Service-Learning, an Experience in Higher Education Framed within the Context of COVID-19

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Abstract

This article presents a model for implementing the service-learning methodology based on the Sustainable Development Goals. This work describes the experience carried out during the 2020-2021 academic year with first-year students from the Degree in Pedagogy at the University of Valencia (Spain), an experience framed within the COVID-19 pandemic. The results prove the suitability of using this methodology to enhance the teaching competencies related to learning skills together with personal development skills. Planning teaching actions on the premise of solving actual problems helps the University contribute and generate an impact in terms of social commitment. In addition, the students show an increased level of motivation towards learning when developing socially useful projects.

Keywords

Aprenentatge servei, una experiència a l'eeducació superior emmarcada en el Context de la COVID-19

Resum

Aquest article presenta un model d'implementació de la metodologia d'aprenentatge servei basat en els Objectius de Desenvolupament Sostenible. El treball descriu l'experiència duta a terme durant el curs 2020-2021 amb alumnes de primer curs del Grau en Pedagogia de la Universitat de València (Espanya), experiència emmarcada dins de la pandèmia del COVID-19. Els resultats demostren la idoneïtat d'utilitzar aquesta metodologia per a potenciar les competències docents relacionades amb les habilitats d'aprenentatge juntament amb les habilitats de desenvolupament personal. Planificar accions docents sota la premissa de resoldre problemes reals ajuda a la universitat a contribuir i generar impacte en termes de compromís social. A més, els estudiants mostren un major nivell de motivació cap a l'aprenentatge en desenvolupar projectes socialment útils.

Paraules clau

Aprenentatge servei, universitat, pedagogia, metodologia, compromís social.

Aprendizaje-servicio, una experiencia en educación superior enmarcada en el contexto del Covid-19

Resumen

Este artículo presenta un modelo de implementación de la metodología aprendizaje-servicio basado en los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible. El presente trabajo describe la experiencia llevada a cabo durante el curso 2020-2021 con alumnos de primer curso del Grado en Pedagogía de la Universidad de Valencia (España), experiencia enmarcada dentro de la pandemia del Covid-19. Los resultados demuestran la idoneidad de utilizar esta metodología para potenciar las competencias docentes relacionadas con las habilidades de aprendizaje junto con las habilidades de desarrollo personal. Planificar acciones docentes bajo la premisa de resolver problemas reales ayuda a la Universidad a contribuir y generar impacto en términos de compromiso social. Además, los estudiantes muestran un mayor nivel de motivación hacia el aprendizaje al desarrollar proyectos socialmente útiles.

Palabras clave

Aprendizaje-servicio, universidad, pedagogía, metodología, compromiso social.

1. Introduction

There has been an extensive debate on the role that education plays in training citizenship, given the transformative potential that such training may in itself represent, through the 20th Century and the first decades of the 21st. This debate has been transferred to university institutions, which many voices claim to be optimal spaces for learning, not only in the broadest vocational and cultural senses, but also humane, and therefore, ethical and moral. It should not be forgotten that enabling learning situations related to training citizenship is one of university institutions' own duties. High-quality university training cannot separate vocational from citizenship training (Martinez, 2006).

Accordingly, despite a lack of clear consensus about the specific methodologies, strategies and/or resources serving as a guide to training citizenship, there is nonetheless an agreement about the appropriateness of bringing education and training together in real settings and contexts, as well as favouring the competences required for community life. These teaching-learning settings and contexts are promoted to solve conflicts from a variety of disciplines and areas of knowledge (Guerrero & Calero, 2013). The insertion of these in-classroom pedagogical practices implies the use of active methodologies with which students become the central pillar in the teaching-learning process, and professorship turn into a guide and/or accompanying figure. Active educational methodologies connect to a larger extent with students' interests, as they are able to observe the practical part from learning, which has been acquired in real situations and contexts (Silva & Maturana, 2017).

