

**Learning, difference and development:
a study of volunteer placements in Indonesia**

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Contents

Contents.....	2
Abstract	5
Declaration	6
Copyright.....	6
List of tables.....	7
List of figures	7
List of photographs.....	7
The Author	7
Dedication	8
Acknowledgements	8
Introduction	9
 Chapter One: Volunteer Placements in Context	 12
Volunteering agencies.....	14
The Indonesian context.....	20
An Indonesian perspective on the development of the nation	26
 Chapter Two: Volunteering in Indonesia	 29
A social worlds perspective	29
The social world of volunteering in Indonesia	31
The legitimization of volunteering through participation.....	34
The legitimization of volunteering through change.....	37
 Chapter Three: Learning and Participation.....	 41
Epistemological considerations: learning in a context of difference.....	41
The context of difference in development projects and anthropology	42
Foregrounding learning.....	45
 Chapter Four: Fieldwork in the context of difference.....	 48
Planning the fieldwork.....	48
The fieldwork journey.....	50
Reflections on fieldwork in the contact zone.....	51
Appropriate dimensions of analysis from a contact perspective	54
A focus on resources.....	58
A review of the research process	62
 Chapter Five: Case Studies of Volunteer Placements.....	 63
Case studies to develop theory.....	63
An introduction to the case studies	64
Case Study I: Expectations of an English Teacher	64
The context and aims of the placement	65
Surprise - learning about assumptions.....	70
Difficulties with collaboration.....	71
A focus on social resources and learning	72
Case Study II: Stability and Sustainability	78
The context of the placement	80
The school's previous volunteer	81
Participants' engagement in school and community.....	82
Collaborative science teaching.....	84
A focus on social resources and learning	89
Case Study III: Participating with Bamboo.....	91

Learning and difference.....	94
A focus on social resources and learning	99
Case Study IV: The Frustration of Facilitation.....	100
Context and aims	100
Frustrations	101
Competing views	101
Detached views.....	104
A focus on social resources and learning	107
Reflection on these case studies.....	108
Chapter Six: The Learning Framework: boundaries, transgression and community	109
Classification, accounts and social resources	109
Culture as classification	111
Classification and the volunteer as individual newcomer - learning as participation	114
Language learning in the context of classification	118
What are the processes through which accounts and distribution of resources change?.....	119
1. Learning through contradiction.....	120
2. Learning through transgression.....	122
3. Learning through negotiation.....	127
The link between contradiction, transgression and negotiation.....	130
Outcomes of the placement in terms of the alternative learning framework	132
Chapter Seven: Learning in a Classified Context of Difference.....	134
Effects of learning in the first stage of volunteer placements.....	134
Unintentional transgression.....	138
Other effects of transgression.....	139
Summary.....	144
Effects of learning in the second stage of volunteer placements	145
Projects	146
Unintended outcomes of projects	149
Solidarity	150
Unintended outcomes of solidarity.....	153
Understanding other changes with respect to learning	154
Opportunities for negotiation in a changing context.....	154
Reactions to external resource pressures.....	155
Other volunteers and their transgressions.....	157
The volunteer's approaching departure.....	158
The end of the placement in terms of learning processes	159
Colleagues' accounts and the distribution of social resources.....	159
Volunteers' accounts of development: projects, solidarity, and difference.....	163
Volunteers after the end of the placement.....	166
Reflections on my own account of volunteering.....	167
Sharing accounts with other volunteers.....	168
Opportunities to speak.....	169
Dialogue through volunteering.....	170
Chapter Eight: The Learning of the Outsider and Discourses of Development	172
A brief review of the thesis.....	172
Reflections on the analytical process after fieldwork	173
Implications of the framework.....	173
The location of volunteering with respect to development.....	174
Volunteering is essentially a neo-colonialist intervention	174
Volunteering is irrelevant in the face of world poverty	175
Volunteer agencies and Southern institutions: learning, capacity-building and skill-sharing.....	177
Skill sharing.....	177
Capacity-building	178

