



***Immersion objectives, method and philosophy.***

**1. Immersions use 'experiential learning' principles**

Perhaps the most influential educationalist of the twentieth century was John Dewey (USA, writing mainly 1910-1930). Dewey contends that "*Experiential learning takes place when a person involved in an activity looks back and evaluates it, determines what was useful or important to remember, and uses this information to perform another activity.*"

The ultimate "another activity" that we hope an Immersion might generate is a lifelong commitment to social justice. But how does this actually happen; what are the internal mechanisms and processes that might trigger such outcomes? Five stages of experiential learning are conventionally identified by educationalists; they seem applicable here. These are to:

- ◆ experience/discover;
- ◆ to share the results and your reactions with others;
- ◆ to process what you make of the experience;
- ◆ to generalise ('extrapolate') from the experience to the world/your world; and
- ◆ to apply what was learned in a specific setting to other settings.

When these elements are assimilated, hopefully an enhanced sense of personal and civic responsibility follows. We do not seek guilt-driven action, but a quiet determination to 'do one's bit' toward a more just and equitable world, in whatever form one feels they can contribute. The proof is in the pudding. Many of our Immersion graduates have thereafter embraced various forms of justice work. Seven, for example, have returned to Timor-Leste to live and work for various periods, and in various capacities. Most Immersion graduates hold the experience close to their hearts.

**2. Immersions use 'service learning' principles**

You'll have heard this phrase, not least because many schools, universities and governments stipulate that students ought participate in Service Learning. You may have wondered what the phrase means. The following components are typically present in service learning; each is integral to our Immersions:

- The experience is structured, which is to say both that it has stages and that it is planned. It does not 'just happen' by coincidence or serendipity. It must be skilfully designed and executed to attain its objectives; throwing people together isn't sufficient;
- It is a learning experience that requires each of these elements: preparation, reflection during the service, and reflection after the service. Action and reflection are mixed and matched at different points;
- There is a community service component, of actually 'doing something' useful to others. Self-styled 'helpers' are not to be imposed; rather, service occurs in response to requests / identified needs;
- Ideally, both parties gain from, and grow through, these experiences. Some genuine 'reciprocity' gradually emerges, even if a little strange and awkward at first;
- There is some balance between the respective requirements of 'service outcomes' and 'learning goals'.

**3. Building relationships is central**

The ERCSJ Board "...prefers to avoid stipulating particular projects/tasks to be undertaken on immersions. The Board regards the choice of particular activity as not integral to the value of an immersion but, rather, a conduit or 'hook' through which relationship can be built. Prior to departure and then again on arrival, the Immersion Coordinator is to consult host communities to ascertain the activities and projects that



would be most useful from their perspective. Two paramount questions for workers and participants to be mindful of throughout an immersion are: *what are the community's expectations?*; and *are we being respectful of the community's needs?* The paramount consideration is the physical, mental and emotional safety of participants and host communities." (ERCSJ Board Meeting minutes, 16 February 2006).

**4. To view the world through the eyes of the poor**

Philosophers who specialise in 'how people know what they know' ('epistemology') concur that what you see partly depends on how you look, and from where you look. It depends on your 'perspective', which includes your assumptions, values and life experiences. Moreover, given that there are so many facts 'out there', not all can be absorbed. To cope, every brain skips some facts when observing, however objective and dispassionate its owner believes themselves to be. For these and many other reasons, there are 'multiple truths', sometimes co-existing in tension.

The social justice traditions do not deny any of this complexity and diversity - and hence why decent, intelligent people can disagree. But social justice's starting point is - and must be - the vista of the poor: what the poor see when they look through their lens. (This is not to say that poor people see things identically. To deny an entire strata of society the capacity to disagree is to deny them the human condition permitted of others.) Seeing through, however briefly, the lens of the poor offers a glimpse, an inkling, into their daily life. Development debates often point to ignorance as the affliction of the poor world - but, however differently, it is no less that of the rich world. What we see on Immersion will be fleshed out with such tools as critical social analysis.

**5. To convey the successes of a host culture as well as its suffering**

We neither provide a freak show nor seek to 'guilt' westerners into embracing social justice. Rather, we hope that genuine movement of the heart occurs, dissolving all else to distil, drill down, to the essence: these are real people, my fellow humans. Part of this experience is to participate in, relish and celebrate successes of, and joyful events within, host cultures and communities.

**6. To ponder how the rich world can learn from the poor world**

For example, one of life's great paradoxes is that folks in poor countries often appear to have a greater capacity for joy than folks in rich countries. Why and how does something so counter-intuitive occur? These and many other puzzles may present themselves to you in the course of an Immersion.