen and are complimented by yet another rich concept pool as they work with refugees and asylum seekers when they are 14 – they will exit at a deeper meaning making level again. There comes a time when the Semantic Memory truly internalises these processes and makes them their own. At this point – the processes that lead to deeper meaning making become ‘part of them’ – part of their world view. This is true education – true educare – true liberation.

As in all learning – there has to be a psycho-cognitive – psycho-sexual readiness to grow, to learn, to explore, to risk and to let go of where one is at. Part of this is the identity journey that all young people are engaging with. Kahne and Westheimer talk about “makers of history” as young adults engaging with Service Learning – claim their agency and their ‘civic identity’ grows.

As it says in Ecclesiastes Chapter 3 – “There is a time for planting, for reaping, for letting go” and more. As educational professionals we need to be time aware – the right time for the right experience – the right level of personal engagement – the right space for risk and adventure. There is nothing radical in this – we do it in every other professional curriculum learning area – so why not do it in Service Learning.

Thank you for who you are and what you do. May I finish with the words of Paul to the people of Ephesus, “Glory be to him who power working in us and do infinitely more than we can ask or even imagine – glory be to him in the Church and in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Ultimately it is transformation – into love.

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