Community-based service learning in international contexts exposes students to communities that differ from their own by race, age, class, culture, and life experiences. As Schultz (1990) suggests:

Our experiences also shape our moral feelings and intuitions. Growing up in a white, middle-class neighborhood may make it very difficult for us to empathize with the pain, desolation, difficulties of minorities or the poor... Being immersed in a minority culture, becoming a minority in another culture may help us to better understand and empathize with the situation of the person whom our society regularly degrades and dehumanizes. Such experiences may awaken new moral feelings in us and so offer us new moral possibilities.

I would add, particularly in the case of international work, such work also challenges faculty and students to the core. Programs with community-based service learning components, especially those that have activist training and expectations of solidarity work, involve levels of risk and commitment at personal and institutional levels which go well beyond traditional courses. The programs outlined below, share long-term commitments to people and communities, structured reflection on ethical and intellectual issues, and respect for diverse cultures. The programs seek local community input on defining needs and match community-identified needs with student skills. In all, the goal is to create a learning experience from which students learn through activism but one that does not privilege their learning at the expense of community members. These changes reflect the impact of solidarity ethics on academic practice.

Students, faculty, and academic institutions leave with the expectation to continue their commitments to economic solidarity across contexts. Realizing the depth and intensity of such commitments, particularly when it involves challenging our own privilege can be intimidating and inspiring. The malefic generosity (Turpin 2008) that often stems from dominance, can translate into the desire to ‘do something’ or ‘help’ rather than listen, learn, and do what is necessary from the
perspective of partners. Understanding that work in Chiapas is also training for the serious work that needs to take place in the US can be disconcerting. The following section traces the evolution of my academic practice in Mexico from academic course with service learning to delegations and solidarity—a relationship still under construction.

In 1996, Hartwick College faculty members were invited to submit applications for participation in an innovative curriculum development project in global education. The focus was intercultural, international immersion programs for first year students. The program’s goal was to enhance first year students’ effectiveness as learners in an increasingly complicated, interrelated, multicultural world. Ultimately, through dialogue with one another, and through sharing years of intercultural and disciplinary work, the faculty chosen developed shared models for intercultural study programs. Implicit in this approach was the assumption, that if first year students were exposed to challenging, cross-cultural programming early on as they passed through subsequent courses and majors, they would bring a deeper and more personal understanding and knowledge of cross-cultural matters to the entire campus resulting potentially in a more progressive and informed campus climate.

After meeting for nearly a year and sharing information and views on learning, assessment, course structure, teaching methodology and group dynamics, my course on Chiapas, Mexico, and my colleagues’ course on Germany/France—both taught during January term abroad—became the initial models generated. The next year, programs to Thailand, South Africa, and Jamaica were created. Throughout the 1996–1999 years, we debated and analyzed our models from inception to completion.

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Of the five first year models generated, several had service learning components including mine in Chiapas. This decision on my part was based on sixteen years of community organizing and activism and ten years of work in service learning and incorporation of this methodology into discipline-based courses including Women and Social Change, Contemporary Theory, Children’s Lives, and Introduction to Women’s Studies and an interdisciplinary January term that I chaired entitled Vision, Action, and Community. I linked this foray into ser-