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**Service Learning – based Pedagogical Approach
and Students’ Perceptions**

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Abstract

Universities in Europe have more opportunities to develop teaching and learning strategies in the framework of ERASMUS + projects. Several development directions in innovative pedagogy focus on societal challenges. Service learning has proven to be an efficient mechanism to increase the level of civic engagement of students and graduates, where they learn, act, and reflect on the lessons learnt from the service to community. Service learning is currently more applied than theoretical, diverse in the way of implementation, and the level of the decision-making process. Several guides describe what service learning is, but universities still do not have a unique and clear way of promoting it. Open labs in universities provide an adequate context for promoting service learning through projects. Therefore, promoting service learning through teaching has much room for improvement. The objectives of this paper are: to describe the service learning approach; to analyse the opportunities to develop service learning in universities; to analyse students’ perceptions on the service learning pedagogy. The methodology includes: the literature review on service learning, descriptive research on service learning opportunities and research based on a questionnaire to identify students’ openness towards such a pedagogical approach. The findings show that service learning is a pedagogical methodology which can be integrated into teaching and learning strategy, but needs more time to be tested, accepted, and understood by the community of professors and students.

Keywords: service learning; teaching and learning strategy; societal challenges; ERASMUS+; students’ perceptions.

JEL Classification: A10, I20, I24, D71.

1. Introduction: Understanding the Service-Learning Approach

Service-learning is a way of engaging participants into community actions in a variety of ways, for the benefit of learners and communities. It is a specific approach

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very well managed in higher education institutions, where students can either develop projects / activities or work within a course / discipline with curricular or extracurricular tasks.

1.1 Service-Learning as an Innovative Pedagogy in Higher Education

Service-learning (SL) is a teaching and learning approach which connects three processes – learning, action, and reflection, in a way which generates opportunities for students to participate in a real service meeting a real need of a particular local community. Resch and Schrittmesser (2021) state that in a service learning-based teaching, students better understand the course content and increase their civic engagement. Moreover, authors explain the importance of this pedagogy by strengthening its advantages, for example, students have the opportunity to enhance their personal development, they engage in real cases, and have the time to reflect on the process.

Service-learning pedagogy is an experiential learning, where students have opportunities for civic engagement and also community-based learning with impact on sustainability (Boland, 2014). Data generated from reflection show how the learning experience contributes to gaining insights in knowledge, students being engaged in real cases to solve local needs of specific communities (Carrington, 2011).

Service-learning can be defined as both an educational philosophy and a pedagogical technique for combining community service with academic objectives. Academic Service-Learning is a teaching methodology which utilises a community involvement component as a means for students to gain a deeper understanding of disciplinary course objectives and to gain a deeper understanding of civic life and participation through structured reflection.

According to Chenarani (2017), service-learning is not only a pedagogy but an educational philosophy which combines community service with academic objectives. In a service-learning process, students become active learners, having the opportunity to apply their what they learnt to actual community issues (Chenarani, 2017).

Service-learning can be defined in the narrow and broad sense. In a narrow sense, service learning refers to an experiential learning process based on a course or a project with rules clearly set at an institutional level. In this case, service learning is a methodology which makes students engaged directly providing a needs-and context-adapted service, including also reflective activities consisting in a diversity of forms, for example, group discussions and journals (Folgueiras et al., 2020; Moffat, Decker, 2000). In a broad sense, service learning is a set of activities built on learning-through-service, when students are invited to provide services organised in an extracurricular format (Sandekian, 2007).

Service-learning, as a pedagogy used in higher education, supports students in developing citizenship capabilities and local citizenship, reflection and reciprocity being very important in this approach (Mtawa, Nkhoma, 2019).

Service learning is clearly described in applied guides, most of them in digital format. A simple understanding of the service-learning concept is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Service-learning categories

Service-learning mode	Description	Examples
Direct service-learning	Students connect with the community on an interpersonal level.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - tutoring, - activities for the elderly, such as reading, - working with youth.
Indirect service-learning	The community partner is the one who identifies a need and gets students engaged in addressing it.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - fundraising activities for an organisation, - creating posters or other visuals for a community organisation, - planting trees in a community space.
Research-based service-learning	Collaborative research where community agents, such as nongovernmental agencies, manage a research dedicated to fulfil the community needs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - auditing energy, consumption, - data collection in a community project.
Advocacy-based service-learning	Students contribute to generate awareness and educate different groups about public topics of interest to the community.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - organising public forums on local community issues, - communicating information on relevant aspects to the community, - addressing social issues.

Source: author's contribution

(adapted from the: <https://www.suffolk.edu/student-life/student-involvement/community-public-service/service-learning/what-is-service-learning>).

The examples provided represent concrete solutions to different local needs and get the form of a service to that community, in a collaborative manner.

