

Service-learning in Central European Catholic Universities. Cases from Poland and Germany

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Abstract

Service-learning (SL) contributes to systematically anchoring and expanding transfer activities of universities (Third Mission) and cooperation with external community partners in teaching and beyond. Accordingly, SL is considered the silver bullet of holistic education and is increasingly implemented in higher education institutions worldwide, regardless of subject disciplines. This paper illustrates the importance of SL as one of the strategies to fulfill the Third Mission at the Catholic Universities in Lublin (KUL), Poland, and in Eichstätt-Ingolstadt (KUEI), Germany, and shows potentials of this concept in the education of students of psychology, didactics and pedagogy. Based on examples of good practice from teaching formats of the three disciplines at KUL and KUEI, concepts and models of SL are outlined.

Keywords: Service-learning, psychology, didactics, pedagogy.

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L'aprenentatge servei a les universitats catòliques de l'Europa Central. Els casos de Polònia i Alemanya

Resum

L'aprenentatge servei (ApS) contribueix a l'ancoratge i l'expansió sistemàtica de les activitats de transferència de les universitats (Tercera Missió) i la cooperació amb socis comunitaris externs en l'ensenyament i més enllà. En conseqüència, l'ApS es considera la bala de plata de l'educació holística i s'implementa cada cop més a les institucions d'educació superior d'arreu del món, independentment de les disciplines. Aquest article il·lustra la importància de l'ApS com una de les estratègies per complir la Tercera Missió a les Universitats Catòliques de Lublin (KUL), Polònia, i d'Eichstätt-Ingolstadt (KUEI), Alemanya, i mostra les potencialitats d'aquest concepte en l'educació d'estudiants de Psicologia, Didàctica i Pedagogia. A partir d'exemples de bones pràctiques dels formats docents de les tres disciplines de la KUL i la KUEI es descriuen conceptes i models de l'ApS.

Paraules clau: aprenentatge servei, psicologia, didàctica, pedagogia.

El aprendizaje-servicio en las universidades católicas de Centro Europa. Los casos de Polonia y Alemania

Resumen

El Aprendizaje Servicio (ApS) contribuye a anclar y ampliar sistemáticamente las actividades de transferencia de las universidades (Tercera Misión) y la cooperación con socios comunitarios externos en la enseñanza y más allá. En consecuencia, el ApS se considera la solución milagrosa de la educación holística y se implementa cada vez más en instituciones de educación (superior) en todo el mundo, independientemente de las disciplinas temáticas. Este artículo ilustra la importancia del ApS como una de las estrategias para cumplir la Tercera Misión en las Universidades Católicas de Lublin (KUL), Polonia, y de Eichstätt-Ingolstadt (KUEI), Alemania, y muestra el potencial de este concepto en la educación de estudiantes de psicología, didáctica y pedagogía. Basado en ejemplos de buenas prácticas de formatos de enseñanza de las tres disciplinas en la KUL y la KUEI se describen conceptos y modelos de ApS.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje-servicio, psicología, didáctica, pedagogía.

1. Introduction

Service-learning (SL) as a concept links academic learning with social engagement (Furco, 2011). Hence, subject-specific, curricular content of studies (learning) is directly connected to social engagement (service) (cf. Regina & Ferrara, 2017; Reinders, 2016; Rosenkranz et al., 2020; Brozmanová, 2020; Tapia, 2021). Teachers and students cooperate with partners from the social, cultural, sports, ecological, or educational sectors in the region and contribute their professional knowledge and competencies to joint projects. According to a publication by the European Association of Service-learning in Higher Education (EASLHE, Albanesi et al., 2020), service-learning is a comprehensive approach to experiential education that emphasizes equal importance on both community service and learning outcomes. It serves as a strategy for institutionalizing community engagement and is tailored to align with universities' educational objectives while addressing community needs (Compare et al., 2023).

