To do service-learning, or not to do, that is the question

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"Learning to live together (...) would induce people to implement common projects or to manage the inevitable conflicts in an intelligent and peaceful way. Utopia, some might think, but it is a necessary Utopia, indeed a vital one if we are to escape from a dangerous cycle sustained by cynicism or by resignation."

Jacques Delors

Abstract

After describing what the educational proposal called service-learning consists of, a series of arguments are presented that justify its adoption in higher education. Everything indicates that incorporating this teaching and learning strategy in our universities is not a matter of preference. It is a moral imperative and a priority if the challenges set out in the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals are to be met.

Keywords

Service-Learning, 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, learning to live together, transformative learning, action-based learning.

Motivation

Despite the fact that more than a century has passed since the first experiences inspired by service-learning, this educational proposal has received little attention in higher education in

the European context and a majority of professors are still unaware of both the Service-Learning methodology and specific experiences.[1]

There are many definitions of Service-Learning (S-L). According to <u>Catalan Universities Service Learning Network</u>: "*Service-Learning is a form of teaching and research that integrates community service and academic learning into a single programme, whereby students are trained while also working on the real needs around them and striving to improve their environment.*"

S-L is not just a learning strategy to get students to acquire more and better knowledge, although there is obviously an intention to optimize their learning. Neither is it a set of volunteer tasks to raise awareness among students, although it is a good idea to incorporate community support as a dynamic form of education. Puig *et al.* (2006) define Service-Learning as both a method, a program and a philosophy, and a form of political participation. S-L places special emphasis on critical analysis and understanding of social problems and needs, and allows students to engage in their creative resolution.

The <u>National Youth Leadership Council</u> (NYLC) provides another definition of S-L as *a type of experiential and project-based learning that drives students' academic interests and passions toward addressing real community needs.* To give an illustration, NYLC uses the following example: picking up trash on a river bank is service; studying water samples under a microscope is learning; when science students collect and analyze water samples, document their results, and present findings to a local pollution control agency – that is Service-Learning.

S-L already has an important tradition in <u>North American universities</u>, where it has been implemented for more than 50 years, as well as in <u>Latin America</u>. Although still very incipient, service-learning has also been gradually incorporated in <u>European universities</u> in the last two decades (Aramburuzabala, McIlrath & Opazo, 2019)

Numerous studies have shown its benefits. In 2001, Janet Eyler and associates published a wide report on *What we know about the effects of Service-Learning on college students,*

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[1] For this reason, it was decided to include a session dedicated to this learning methodology in the past <u>Workshop on active educational methodologies organized in the University of La Laguna with support from FEBS Education Committee.</u> Precisely as a result of the interest of the attendees, the idea and motivation for writing this paper arose.

faculty, institutions and communities (Eyler *et al.*, 2001). The document summarized the findings of service-learning research in higher education over a seven-year period providing evidence on how S-L can benefit all participants and promotes a deep approach to learning.

S-L improves student learning outcomes and contributes to student personal and social development. Students experience a positive effect on interpersonal development and the ability to work well with others, leadership and communication skills, but also on sense of social responsibility, citizenship skills and commitment to service. Studies also reveal a clear impact on understanding and application of knowledge, promotion of scientific interest, development of critical and reflective thinking, perception of possibilities for social change based on collective effort, and exercise of an active citizenship.

On the other side, faculty report satisfaction with quality of student learning and commitment to research. Service-learning supports faculty teaching by providing a real world counterpart to the more theoretical material discussed in the classroom. Learning is based on student experiences and throughout structured reflection activities. Service-learning increases student and faculty participation in their communities strengthening the relationship between academic institutions and their communities.

Community members also benefit from additional resources provided by student service and from faculty expertise and gain opportunities to research agency or community problems they might otherwise not have the resources to undertake, thus enhancing university relations and supporting the civic engagement mission of universities.

After that report, the literature on the benefits of S-L has grown exponentially in the last twenty years, evidencing that S-L can provide also opportunities to develop work-life skills that aim to foster capable and enlightened future citizens and employees (Nortomaa & Grönlund, 2019).

Thus, S-L proves to be a valuable learning and social transformation tool that responds to the ultimate goal of education and the challenges set out in the 2030 Agenda: to train competent citizens capable of transforming societies.

Appropriate spaces to incorporate service-learning in higher education.

Service-learning can be incorporated into any area of the university curriculum and can be carried out within the framework of a subject, a final degree or master's degree project, curricular or extracurricular external internships, transversal projects, interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary projects, ...