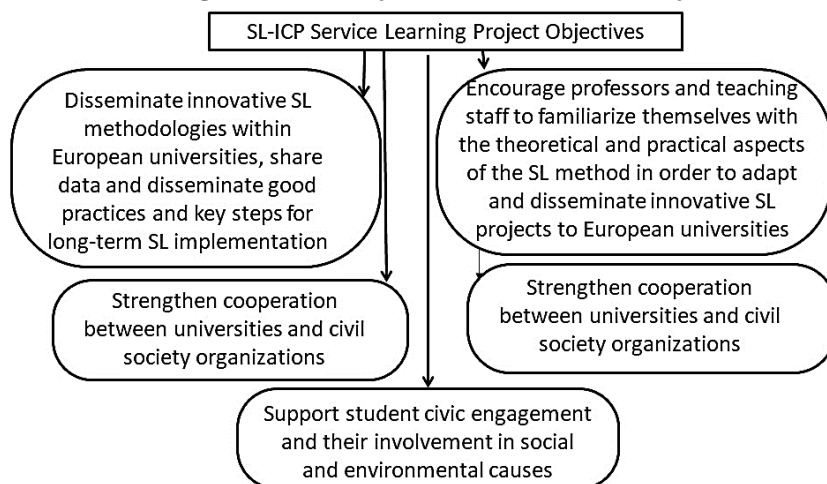
1.2 Service-Learning as a Collaborative Practice of Stakeholders

Service learning involves different stakeholders in joint actions for the benefit of the community. It generates a real-world learning for students, and several benefits for community groups, agencies, and organisations (Rutti et al., 2016).

In the project entitled “Service Learning: Intersectoral Collaboration Practices for the development of the students’ soft skills and socially engaged universities”, project type: ERASMUS + Call 2022 Round 1, number: KA22022-1-FR01-KA220-HED-00008974, (SL-ICP Project), innovative learning and teaching practices are developed to support students to gain soft skills and field experience from

community engagement (Project website, 2023). This project has several objectives related to service-learning awareness, as observed in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Main objectives of the SL-ICP Project



Source: Author's contribution

(adapted from the Project website, 2023: <https://eurasianet.eu/service-learning/>).

The abovementioned project is coordinated by Eurasia Net, a nongovernmental organisation promoting European and international cooperation in several areas, such as educational, intercultural, or environmental domain, through youth exchanges and involves 6 European universities (Eurasia Net website: <https://eurasianet.eu/qui-sommes-nous/>). The collaboration is done for the implementation of the work packages referring to mapping and analysis of existing service-learning initiatives, training of professors on service-learning methods, organising local events in all territories involving local stakeholders, creating an implementation guide for such projects and promotion of service-learning actions.

Under this Erasmus project, several workshops in local territories were organised in 2023 to share the best practices of civic engagement and to explain the concept of service-learning and its benefits. Three workshops organised at the University of Bucharest put together 33 professors, students, and civil society representatives to support students in their learning process with innovative methods and field experiences. In one of the debates, the participants revealed their perceptions on what makes a civic project successful, as shown in Figure 2, while the main weaknesses of a service-learning project include the lack of some students' engagement, the lack of motivation, some giving up of volunteers, not enough promotion of the project, the need for proper logistics (just a good idea is not enough), clear and effective recognition of the student work (curricular recognition).

Figure 2. Features of a Successful SL Project



Source: Author's contribution (SL-ICP Project workshop of March 2023).

Moreover, studies have shown that service-learning actions are directly linked with employer promotion of corporate social responsibility, while service-learning responsibility and desire to learn of students are connected to a perceived value for project coordinator (Lester et al., 2005). It is a common understanding of the fact that the service-learning approach is a collaborative practice where different stakeholders work together, sharing the same objectives; service-learning initiatives connect students, academics, and the local community in a way which can be referred to as a teaching and learning through engaging, becoming problem solvers and effective partners. In addition, the service-learning approach could be considered a real contributor to social and civic engagement and of university reform (Aramburuzabala et al., 2019).

2. Problem Statement

Several guides on how to develop service-learning courses or projects in universities must be considered from the literature review, some of them being more visual than others, more general, or more local orientated. Some put an emphasis on the benefits for the university, students, and community partners, such as the Service Learning: A Guide prepared by Sheila Corder and the Center for Teaching and Learning at Boston University (Website of the Guide: <https://www.bu.edu/ctl/guides/service-learning/>), while others put an emphasis on the course development, such as in the Service-Learning Course Design Guide at the University of Tennessee (Website of the Guide: Service-Learning Course Design Guide: <https://teaching.utk.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/78/2018/04/442930-Service-LearningGuide-v2.0accessible.pdf>).

A synthesis of relevant university guides is provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Service-learning guides

Title of the guide	Institution	Relevant approach
Service Learning: A Guide	Boston University, Centre for Teaching and Learning	Service-learning is incorporated in a course.
Service Learning Teacher Training Manual	University of Nebraska	Phases described from concept to project evaluation
Service Learning Handbook	Regis University	Several methods for critical reflection
Practical guide on e-Service- Learning in response to COVID-19	European Association of Service-Learning in Higher Education	Good practices are revealed

Source: Author's contribution (adaptation from the Guides webpages)

Many universities develop and implement engaging activities for students, but not all of them are incorporated into the curriculum, and not all of them are service-learning actions. In many cases, service-learning actions coordinated in universities to get students engaged do not match the students' perceptions, but there is a student recognition of the service-learning contribution to the retention of the course material and achievement of the learning materials, as well as for service-learning is valuable for personal and professional development (Currie-Mueller, Littlefield, 2018; Mann, Schroeder, 2019). Research suggests that students' perceptions are very important in understanding how they can benefit more from the service-learning actions, through a good observation of the students' feelings and perceptions (Colvin, 2020).