A learning perspective: notes for volunteer agencies	179
Missed opportunities: learning from volunteering	181
Lessons beyond volunteering: learning through participation.....	182
Learning in development projects.....	183
A critique of learning in participatory development.....	184
Empowerment and learning	187
Learning and the development practitioner	189
Conclusion	191
References	193
Appendix I: Case Study of my placement in Merauke, Irian Jaya.....	202
Introduction	202
Learning en route to Merauke.....	203
The context.....	204
Working with teachers	204
Social life in Merauke	205
Gatekeepers to the interior	207
A busy final year	209
A tightening web	211
After my departure	212
Reflections	213
Appendix II: case study of placement at SMU Baik Hati	214
The placement	214
Institutional dynamics and the volunteer placement.....	215
‘Development’ and the placement	215
Working in other schools	219
Working the system.....	222
A second volunteer at the school	225
Cultural crisis.....	225
The control of the placement	228
Women, food and public speaking.....	229
Summary of learning.....	230
Appendix III: Q sort method, analysis and reflections.....	231
Introduction to Q sort.....	231
The statements and the key question.....	231
Results	235
Description of the seven factors resulting from the Q sort.....	238
The grouping of volunteers and colleagues	241
Evaluation of the Q sort process	243
Qsort, discourse and social resources	244
Comparison of Qsorts of colleagues in case studies.....	245
Appendix IV: Fieldwork itinerary.....	247
Appendix V: Example of NUD*IST coding tree and data file	251
Part of data file EL30 Below is an extract from one of the sixty-six data files referenced in the text.....	251
Appendix VI: Other instruments of data generation	255
Initial questionnaire to volunteers in Nusa Tenggara	255
Questionnaire June 1998 following up placements visited during fieldwork:	256

Abstract

The process and outcomes of volunteer placements are explored through the development of a learning framework which draws on perspectives from education, anthropology and development studies. This exploration leads to an assessment of the volunteer placement as a distinctive, relatively neglected and potentially valuable type of engagement in the field of development, because of the learning processes in which participants are engaged.

A volunteer placement is part of a managed process whereby professionals (teachers, health workers, etc.) from the North go to live and work for two or three years in a Southern institution. This process is maintained by volunteer agencies through the investment of material resources and control over information. Through their assumptions, commitments and practices, volunteers and colleagues legitimise the boundaries of their different social worlds prior to the placement. These boundaries constitute part of the context of learning when the placement commences.

The empirical focus of this study is a series of volunteer placements in a variety of institutions on the central islands of Indonesia (Nusa Tenggara) between 1992 and 1999. Case studies negotiated with differently positioned participants describe the learning processes in which they engage as they live and work together. In this empirical study, significant learning is understood to be located in the interaction of their accounts and the distribution of social resources. Accounts are interpretative resources, influenced by participants' experience prior to and during the placement, and by wider discourses. The distribution of limited social resources (time, space, material resources, information, and social positioning) is necessarily a social process involving other participants.

In a context of difference, learning processes involve participants' developing awareness of contradiction between their accounts and the distribution of resources. In acts of transgression they challenge powerful social classifications which limit the distribution of social resources, and create a context for negotiation between participants. Learning processes are seen to contribute to the construction of projects within the placement, to relationships of solidarity between volunteer and colleagues, and to particular accounts and distributions of social resources which outlive the placement.

In contrast with this learning framework, development agencies use terms such as 'capacity building' and 'skill-sharing' to signify learning processes. In doing so, they largely overlook the problems and opportunities of learning involved as an individual outsider participates in a context of classification. This study suggests that individual outsiders play significant yet hidden roles in many modes of development, and that a focus on learning would shift the rhetoric of development closer to the everyday reality of development activity.

Declaration

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List of tables

Table 1: Net Enrolment Ratios (NER) for Secondary Education by Province, 1995.....	23
Table 2: Human Development Index 1998.....	23
Table 3: Trend in Indonesian Human Development Index.....	23
Table 4: Examples of learning processes in case study placements.....	130

List of figures

Figure 1: Map of Indonesia.....	21
Figure 2: Map of Nusa Tenggara Timur.....	50

List of photographs

Photo 1: The new gateway for Dola High School.....	65
Photo 2: Frater Yanuarius and motorbike.....	68
Photo 3: David in Dola High School Class 2, Tuesday 3rd March, 1998.....	69
Photo 4: Preparing for a school retreat, Thursday 18th March, 1998.....	69
Photo 5: Phil teaching Class 1 physics, 9th March 1998.....	79
Photo 6: Preparing for a practical lesson: taking water to class.....	81
Photo 7: Ibu Elin teaching concepts of pressure, Saturday 4th April, 1998.....	85
Photo 8: Interview with Ibu Elin: using Q-sort statements, Saturday 4th April, 1998.....	86
Photo 9: Yuli and Marcus in the YPBF office, 8th April 1998.....	92
Photo 10: Alicia working on designs at home in Maumere, 5th March, 1998.....	94
Photo 11: The prototype bamboo house.....	97

The Author

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Dedication

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