

# COMMUNITY-ENGAGED UNIVERSITY



**Proceedings of the 1st International Scientific and Professional  
Conference on Service-Learning “COMMUNITY-ENGAGED  
UNIVERSITY”, May 20, 2022, Split, Croatia**





## **The European University of the Seas (SEA-EU)**

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on Service-Learning “COMMUNITY-ENGAGED UNIVERSITY”,  
May 20, 2022, Split, Croatia

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## ***Community-Engaged University Conference, SEA-EU Alliance***

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### **Published by:**

University of Split, The European University of the Seas (SEA-EU) Alliance

Ruđera Boškovića 31, Split

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+38521 545 078

### **Conference partner institutions:**

University of Cadiz

University of Gdansk

University of Western Brittany

Kiel University

University of Malta

**Printed by:** Redak, Split, Croatia

Split, 2022

### **Edition:**

100 pieces

**ISBN:** 978-953-7220-72-3

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## Preface

It is a great privilege for me to present the proceedings of the SEA-EU conference on “Community Engaged University” held at the University of Split on 20 May 2022. We hope you will find this volume useful and inspiring. The conference provided a platform to discuss problems, challenges, opportunities and research results on the practice of service-learning, an aspect on which most of the papers focus. Service-learning is a form of innovative pedagogy that combines the learning objectives of university courses and service to the local community in order to enhance students’ personal and professional growth as well as the common good.

Within the SEA-EU alliance we set out to develop a service-learning centre led by the University of Split and in which we actively engage students in a wide range of experiences. We believe that applying the knowledge gained at the University to the real world allows students to synthesise course material in a more meaningful way. SEA-EU students thus benefit from the close relationships between educational institutions, teaching staff and students on the one hand, and economic actors, public or private enterprises, companies and NGOs on the other, creating a unique learning environment. The participation in our proposal of companies, business clusters and business-owned foundations as associated partners will support the training practices of SEA-EU students and the development of an entrepreneurial mindset.

During this conference, the beautiful city of Split and the University of Split (UNIST) became the heart of the SEA-EU alliance, in a clear commitment to a stronger connection between our universities and the communities in which they are embedded. The conference had a hybrid format, with one online and four face-to-face sessions. The 80 participants enjoyed rich discussions and exchanges that contributed to the success of this meeting. Participants from 13 countries gave a distinctly international dimension to the event. The 39 papers presented formed the core of the meeting and provided opportunities for discussion. Of these papers, 18 have been collected here.

These proceedings provide a written record of the synergy that already exists between the University and the communities in which they are embedded, and represent a solid framework from which further interactions will emerge in the future. Please enjoy this selection of papers and continue to pave the way for service learning applications in SEA-EU university programmes.

The European Observatory on Service-Learning in Higher Education has generously supported the meeting. We are grateful to them and would also like to extend our thanks to the members of the organising team for their hard work. Finally, we look forward to further cooperation and future meetings on this topic in the framework of the European University of the Seas (SEA-EU).

Fidel Echevarría  
SEA-EU General Coordinator



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# EMPOWERMENT TO PROTECT: SERVICE LEARNING PROJECT

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## ABSTRACT

As a result of the pandemic emergency, decreed in Portugal in March 2020, the need to train professionals from nursing homes institutions in preventive measures for the transmission of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). Training activities were planned, appropriate to each institution and target population of the sessions (Introduction to COVID-19, Hand hygiene, Personal protective equipment, Safe working environment and Being a professional). These sessions are co-planned and carried out by the students, with teacher's supervision. The final discussion with trainees is shared between students and teachers, who guide the entire process. Using literature review, the contents were updated and integrated. It's considered guidelines of competent entities and recognized merit, national and international. Scientific and pedagogical guidance is implemented in moments of partnership with students, with development of communication skills inherent to the training process. Learning was transversal to the entire process, with reflection on the lived experience. It is noteworthy that by the student's involvement in concrete social issue, the commitment to the community is developed.

**Keywords:** Nursing, Health Education, Service Learning, Infection Prevention COVID-19.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Empower to Protect Project has existed at the Católica Nursing Center of the Nursing School of Lisbon, since March 2020, when the first state of emergency was declared.

It was born from the will of teachers and students, based on needs identified in partner institutions with protocol and where our students were conducting their clinical practice.

Training activities were planned, appropriate to each institution and target population of the sessions, including the main subjects: Introduction to COVID-19; Hand hygiene; Personal protective equipment; Safe working environment; and Being a professional. These sessions are co-planned (teachers

and students) and carried out by the students. The final discussion with trainees is shared between students and teachers. Teachers guide the entire process.

Associated with the unique time we live, it was necessary for the training to be virtual (Santos Junior & da Silva Monteiro, 2020).