Therefore, the current state of the service-learning initiatives is differently institutionalised in universities. Statistics show that 95 % of students consider that their attitude toward service has become more positive and that 90 % of students declare that they made a meaningful contribution to the community, according to the Service Learning Institute at California State University (Service Learning Quick Facts, <https://csumb.edu/service/service-learning-quick-facts/>). The paper addresses the gap between the level of awareness towards the service-learning and the effective service to the community provided by the students. The question is how are the students' knowledge/awareness on community engagement and the students' willingness, with the effectiveness of the service-learning related?

3. Research Questions / Aims of the Research

The objectives of this paper consider the description of the service-learning approach, the analysis of the opportunities to develop service-learning in universities, and the analysis of the students' perceptions about the service-learning pedagogy. The methodology includes: the literature review on service learning, descriptive research on service-learning opportunities, and research based on a questionnaire to identify the students' openness towards such a pedagogical approach. Two hypothesis and their alternate hypothesis have been considered:

- H1 0. The students' awareness on civic engagement has no effect on their effective civic engagement in service-learning projects.
- H1 a. The students' awareness on civic engagement has a positive effect on their effective civic engagement in service-learning projects.
- H2 0. The students' willingness for civic engagement has no effect on their effective civic engagement in service-learning projects.
- H2 a. The students' willingness for civic engagement has a positive effect on their effective civic engagement in service-learning projects.

4. Research Methods

The methodology includes: the literature review on service learning, descriptive research on service-learning opportunities, and a research based on a questionnaire to identify the students' openness towards such a pedagogical approach. The questionnaire was piloted and improved in the first semester of the 2022-2023 academic year. It revealed that using the concept of service-learning directly in the survey, might be confusing for students. They addressed additional questions, for example: If I worked for a company would that be SL?; If I bring an evidence of volunteering activity, does it count?; If I get involved in environmental issues (cleaning an area) does it mean SL?; How many hours should I be active in the community?; What does a community mean? Therefore, the questionnaire was then improved with a clarified paragraph on SL, and before the students filled it in, they were already having a face-to-face explanatory meeting.

The survey was conducted during January-May 2023 (in a Google form document) at the Faculty of Business and Administration, within the University of Bucharest, and the entire population of students was considered. 178 valid responses were collected, the response rate being 73 %. The students' awareness on civic engagement, their willingness on civic engagement has a positive effect on their effective civic engagement in service-learning projects. The questionnaire included open and closed questions for which the Likert scale with 5 levels was considered (1 being the minimum level and 5 the maximum level of awareness, engagement, etc).

5. Findings

The measured variables of the Likert scale, generate the same statistical coefficients, as observed in Table 3.

Engagement message from students to motivate other students: Now is the time!; Help others and you will be helped, too!; Do better and become better!; Be yourself what others were not!; Help, so we can save the planet!; Engage yourself, so you get to know yourself better!

Table 3. Statistical coefficients

Result details and calculations	The correlation between students' awareness on civic engagement and their effective civic engagement in service-learning projects	The correlation between students' willingness for civic engagement and their effective civic engagement in service-learning projects
No. of entries	178	178
R calculation	- 0.1346	- 0.1623
p-value	Although technically a negative correlation, the relationship between your variables is only weak (nb. the nearer the value is to zero, the weaker the relationship). The P-Value is .074547. The result is not significant at $p < .05$.	Although technically a negative correlation, the relationship between the variables is only weak (nb. the nearer the value is to zero, the weaker the relationship).

Source: Authors' contribution (statistical p- value calculations).

Therefore, between students' awareness and their engagement in the community, there is a weak negative correlation. Same, in the case of the correlation between students' willingness for civic engagement and their effective civic engagement in service-learning projects.

The students' perceptions prove that: Level of student engagement in civic engagement (49 % – no); Reasons for not being more engaged (64 % – lack of time) the correlation between students' willingness for civic engagement and their effective civic engagement in service-learning projects.

6. Conclusions

SL is an innovative teaching and learning strategy which allows students to actively learn and not to engage in actions during their presence on campus. Universities are open to community engagement and provide training for professors to support youth engagement. Students' perceptions reveal an interest in doing service-learning, for all stakeholders practice. The more aware they become, the less effectively they get engaged. Moreover, the higher the willingness for civic engagement and their effective civic engagement in service-learning projects.

Universities need to learn from each other, and so do the stakeholders, too. A strategy for the SL development and implementation within universities under the framework of either some credits allocated from the total number of a specific subject, or a SL projects demonstrates the role of universities in the community developments through the human resources.

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