The positive influences of service-learning on students have been described extensively (for instance, Bartsch & Grottker, 2021; Reinders 2016). Meta-analyses (Celio, Durlak & Dymnicki, 2011; Conway, Amel & Gerwien, 2009; Yorio & Ye, 2012; cited in Reinders, 2016) show low to medium effect sizes regarding the impact of SL on learning success, learning motivation, social engagement, democratic attitudes, prosocial behavior, prosocial attitudes as well as self-efficacy and personal values. Indeed, Bartsch and Grottker (2021, 25 ff.) report that SL shows positive influences on students' self-esteem and empathy skills and is associated with reduced prejudices and stereotypes toward minorities and a better understanding of other cultures. In addition, positive correlations to experienced action effectiveness, teamwork skills and leadership and communication skills of the participants of Service-learning projects are shown. With regard to the acquisition of academic (subject) content and basic methodological skills of students, service-learning has a positive effect on academic learning (Bartosch & Grottker, 2021, 25 ff.). However, these positive effects are only effective if the described quality criteria of SL are observed (Reinders, 2016). Overall, SL promotes an awareness of sociopolitical problems and issues and a sense of social responsibility (Bartosch & Grottker, 2021, 25 ff.).

For the projects at John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin (KUL), and Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt (KUEI) presented in this paper, students' communication skills, studying in foreign living environments, and students' empathy skills are of particular interest. Accordingly, the focus is on four projects held in Lublin and Eichstätt by students of psychology, didactics and pedagogy. The socio-political context (Covid-19 pandemic and war in Ukraine) plays an important role in this regard.

2. Methodology

In the Task force Quality of the German network *Bildung durch Verantwortung*, the following ten quality criteria were identified in a community-based research approach and as a reference framework for the implementation of service-learning in German-speaking countries: societal need, defined goals, service-learning is an inherent aspect of the degree course, skills acquisition by students, studying in foreign living environments, collaboration between parties involved, reflection, student supervision, evaluation and quality development, appreciation (Hochschulnetzwerk Bildung durch Verantwortung/AG Qualität, 2019). Based on the ten criteria, further procedures and instruments were developed that provide SL actors with orientation and suggestions for the implementation and evaluation of SL projects. For example, scholars developed item pools for the summative and formative evaluation of SL projects for the three stakeholder groups in SL projects: students, teachers, and community partners (Brok et al., 2021). Status quo and successes of SL efforts in higher education institutions can also be determined using the self-assessment rubric for the institutionalization of service-learning in higher education (Furco, 2002). Based on the results, strategic and operational goals as well as comprehensive measures can be derived for the five areas of strategy, teachers, students, partners, and institution. Nevertheless, patience is required here, because: "it takes five to seven years to move from one stage of institutionalization to the next and that it may take 15-20 years of concerted effort to fully institutionalize service-learning in Higher Education" (Furco & Holland, 2004, 23).

However, these quality criteria and standards need to be reconsidered and reflected upon when the socio-political context changes as rapidly as is currently visible. In particular, the catholic universities of the Uniservitate hubs for central & eastern Europe and the Middle East (CEE&ME hub) see and have seen themselves confronted with major methodological challenges in this regard. In addition to the pandemic, the need for measures and projects increased rapidly due to the war in Ukraine, but also due to the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. For example, the Ukraine conflict has profoundly deteriorated social relations and significantly affected health, psychological well-being, and social and professional identities. This has resulted in the erosion of individual values, diminished perceptions of self-efficacy, and erected barriers in Ukraine and Europe (De Carlo, 2023). There is a growing acknowledgment that providing education in conflict-affected regions must address these traumas and students' specific needs, while also tackling technical challenges such as the lack of infrastructure, textbooks, trained teachers, and institutional capacities (Pherali, 2019; Di Masi et. al, 2023). Further research is required to understand how students are impacted by conflict or irregular events such as a pandemic, their resulting reactions, and how they navigate the decision to either continue or discontinue their studies amidst a crisis. Particularly concerning young adults, a study on the mental health consequences

of the war in Ukraine discovered that direct exposure to military actions, physical violence, or severe human suffering can lead to heightened levels of anxiety, depression, stress, and trauma-related symptoms (Kurapov et al., 2023; Rogowska and Pavlova, 2023). When it comes to service-learning, the motivation and diagnosis phases need to be rethought and reflection takes on an even more important role. Psychology, didactics and pedagogy in particular can make an important contribution here: students cannot only use their knowledge and skills in SL projects. Teachers can also make new findings visible for their research through these projects.