Aiming at exploring, in a more specific manner, the methods which could be used in the classroom for citizenship training and community involvement, which in turn enable a connection to the technical and professional learning required by different university degrees in a way that students find motivational, it has been found that a methodology that facilitates both dimensions is Self-Learning. Its implementation in university environments

may be an opportunity to develop a sense of citizenship among students, as well as promote other values needed for community life (López-Fernández, Benítez-Porres, 2018; Sotelino, 2015; Francisco & Moliner, 2010). Self-Serving methodology favors teaching competences related to learning skills (teamwork, creativity, digital competence, etc.) together with personal development skills (tolerance, solidarity, empathy, etc.). Currently, the Spanish Network of Service-Learning (REAS) is going to great lengths to collect many initiatives that are being carried out at different educational stages. Some of them are placed in higher education, specifically the Spanish University Network of Service-Learning (ApS-U) has collected many of the initiatives carried out on this stage, being Social Sciences and Law the areas where more prominent experiences were observed. Nevertheless, having a good network of entities, companies, institutions and/or organisms to make this kind of projects possible might enable the scalability of this methodological proposal on any area of expertise.

Any concerns about citizenship training, responsible and transformative in our coexisting environment, must consider the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and their incorporation on the proposals suggested. The University must contribute in the development and fulfillment of SDGs in a broad level, not only by providing training and research, but also involving the agents that it consists of. The SDG Agenda covers a wide number of social, economic, and environmental challenges. Universities' functions, experience, and preparation are a key factor to overcome such challenges (REDS-SDSN, 2017).

This research is intended to join forces in the visualisation and possibility provided by ApS methodology and aims at illustrating an implementation model based on real experience. This plan generated adaptations in the syllabus to introduce, in a unified manner, learning on community and/or social competences together with the competences required by the studies where this educational innovation is framed: the Degree of Pedagogy. The following section will show the method used for the implementation of service-learning on higher education framed by the DSGs with Pedagogy first-

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graders from the University of Valencia on the subject Organisation: Strategies for Educational Action in Diverse Contexts.

In addition, given the restructuring undergone in education due to COVID-19, this experience has shown an opportunity to take action to deal with some of the demands that the pandemic has arisen which, in turn, could be linked to educational actions in the development of projects that favor community services. Creativity and innovation, with the help of new technologies, allow the design of different service-learning proposals that bring other ways and modes of generating actions and/or caring services that do not necessarily require on-site attendance (REAS, 2020).

2. Description of the implementation model

Any implementation of a service-learning proposal in the classroom requires a model acting as a guide that will put the methodology into practice. Accordingly, and following the steps provided by Puig (2015), the experience developed in higher education is this:

1. Needs Detection Stage: initially, two in-classroom sessions were used so that students could get acquainted with the foundations defining service-learning methodology. In the first session, a presentation out about a theoretical approach to terminology was carried with the intention of showing references and examples that could help students make their choices, stages and their completion times were defined, and finally, students were shown the organisms that promote this teaching-learning methodology on the different educational stages in Spain; in the second session, students received the visit of an expert who showed them some examples of real service-learning experiences which he contributed to design and develop. These examples helped create group formation in the classroom and choose the subjects to work on. Each group developed initial research before deciding the subject that their own service-learning would address, and they explored the needs and opportunities both inside the university, seen as the body that integrates their subject, and those entities nearby the space where they intended to contribute with their service. Then, the groups analysed the

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training requirements for the subject by examining the teaching guide; it was identified that projects based on service-learning methodology would help develop the capacity to get involved in processes that favor research capacity and innovation in educational contexts, on the basis of participative and collaborative process dynamisation, and not only on professional development, but also personal and social. Additionally, they observed which entities would be able to cooperate with the University of Valencia in the implementation of their service-learning projects, and also detected these entities' needs for services. In this case, as we encounter an area with different context typologies where learning (formal, non-formal, and informal) takes place, students are offered to set their own training routes once they have established contact with entities, they deem suitable for their projects.

There are different service-learning typologies: investigation, direct and/or indirect intervention, and advocacy (REDS-SDSN, 2017). In the case of awareness raising campaigns (advocacy), contact with entities will not be needed, but it will be necessary to establish a detection stage to acknowledge the needs and understanding of the public to whom we address our campaign using different tools to collect and/or analyse information (surveys, bibliographic review, interviews, etc.).