In the context of a subject, each teacher can design the training process with a different degree of intensity, depending on whether participation in service-learning projects is compulsory or optional, the group is individual or collective, or involves the development of reflective or direct impact activities. Within the framework of the final degree or master's degree projects, S-L projects allow carrying out research projects aimed at solving social problems detected either by social entities or by students themselves, where the subject to be addressed is decided jointly with social agents, which contributes to generate basic theoretical knowledge.

Some concrete examples of service-learning experiences in the university context. There are various web sites, publications and guides where we can find multiple examples of S-L in the different academic disciplines, such as, for example, the one produced by the Catalan Universities Service Learning Network in 2019 (in Spanish). It describes many examples of SL projects. In the field of health sciences, for instance, projects that respond to real health needs of the community and promote student learning from experience and reflection in a reciprocal framework are described. The services are developed with very diverse institutions, entities and NGOs that belong mainly to the social, educational and health fields. Some of the projects are aimed at people who suffer from diseases, in such a way that the service consists of offering useful strategies and tools to empower them in order to make decisions and autonomously manage their disease. For example, students who put their knowledge and skills into practice by caring for children with diabetes and teaching them self-care techniques, or helping them improve the use of inhalers in a leisure context. Other examples are related to the adequate care of Alzheimer's patients or the psychological accompaniment of elderly people who live alone.

On the other hand, we can find service-learning projects in the field of science. Students who carry out training activities on chemical pollution based on the analysis of polluting elements, or who give workshops where environmental or nutrition-related problems are analyzed within the framework of events dedicated to disseminating science among schoolchildren are among them. In the same way, the guide describes in addition other examples in the social and legal sciences, in the arts and humanities, in the field of computer and telematics engineering and also in architecture studies.

University Social Responsibility and the two fundamental Pillars of Education: *learning to be* and *learning to live together*

Formal education tends to emphasize certain types of knowledge to the detriment of others that are essential to sustaining human development. This is a fact that already recognized that famous report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century leaded by Jacques Delors, President of the European Commission at that time in 1996, and the Four Pillars of Education that it proposed and described. In the prologue, signed by Delors himself, two of the foundations that should inspire education in this century were highlighted.

On the one hand, the need for *learning to be* was rescued, noting the validity that the recommendations of a previous report by UNESCO in 1972 maintained at that time, and arguing that everyone will need to exercise greater independence and judgment combined with a stronger sense of personal responsibility for the attainment of common goals. On the other hand, the prologue highlighted that "*the far-reaching changes in the traditional patterns of life require of us a better understanding of other people and the world at large; they demand mutual understanding, peaceful interchange and, indeed, harmony - the very things that are most lacking in our world today.*" As a consequence, the Commission decided to put greater emphasis on one of the four pillars: *learning to live together.*

Social Responsibility must be a mission of the universities and the S-L is a fundamental instrument for its promotion. Between 2008 and 2009, UNESCO organized four international conferences on education and they already highlighted the need to promote ethical attitudes and values among students in order to strengthen their

responsibility towards society and their receptivity to local realities. national and global. At that time it was already claimed that social responsibility permeated the missions of higher education institutions. This message was later embedded in the strategies declared by the ministries of education of some European countries, such as Spain, where in 2011 it was proposed to redefine the Third Mission of its university system, explicitly recognizing that both social responsibility and sustainability constitute its central axis, and that the objective of this mission must be precisely the university contribution to a model of innovation and socially responsible and sustainable social, cultural, economic and environmental development (Secretaría General de Universidades, 2011). Indeed, S-L is closely related to introducing reflection into pedagogical practice and contributing to this mission of universities from teaching, thus promoting the social commitment of the university or what has been called University Social Responsibility[2].

> Learning to live together and University Social Responsibility still remain as outstanding challenges. Twenty-five years after the Delors report, the university scene does not seem to have changed much.

The imbalance between learning, as well as the claims and recommendations of that report, which in turn echoed other reports from previous decades, seem to remain in force and everything suggests that we have not made sufficient progress in that fundamental pillar for life on the planet: learning to live together.

This same conclusion emerges from the words of one of the most brilliant philosophers of our time, Edgar Morin, about to turn 99, who in a recent interview points out that: "*We live in a great planetary market that has not known to arouse feelings of brotherhood between countries (...) Therefore, today it is necessary to promote the construction of a planetary consciousness under its humanitarian basis: to encourage cooperation between countries with the main objective of increasing feelings of solidarity and brotherhood among the peoples*".