For example, KUEI is spearheading Work Package 2 in the research project titled "Service-learning in Higher Education for Ukraine's Recovery" (ServU), which is funded by the European Commission and coordinated by the krainian Catholic University, Lviv, until 2026. The ServU project is designed to bolster collaboration between Ukrainian higher education institutions (HEIs) and local communities, aiming to collectively aid in Ukraine's recovery through the integration of Service-learning education. Work Package 2, in particular, is focused on adapting the service-learning methodology to address wartime circumstances and facilitate recovery efforts¹. At KUL, a recent development includes the creation of a handbook titled "Service Learning for Academic Teachers", aimed at comprehensively addressing service-learning as a foundational learning and community-serving approach within polish HEIs. This handbook delves into various aspects, including e-service-learning, to tackle the challenges of education in the 21st century (Kamiński et al., 2024).

The following examples showcase service-learning projects at KUL and KUEI that have been devised and executed amidst ongoing global challenges, including the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian war against Ukraine.

3. Service-learning at KUL and KUEI: Some cases in the context of Covid-19 and war

3.1. Case study "poMOC MŁODYCH – YOUTH'S HELP" at The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin (KUL), Lublin, Poland

The "poMOC MŁODYCH" campaign at KUL during Covid-19 aimed to offer peer support to college and school students experiencing isolation, needing

¹ The ServU project is built on the overarching priority of the European Commission, "Governance, peace, security, and human development", which aims to strengthen active citizenship and build specific expertise in democracy, human rights, and multilateralism. To achieve this priority, ServU will apply a new teaching methodology for Ukraine, named service-learning, and will develop study courses that consider the needs of local territorial communities and foster the acquisition of students' citizenship competences. The ServU project envisions a partnership of 3 Ukrainian Universities: Ukrainian Catholic University (Lviv, Ukraine), Sumy State University (Sumy, Ukraine), Dnipro University of Technology (Dnipro, Ukraine), as well as three international partners: the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt (Eichstätt, Germany), KU Leuven (Leuven, Belgium), and Libera Università degli Studi Maria Ss. Assunta di Roma (LUMSA) (Rome, Italy).

encouragement, or seeking conversation. It responded to social, environmental, and community issues among adolescents and young adults arising from the pandemic. Isolation, inability to fulfill psychological needs, and family-related challenges were notable social problems. Environmental issues stemmed from these challenges. Youth overwhelmed by familial issues, lack of social interaction, existential concerns, illnesses, and stress struggled with emotional regulation, leading to anxiety or depression. Community problems included the fear of the future. Those seeking assistance felt anxious, depressed, and helpless, necessitating support and encouragement. "poMOC MŁODYCH" was created in response to the need of the moment, and its' helpful nature was kept in the spirit of peer support. The resources available to the students at the Institute of Psychology at KUL certainly contributed to reducing the suffering of young people and helped to cope with the very difficult situation during the Covid-19 pandemic. The students offered a range of services through several channels of online communication: Skype, Facebook, Instagram and e-mail consultation. As a rule, the duty hours were 7 days a week (depending on the channel) from 8:00 to midnight. The students held talks not only in polish, but also in english, german and italian. Doubts about the work, implementation of further ideas and ideas for the benefit of people in need were discussed during weekly meetings with the mentor, which resembled a professional peer supervision, in which they will participate in the future as psychologists. The essence of these meetings was also the initial diagnostic process regarding the individuals coming forward and their possible eligibility for peer support or professional help.