2. Agreement stage: the next step was the stage of legal formalisation of the cooperation agreement between the university and those entities that had been successfully contacted for the service-learning projects to be developed. These documents state a set of criteria and elements that the project has at its disposal to jointly develop the experience in a regulated manner. The cooperation agreement is contextualised in the first-year subject of Pedagogy at the University of Valencia Organisation: Strategies for Educational Action in Diverse Contexts, and the entity, center and/or institution where the service will be developed, drawing up the educational cooperation and stating the joint commitments and actions.

In this case, the University of Valencia offered counseling and follow-up by means of two professors mentoring the projects, and the students were placed at the entities' disposal, around 150 students from three groups (55 in group PC, 51 in group PB, and 48 in group PA), who made groups of 3-4 people to develop their service-learning projects in different contexts. The signatory centers or entities to this cooperation agreement suggested naming a person to coordinate the proposal at the project's disposal, so the project follow-up communication could be favored. Furthermore, the corresponding authorisations for participating in the service-learning projects for the centers whose service involves under-aged were issued.

3. Design stage: this stage included the planification of actions (goals, contents, competences, methodology, timing, assessment, etc.), as well as the definition of values which would be considered the basis of the service, responding to the cooperative institution's needs. The service-learning planification stage was carried out during February-March 2021. The design meant for students the conduction of a coordinated assignment between the university and the entities, where tutoring in-classroom sessions for projects were facilitated to monitor the learning and service goals that were being carried out, and other sessions to visit the premises where the projects were taking place to obtain detailed in-place information of the context and adapt proposals to the needs detected. The teaching staff of the University of Valencia acted as guides and accompanying figures for every working group during the whole process.

The implementation of projects took place on alternate days, which allowed students to consider and implement measures to correct their first proposal, in the cases where the service needed an improvement. Thus, this project typology permits developing cyclical learning where, while students have prior planning at their disposal, unexpected events can occur during the service that force us add, modify, or delete some aspects from our project. Group tutoring sessions have to be taken into account in the development of this subject, which makes it possible for ApS projects to be modified, adapted and/or restructured as proposals are being developed, putting into practice

competences related to research-action, context analysis, conflict resolution, etc. This stage took place during March-May 2020. Sessions were mostly held in person, but some centers opted for remote alternatives.

3. Results

A total of 23 projects were finally produced. They were very different from each other regarding the subjects, as students were able to choose their own subject on the basis of their own affinity and interests as long as a real need for the service was detected. During February and March, once the groups were formed, several sessions were held in the classroom to plan the ApS, collect data to develop the need detection stage, and arrange the first contact with the centers and/or entities in such cases where the project typology (see figure 1) was framed within direct and/or indirect interventions (16 projects). Different instruments for data collection were selected to base their projects on rigorous sources (surveys, interviews, readings, etc.) in the cases where the service-learning typology was a campaign (7 projects).

Figure 1. Number of projects conducted by typology.
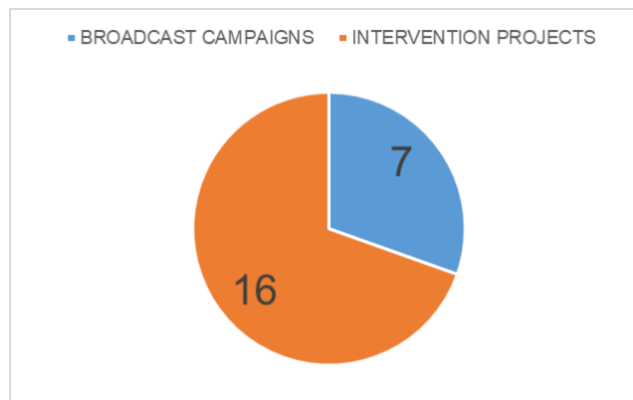
Service-learning projects developed in the classroom were very diverse (see figure 2), which enriched students notably as they acquired knowledge not only by producing the projects but also after presenting the results to their peers. Service-learning projects aimed at groups at risk of exclusion were more predominant.

Moreover, it is necessary to place value on the number of people who benefitted from these developments which can be categorised according to typology as: i) Direct/indirect intervention Service-learning, with 556 beneficiaries; ii) Service-learning based on awareness campaigns, around 1,250 beneficiaries. This latter typology did not permit an easy quantification of the social impact generated, so it was decided to estimate the number of viewings from accounts based on the number of followers that these accounts had.

