

## **The impact of service-learning on university teachers. A part of a systematic review**

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### **Abstract**

This article shows a specific result about the impact of Service-Learning (SL) on academic teachers, highlighted by a systematic review, coming from larger doctoral research, still in progress, concerning the decade 2011-2021, regarding the transformation of in service and future teachers, which corresponds to the main research question of the study. The review of 60 studies, focused both on teachers still employed and future teachers, showed a substantial imbalance between the studies including pre-teachers and in-service teachers. After a general framework of the theoretical background, the development of SL in the higher education in Italy has taken in consideration as main reference. The article describes the methodology used for the study of the four articles, that involved both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Results show an effective impact of SL in the development of professional and personal teacher's competences, but the low number of the population involved in the studies does not allow to a generalization of the findings.

### **Keywords**

Service-Learning, university teachers, transformation, impact.

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## **L'impacte de l'aprenentatge servei en el professorat universitari. Una part d'una revisió sistemàtica**

### **Resum**

Aquest article presenta els resultats d'una revisió sistemàtica centrada en l'impacte de l'aprenentatge servei (ApS) en el professorat, com a part d'una investigació doctoral més àmplia que actualment està en curs. La revisió, centrada en els anys 2011-2021, inclou 60 estudis que analitzen tant professors en actiu com futurs docents, i observa un desequilibri significatiu en la inclusió de futurs professors i professors en exercici. Entre els professors en actiu, només quatre són de nivell universitari, i aquests són objecte d'una anàlisi detallada. Després d'establir un marc teòric ampli, l'article examina l'evolució de l'ApS a l'educació superior a Itàlia com a referència principal. L'article detalla la metodologia emprada en aquest estudi, que ha integrat enfocaments tant quantitius com qualitius. Els resultats indiquen un impacte positiu de l'ApS en el desenvolupament de les competències professionals i personals del professorat, però el baix nombre de respostes dificulta la generalització dels resultats.

### **Paraules clau**

Aprenentatge servei, professorat universitari, transformació, impacte.

## **El impacto del aprendizaje-servicio en el profesorado universitario. Parte de una revisión sistemática**

### **Resumen**

Este artículo presenta los resultados de una revisión sistemática centrada en el impacto del aprendizaje-servicio (ApS) en el profesorado, como parte de una investigación doctoral más amplia que actualmente está en curso. La revisión, centrada en los años 2011-2021, incluye 60 estudios que analizan tanto a profesores en activo como a futuros docentes, y observa un desequilibrio significativo en la inclusión de futuros profesores y profesores en ejercicio. Entre los profesores en activo, sólo cuatro son de nivel universitario, y éstos son objeto de un análisis detallado. Tras establecer un marco teórico amplio, el artículo examina la evolución del ApS en la educación superior en Italia como referencia principal. El artículo detalla la metodología utilizada en este estudio, que ha integrado enfoques tanto cuantitativos como cualitativos. Los resultados indican un impacto positivo del ApS en el desarrollo de las competencias profesionales y personales del profesorado, pero el bajo número de respuestas dificulta la generalización de los resultados.

### **Palabras clave**

Aprendizaje-servicio, docentes universitarios, transformación, impacto.

## 1. Theoretical framework

Service-Learning (SL) is an educative approach that can be considered to have a global development (Tapia, 2006). However, SL keeps very strong its theoretical and pedagogical background (Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1968), meanwhile enriching itself with local references, who had already predicted SL in its social values and civic engagement, such as, for Italy, Lorenzo Milani (Fiorin, 2016; Mortari, 2017).

In Italy, after the first experimentation in the higher education field, during the academic year 2011/12, by Professor Italo Fiorin (2016), one of the first scholar who introduced SL in Italy, this approach has been developed in every school level and it caught the attention of the ministerial authorities, who published a document concerning the possibilities of SL in the educational field and, in particular, in the school system.

Nowadays, after ten years of development and national diffusion, the Italian Manifesto of SL in higher education was created (Albanesi, Bergamin, Cecchini, Compare, Culcasi, De Piccoli & Di Masi, 2023). Many scholars, more than 60, coming from different backgrounds and universities joined this paper, to promote the diffusion of SL. In September 2023, during the annual European conference of SL, the first official Italian network it has been formalized with the name of UNISL, Italian Universities for Service-Learning.

The Italian definition of SL reported in the Manifesto is:

“Service-Learning is an educational and formative approach that integrates community service activities in the student’s academic path, with the aim to respond to social and environmental needs of the community, in terms of social justice and sustainable development”.

The building of the Italian Network (UNISL) gave the opportunity to share the many experiences and researches in Higher Education, that analyze SL by different perspectives. At the moment, there are not many national studies concerning the impact of SL on teachers, especially academic teachers, otherwise there are much more studies regarding future teachers (Cadei & Serrelli, 2021; Kulberg, 2022; Longo & Falzone, 2023).

SL demonstrated to be a kind of approach able to create an impact in student’s competences (Furco & Billig, 2002; Silva 2018; Amandini, 2021) and to be

significant for the service offered to the community (Orlandini, Chipa & Giunti, 2020; Triani, 2021). The issue regarding SL impact on in-service teachers deserves a special attention due to the low percent of studies. The research involving academic teachers can be helpful to reconceptualize also the community engagement of the university (Berkey, Rountree, Green, & Meixner, 2023).