3.2. Case study "Help for refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine (2022)" at The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin (KUL), Lublin, Poland

Preschool and early childhood pedagogy students have responded to educational challenges arising from the war in Ukraine. With the influx of Ukrainian refugees into Poland, a significant educational challenge has emerged. The initial response involved collaborating with the Children's Home in Puławy, accommodating Ukrainian children. Drawing upon their pedagogical training, students organized various activities including sports, arts, cognitive exercises, and care initiatives for these children. Recognizing the need for further outreach, activities were tailored for preschool children and teachers. Adapting to kindergarten can be daunting, particularly for ukrainian children who find themselves in a foreign environment without knowledge of the language. To assist both children and teachers, simple dance and music games in Polish and Ukrainian were developed, accompanied by instructional videos. Regular seminars in the summer semester of 2022 provided a platform for educators, school principals, student teachers, and academics to exchange experiences and reflect on educational practices. These seminars foster dialogue, allowing students to present educational ideas while teachers share their insights and experiences.

3.3. Case study "Language support at elementary school" at Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, Eichstätt, Germany

Since 2022, also Germany has experienced an influx of refugees from Ukraine and beyond due to the war. Despite being a long-standing destination for immigrants, government support is limited and schools in Germany are struggling to integrate refugee children. The sharp increase in students with German as a second language has created a pressing need for additional language support in schools, exacerbating the challenges faced by classroom teachers, particularly amidst the ongoing teacher shortage. There is a growing concern that students with language difficulties may fall behind academically, leading to an increase in secondary school graduates without qualifications. To address these challenges, a service-learning project at the Chair for German Didactics and German as a Foreign Language has been implemented in 2023 for the semesters in 2023 and 2024. Students teach small groups (approximately 2-5 children) at two elementary schools in Eichstätt for 45-90 minutes per week, either individually or in teams. A teacher who serves as a point of contact supports each group of students. The project includes a weekly seminar combining in-person and online professional development on language support, practical application of teaching methods, collaborative lesson planning, and reflection on teaching experiences. Additionally, students receive feedback, individual consultations, and classroom visits from the seminar director. The seminar's content-related outcomes are documented on a blog, serving as a knowledge repository accessible to educators worldwide. An evaluation conducted at the end of the semester ensures quality assurance and informs improvements for future iterations. Students also have the opportunity to explore the project topic further in their final theses (term papers, essays).

3.4. Case study "Workshop evening for engaged people" by the program Business & Psychology at Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, Eichstätt, Germany

In February 2022, students enrolled in the "Business & Psychology" program at KUEI organized a workshop evening for volunteers as part of a service-learning seminar. This initiative aimed to reinforce commitment by addressing reported challenges. Recognizing the importance of fostering volunteerism within society, students from the Faculty of Economic Sciences undertook a project within the "Coaching, Mediation, and Dealing with Diversity" seminar. Their objective was to develop and conduct workshops for volunteers. Through interdisciplinary collaboration, students with backgrounds in psychology and economics identified common challenges encountered by volunteers through interviews, which formed the basis of workshop topics lacking in current training opportunities. These workshops addressed key concerns, including the formation and optimization of effective teamwork; management of diversity to enhance cohesion; constructive communication in emotionally charged situations; establishing and communicating personal boundaries; identifying individual roles and fostering effective

cooperation within volunteer teams. Students meticulously designed five workshops based on acquired knowledge and volunteer feedback, refining them through iterative testing and feedback sessions within the seminar. The culmination of their efforts was a highly successful virtual workshop evening in February 2022, attended by over 70 committed individuals from across Germany. Students not only expanded their personal and professional skills but also contributed to the promotion and appreciation of volunteerism through their participation in the seminar.

4. Further steps in the research on service-learning and the promotion of future skills at HEIs in central Europe

The development of innovative study programs and the creation of a student-centered, dynamic teaching and learning environment lay the foundation for integrating professional competence, personal growth, and social responsibility into academic pursuits. Fostering future-oriented and organizational skills is essential for guiding successful transformation processes. The presented case studies of service-learning projects implemented at KUL and KUEI between 2021 and 2023 figure as an opportunity to devise formats that facilitate intensive exchange in research. Innovative service-learning projects, which merge the acquisition of professional knowledge and personal skills with societal service, hold significant importance in the context of war and conflict in the region. Nevertheless, the cultivation of suitable role models such as transformative educators will also be pivotal. Teachers at HEIs cannot only serve as educators but can also play a significant role in research regarding how Service-learning projects should be organized to address future regional challenges. The following list of needs developed by the authors serves as a starting point to encourage further discussion:

- Comparative analyses: Conduct comparative analyses between different central European countries to identify best practices, challenges, and variations in implementing service-learning programs in response to current challenges.
- Interdisciplinary approaches: Explore interdisciplinary approaches to service-learning research, integrating perspectives from education, psychology, sociology, and conflict studies to better understand the complex dynamics and outcomes of such initiatives during times of crisis.
- Evaluation frameworks: Develop comprehensive evaluation frameworks to assess the effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability of service-learning programs in central European HEIs, considering the unique contexts and today challenges within the region.
- Community partnerships: Strengthen partnerships with local communities, NGOs, and government agencies to ensure that service-learning initiatives

address the most pressing needs, while also fostering resilience and social cohesion.

- **Technology integration:** Explore innovative ways to integrate technology into service-learning programs, leveraging online platforms, digital tools, and virtual collaborations to overcome barriers to traditional in-person engagement imposed by Covid-19 and conflict-related restrictions.
- **Student support services:** Enhance student support services within HEIs to provide comprehensive assistance to students participating in service-learning initiatives, including mental health support, financial assistance, and academic advising tailored to the challenges of the current context.
- **Policy recommendations:** Advocate for policy changes at the institutional, national, and international levels to institutionalize service-learning as a core component of higher education curricula and to allocate resources for its sustainable implementation, especially in times of crisis.
- **Ethical considerations:** Address ethical considerations related to service-learning, including issues of power dynamics, cultural sensitivity, and social justice, particularly in the context of serving communities affected by the pandemic and war.
- **Dissemination and knowledge sharing:** Promote knowledge dissemination through various channels to share research findings, best practices, and lessons from service-learning initiatives in central Europe during crises. Recognize community knowledge as equal to academic knowledge. HEIs play a crucial role in sharing knowledge and competencies, as well as addressing contemporary challenges. Objectives include providing educational support to vulnerable populations and promoting technological inclusion. This requires balancing academic and local knowledge while addressing issues of knowledge valorization and social inequalities.

Service-learning is highlighted in the UNESCO (2021) Report on the Futures of Education as a teaching and learning approach that can foster solidarity and cooperation among young people, while also helping them develop specific and cross-cutting skills. The report emphasizes the importance of reimagining education through the adoption of pedagogies focused on cooperation and solidarity, as well as a new paradigm based on care (UNESCO, 2021).

Service-learning aligns with the concept of pedagogies of cooperation and solidarity by enabling learners to engage with and contribute to the world around them, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of shared values and systemic interdependencies essential for addressing contemporary challenges. An innovative aspect of service-learning is its emphasis on involving various social actors in educational responsibility. This approach calls upon diverse stakeholders to actively participate in shaping the educational landscape and contribute their insights and creativity, drawing inspiration from the principles of critical pedagogy (Culcasi, 2020).

5. Conclusions

The contemporary global challenges present universities with novel complexities and inquiries. In our region, significant challenges such as the war in Ukraine, resulting waves of migration, and the lingering impacts of the pandemic, including adverse effects on mental health, demand urgent attention. The Uniservitate program has been instrumental in providing both ideal and financial support for the projects discussed here, yielding substantial benefits for communities and students alike.

Service-learning projects in Europe during times of pandemic, crisis, and war serve dual purposes: addressing community needs while offering students practical opportunities to apply their knowledge and skills in crises, fostering civic engagement, and contributing to peacebuilding endeavors. However, especially given the socio-political climate in the region, there is a pressing need to reassess various university approaches. For instance, service-learning as a methodology warrants renewed scrutiny. Particularly, considerations must be made regarding the criteria for effective Service-learning projects when rapid action is required, such as in response to sudden pandemics or conflicts like the war in Ukraine. International collaboration among universities is imperative in navigating these challenges effectively.

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