Figure 2. Number of projects conducted by topic
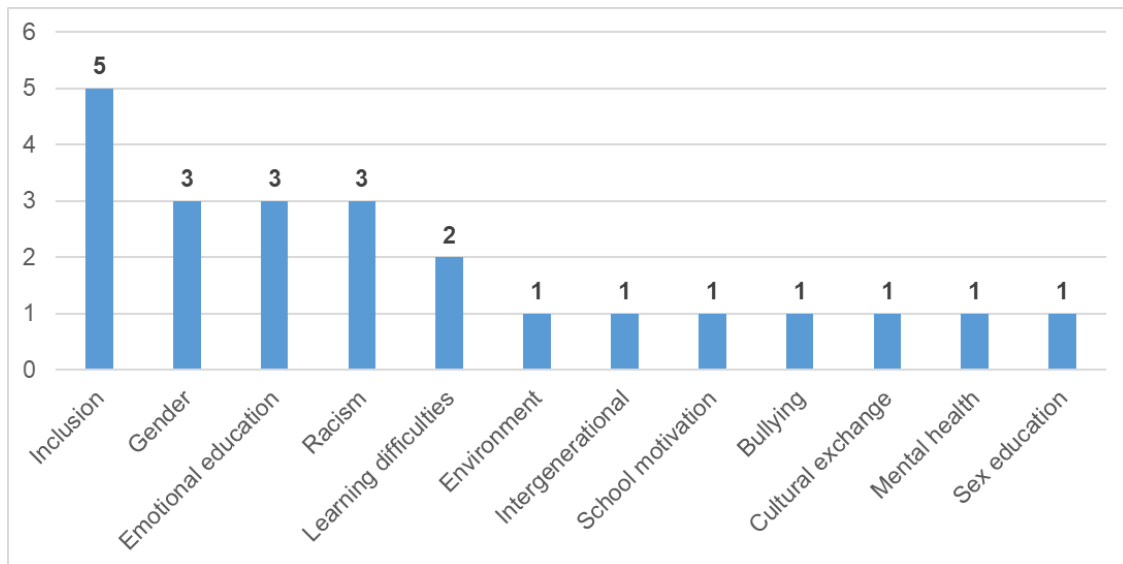
Next, we will show brief descriptions of some projects that first-grader students of Pedagogy from the University of Valencia conducted:

Time is money. A cross-generational project with elderly people and teenagers at risk of exclusion from a day center in the municipality of Torrente (Valencia). A total of 32 people took part in the project. Teenagers' needs at this center are, primarily, socio-affective deficiencies and drug use. University students decided, once they knew this context, to promote cross-generational ties so these teenagers could feel listened to and have an elderly person as a referent, outside their families, that could provide them with advice and experience; on the other hand, the project aims at placing importance on elderly people's life experiences, largely ignored on many occasions by our

society, by giving them prominence at helping and accompanying teenagers at risk of social exclusion. For this reason, it was important to find a group of elderly people who were willing to record a video to share their life experiences (past mistakes, satisfaction, etc.). Then, teenagers watched the video and most of them connected empathically with some of the stories, after observing similarities between the stories and their own personal experiences. Later on, the teenagers wrote what they found appropriate to share with the elderly in connection with the video, so the service achieved a bilateral component, as the COVID-19 situation prevented a group meeting from happening. Finally, the elderly received the letters and were able to know some of the feelings that teenagers, a group of people that share neither physical space nor age, but with many similar life experiences, expressed.

Your culture enriches me. The goal of this project is to promote cultural exchange and development among different municipalities and autonomous regions, in this case, the municipalities of Manises (Valencia) and Iniesta (Cuenca). Participation reached around 55 third-grade secondary education students from two high schools each municipality mentioned above. This project tried to create a cultural bond between both educational centers so the students could observe and learn from cultures other than their own, giving way to a process of acculturation among peers. To achieve this, and taking into account the distance between the centers, students received the proposal of creating Cultural Dissemination Products (CDP) on the basis of some video and/or presentation which they could use to explain characteristics inherent to their culture (gastronomy, folklore, language, etc.). A two-week period was offered for creating the materials during their tutoring time. Finally, students from the University of Valencia were responsible for projecting the different CDPs in the centers' classrooms. Thus, Iniesta's students were able to learn a little more about the culture in Manises and vice versa. The project was deemed positive for both centers' students, who were empowered from the design and development of the CDPs and were keen on the idea of transferring their projects to another autonomous region. Finally, the creation of an Instagram account (@intercultural.aps)

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permitted dumping the material generated for its dissemination and favored, in turn, a linkage point for the students that participated.