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[2] A detailed conceptual introduction to the concept of University Social Responsibility (USR) and recommendations on ways in which universities might get started with the USR process can be found in UNIBILITY (2017)

On the other hand, fostering University Social Responsibility continues to be a pending issue and, paradoxically, it has received more attention in Latin America (Vallaeys, 2020) than in Europe (UNIBILITY, 2017), where universities promoting it have mostly adopted an approach much closer to Corporate Social Responsibility.

Focus on mainstream university ranking systems: you are what you measure.

An explanation for the fact that universities have not devoted enough teaching efforts to improve the more emphasized pillars at Delors report, i.e. learning to be and learning to live together, could be found in the dominant university policy throughout these decades. The attention of the Councils of many universities seems to have focused on improving their performance in the criteria included in the mainstream university rankings systems such as: the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ShanghaiRanking Consultancy), THE World University Rankings (Times Higher Education) or QS World University Rankings (Quacquarelli Symonds).

These metrics are fundamentally focused on measuring aspects related to research and teaching, such as academic and employer reputation, faculty/student ratio, citations, international faculty and student ratios, academic awards and so on. Nonetheless, this concern to climb positions in these rankings fundamentally linked to teaching and research missions contrasts with a lesser dedication to measuring aspects related to the Third Mission of universities, particularly those linked to social commitment.

In fact, recent literature highlights that a cohesive methodology for the evaluation of the Third Mission and its impact on external stakeholders has not even been developed (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020). As Lord Kelvin argued already in the 19th century, *what is not measured cannot be improved, and what is not improved is always degraded.*

The lack of alignment between the criteria that are part of the aforementioned rankings and the Third Mission could be one of the main reasons explaining the reality that we have reached in this last decade.

In recent years, rankings that include environmental criteria have begun to gain importance, such as the *UI GreenMetrics* (University of Indonesia), but obviously this is only one of the dimensions that the Third Mission must incorporate. Since 2019, the *Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Rankings* have been announced as the only global performance tables that assess universities against the United Nations '*Sustainable Development Goals*' (SDGs). THE use calibrated indicators to provide comprehensive and balanced comparisons across four broad areas: research, stewardship, outreach and teaching. In its first year of publication *THE Impact Ranking* focused on measuring the impact on 11 of the goals and in 2020 the focus was expanded to incorporate the 17 SDGs. The results obtained support the aforementioned argument since most of the World University Ranking institutions rank outside the world's top 400 in the Impact Rankings. In fact, only 82 universities can be found in the top 300 spots of both rankings.

In the meantime, it is urgent to act. In September 2015, the UN General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, a plan of action in favor of people, the planet and prosperity, which also intends to strengthen universal peace and access to Justice.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has highlighted the diversity and seriousness of the problems that put the planet and humanity at risk at this time and its fulfillment constitutes an opportunity, as well as a requirement, to respond to the world's challenges.

Universities, and the entire educational system in general, are called upon to respond to all these challenges and to promote, among other measures, the adoption of new teaching methodologies that increase their social commitment and contribution to sustainable development.

Higher Education Institutions have a critical role in helping society achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Recently the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), a global initiative for the United Nations, has published a document titled *Accelerating Education for the*

SDGs in Universities: A guide for universities, colleges, and tertiary and higher education institutions. (SDSN, 2020). The guide remarks that universities and other higher education institutions have a critical role in helping society achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and makes an important and urgent call for universities around the world: "*The need to greatly expand society's capacity to solve complex challenges has never been more important or more urgent, with just ten years remaining to the 2030 dead-line of achieving the SDGs, the growing understanding of the urgency of addressing climate change, and now the COVID-19 crisis*".

Why is promoting Service-Learning at universities so important at this time?

While recognising traditional learning and teaching activities providing some aspects of what is needed to effectively address the SDGs, it is emphasized that universities need: "*(...) to both scale up existing activities, as well as implement and mainstream new types of activities that go beyond usual operations, (...) to develop new "transformative learning" activities, which employ interdisciplinarity, action-based learning, and multi-actor involvement, and which are not currently standard practice within universities*".

It is precisely in this context where the pedagogical proposal of Service-Learning becomes more relevant than ever. After all the arguments that have been provided above, perhaps the title of this paper is a little further from being an aporia. At this point it is expected to be clear that promoting Service-Learning at universities should not be a matter of choice but a moral imperative and a priority if the challenges set out in the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals are to be met.

It is clearly a time to do Service-Learning, to make a teaching effort to improve the forgotten Pillars of Education, that is, learn to be and learn to live together, and therefore it is also a priority to properly measure what we want to achieve, refocusing and ranking first what is most urgent, relevant and pertinent to humanity and future generations.

Acknowledgements

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