## 2. Methodology

After a review of 1229 articles, 60 studies were included in three categories: studies about in service teachers (n=4); studies about future teachers (n=49); mixed studies with both categories (n=7). Sample data's findings reported that four studies concerned University teachers, including one article about agricultural educators (Roberts, Edwards & Ivey, 2019). A qualitative analysis of the main findings, about the four primary studies, is reported. Three studies concerned only University Teachers, included in the category of in-service teachers, while one article regarded also future teachers.

## 3. Results

The most important quantitative data available is the length on the sample size, which is, of course, very different, depending by the approach of the studies. Roberts, Edwards & Ivey (2019) used a mixed methodology and a large number of agricultural teachers through an online survey (n=49). Very different is the experience of Christoph (2015) that used an autobiographic method to talking about her experience in SL field as university teacher (n=1). Martinez, Martinez, Saez & Geruzaga (2013) used a qualitative approach with a sample size of four university teachers (n=4) who reported their personal experience in the institutionalization of SL. Using a qualitative method, Sipacio (2018) studied ten (n=10) university teachers related with SL. The total number of the university teachers analyzed in the four studies is 63. The preferred method is qualitative (n=3). Two articles come from Spain, one from USA and one from Philippines.

Investigating qualitative data, transformation was realized in different ways. In her testimonio, Christoph (2015) reported professional innovation after the conduction of a community-engaged service project. Nancy Christoph is a university teacher from Pacific University. Her article started with a reflection of the importance of service, in her university, as third mission, in comparison with

teaching and researching. SL is considered a way to improve the community engagement of the students. Christoph underlines how SL, with its impact on students, generates a transformation on faculty members where teachers “modify their curricula to integrate SL into their courses [...] and even recalibrate their teaching to accommodate the shifted classroom dynamics [...]” (p.347). To highlight the importance of the community engagement (p.347), for a university teacher, Christoph experienced SL sharing her “intellectual activism” (p.348) for the community, by teaching poetry in a class to Spanish speaking immigrant women. She pushed herself out her comfort “academic” zone to face a new experience of teaching. She declared that this experience affected her professionalism deeply: “[..], my community-engaged service experience had enhanced the linguistic, cultural and literacy abilities I employ in my university courses. Has inspired new course offerings, has strengthen my connections to the local Latino community that in turn supports my classroom teaching, and has shaped my scholarship” (p.352). The first result was the renewing of the curriculum starting also with a new field of research, the civic engagement.

In the College of Education, Arts and Sciences of the National University of Manila, Philippines, Sipacio (2018) highlights the importance of change the course syllabus to include SL. The researcher revealed very few studies concerning college teachers, but he considers very important to involve academic teachers to enhance the development of SL to afford and to solve the problems of implementation (p.2466). He investigated the SL integration process by the reflections coming from college teachers. Teachers found out the inclusion of SL into an academic course is a challenge that can improve professional learning, helped by the reflection process. SL training helped teachers to find new methodologies to develop their curriculum and to get deeper in the relationship with their colleagues. Teachers felt a transformation in terms of personal satisfaction, improvement of didactic autonomy and reflection skills.

In the article by Martínez, Martínez, Saez & Gezuraga (2013) is reported the experience of the institutionalization of SL in Basque country through the renewing of the curriculum, the academic teacher training and the beginning of a community engaged research field. In particular, one of the seminars involved thirty (n=30) professors to integrate SL in their syllabus. The results of the introduction of SL approach in the university are the development of professional competences, the

sharing of teaching-learning process responsibility and the growth of the third mission in a real community engagement.

In Roberts, Edwards & Yvey. (2019), through a mixed method, the comprehension from agricultural educators of SL has been studied, as the main topic. The authors analyzed, consulting the syllabus from the educators, members of the American association for Agricultural Education (AAAE), three categories of agricultural educators: "Optimistically Unaware" who expressed positive beliefs about SL; "Policy-focused Decision Makers" who see the potential of SL in improving lives; "SL Implementers" who retain SL a method able to enrich the agricultural educator competences. The challenges founded out are time as a barrier for SL implementation; the eventual absence of an administrative office as support.

#### **4. Conclusions**

This article analyzed the category of academic teachers coming from a larger systematic review (Kulberg, 2023) concerning the impact of SL as the educational approach in terms of personal and professional change. After a briefly description of the theoretical framework, based on a focus on the new Italian SL Network, the article describes shortly the process of the systematic review and the nature of the four studies founded out. Quantitative results highlight the small size of the population analyzed and the preference for qualitative or mixed approaches. Qualitative findings registered personal transformations in terms of satisfaction and the construction of relationships. Professional impact is considered about the acquisition of new methodologies and research skills.

Trough teacher's transformation is possible to generate real changes in the school vision, redirecting the choices to active methodologies and to the dimension of democratic and prosocial participation of the entire school heroes.

The major limit of the outcomes is the not generalization of the main findings, according with the rest of the research regarding also teachers working in other school degree (Kulberg, 2023). Anyway, the results allow to continue the doctoral research in the Italian context, which is yet at the beginning in the field of SL, especially regarding the analysis of teacher and SL impact and in the field of higher



education. The new Italian Network and the growth of similar research in the field of SL can help to solve the chiaroscuro aspects of this article.

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