Motiva't. Guided project intended to motivate pupils at their final stage of school and decrease their anxieties caused by transitioning to secondary education centers. Participants were a group of around 25 sixth graders from a primary school in Pego (Valencia). First-grade Pedagogy students created an account both on Tik Tok and Instagram (@motiva_t_uv) where they uploaded short videos telling their experiences, giving advice, suggesting weekly challenges, and, ultimately, accompanying them during this transitional stage that they went through years before. Moreover, being a project created by young people provides higher levels of empathy and offers the possibility of answering doubts and/or queries emerging spontaneously as the channels created are vastly used by people of these ages.

You can make it. This is an educational support project among secondary education students and Pedagogy first graders from the University of Valencia. It was conducted with 24 students from a third-grade secondary education class. In this case, Pedagogy students were able to design several sessions to teach study techniques, improve students' self-esteem and self-concept, manage stress and emotions during the period of exams, etc. In total, five sessions were carried out in the educational center during tutoring time. The pandemic showed aggravated difficulties on learning pace follow-ups and this kind of project aimed at offering an added resource to improve the quality of education. The results were positive, as both students and the group tutor observed the usefulness of acquired learning and emphasised the need for developing more sessions that help to better manage aspects that go beyond the classroom (emotions, time managing, planning, etc.).

Mental health and youth. Project aimed at knowing the opinion of teenagers from two high schools from the province of Valencia (IES Les Foies and IES La Masia) about the pandemic impact on their mental health. The Project is intended to bring evidence about the need to address this topic in educational centers, especially at secondary education stages. The students from the

University of Valencia were responsible for designing and managing the survey through a Google form for both centers. They were able to collect 130 surveys from both centers and the results were similar, showing a consensus among 11-to-16-year-old students that responded to the survey: 71.9% stated being more tired since the start of the pandemic, 66.5% were worried about their mental health, 60.5% stated having been diagnosed with some kind of mental disorder, 82% stated not having received any information about mental health, 89% thought that everyone should visit a psychologist, and 52% mentioned having needed help at some point and not having been able to communicate it. After collecting the data, the university students wrote a report with the results that they sent to the departments of Educational Orientation from both centers and the staff, surprised after observing the data, declared their intention to act against this problem.

4. Conclusions

The appropriateness of the nature of the discipline, its adaptability, and applicability of their contents to real situations make the service-learning methodology and pedagogy a perfect combination for planning educational action. In recent years, there have been many university teaching experiences that have shown, in the same manner as the present research has exposed, the potential that this methodology possesses to activate students' learning in every dimension: cognitive, emotional, and social. However, such experiences tend to be located mostly in the areas of Social and Legal Sciences. Service-learning usage promotes competence development, improving the level of acquisition of these sciences after their practical implementation (Martínez, 2013). After the above-mentioned examples, framed within a core subject from the first year of Pedagogy, it can be observed how students have overcome different obstacles during their service-learning developments and have learnt how to manage the conflicts that appeared when implementing them. This kind of pedagogical proposals brings clear evidence to the practical functionality of this knowledge in the classroom and help universities to add value to their social responsibility; in turn, students feel motivated by observing that their projects are useful and

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are favorable towards this kind of educational actions, where they can exert real participation in the planning and implementation of these projects (Uruñuela, 2011).

Moreover, placing value on the social impact generated by this experience after its implementation is a must, since around 2,000 people have participated in the services developed by the first-grader Pedagogy students from the University of Valencia during 2020-2021. As it was initially mentioned, training responsible and transformative citizenship in contexts of coexistence needs to be integrated into higher education. Thus, SDGs' incorporation within the proposals formulated in the classroom through service-learning aims at constituting an example of the University's role to contribute to the development and resolution of these challenges, which are vital for achieving sustainable and social justice goals.

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