The term Service-Learning refers to a type of teaching methodology in which a link is built between what is experienced in the community and what is learned in the academy. Thus, there must be a relationship between the experiences in the community and the knowledge acquired at the academic level (Howard, 1998 cited by Kezar & Rhoads 2001).

This type of methodology emphasizes the importance of reflection in action, where students lived experience differ from the knowledge acquired only in the classroom. Therefore, learning is maximized when it becomes active and engaged (ASH & Clayton, 2009).

Through a survey conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities it was possible to understand that most employers seek skills in their employees such as: civic knowledge and skills, intercultural competence, problem-solving skills, teamwork skills, and critical thinking skills. Although these skills transcend academic knowledge, they can be developed and reinforced through Service Learning (Hart Research Associates, 2013).

The Council of Europe's (2016) for democratic culture have created a framework of civic competencies that encompass twenty skills divided into: values, attitudes, skills and knowledge and critical understanding. These included respect, civility, responsibility, self-efficacy, critical thinking, listening, observation, empathy, providing guidance for the design of Service Learning (Bringle & Clayton, 2021).

The objective is to understand the impact of the “Empowerment to Protect” project on the target population, inserted in the research project of Católica Learning Service.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

A descriptive research design is presented, using descriptive analysis of data by frequency distribution. Data collection was carried out using a questionnaire previously sent to the reference person in the institution. With a methodology focused on the active participation of trainees, in last fortnight March 2022, 3 training courses were developed in Nursing Homes, at 2 different institutions in Lisbon, where all of them were provided by 3 students and 1 teacher. Training in Portuguese was provided to nursing homes helpers.

The measurement instrument applied consists of 4 questions (“To what extent do you consider the objectives of the session to have been achieved?”; “Regarding the way in which the session took place, where do you rate your degree of satisfaction?”; “In general, at what level do you place the contributions this session has given you within the scope of your role?”; and “In general, how do you consider your level of participation during this session?”), where the trainee is asked to share his opinion regarding the training he has just attended, on a Likert-type scale from 1 (minimum) to 5 (maximum). Then, in an open question, they are asked to highlight the most positive aspects, the ones you least liked and suggestions for future training.

It is important to highlight that the ethical principles associated with the research were considered (Marques-Vieira et al., 2021a).

### 3. RESULTS

The sample consists in Nursing Homes helpers (n=36), who responded the questionnaires in 3 training sessions: on March, 16 (n=25); on March, 21 (n=5); and on March, 31 (n=6), with two institutions (n=25 and n=11, respectively). The sample is entirely composed of females (n=36).

The questionnaire, which requested the trainee's opinion, was completed at the end of the training, using a Likert-type scale. Regarding question 1 (To what extent do you consider the objectives of the session to have been achieved), we found that 69,5% put themselves in item 5 (n=21) and 30,5% in item 4 (n=15). From the analysis of the answers to question 2 (Regarding how the session took place, where is your level of satisfaction), 69,5% put them in item 5 (n=25), 25% in item 4 (n=9) and 5,5% on item 3 (n=2). Regarding question 3 (In general, at what level do you place the contributions that this session gave you within the scope of your function), 47,2% answered 5 (n=17), 36,1% in item 4 (n=13) and 16,7% ranked 3 (n=6). Finally, the answers to question 4 (In general, how do you consider your level of participation during this session), were the ones that translated a greater subdivision, being 50% attributed to 5 (n=18), 22% to 4 and 3 (n=8), 2,8% to 2 (n=1) and 2,8% who did not respond (n=1).

In the open questions, in the "Refer to the most significant aspects that you had the opportunity to develop during this session", from the answers (n=29), "a good synthesis of the theme emerged" (n=19), "reinforcement of correct hygiene care of the hands" (n=4), "correct use of personal protective equipment" (n=3), "how to correctly use the different masks" (n=2), "safety procedures with the uniform" (n=2), "safety conduct in public transports" (n=2), "use of illustrative videos" (n=2) and "safety procedures in our home" (n=1). In the question "Which aspects did you least like in this session", emerged as results from the answers (n=5), "it was a long training" (n=4) and "it should have been longer" (n=1). Finally, in the question "Give some suggestions that, in your opinion, may contribute to improving future sessions", from the answers (n=10) it was highlighted as answers "to continue the training, with other themes" (n=5), "to be more enjoy the training" (n=3), "be face-to-face" (n=2) and "training on vaccination literacy" (n=1).

### 4. DISCUSSION

The proximity of academy to the contexts of professional practice and the reflective practice inherent to the development of skills through lived experience (Silva et al., 2009), harmoniously integrate this pilot project with in-service learning principles of social responsibility.

Through the human resources of the partner institutions, the involvement of students and teachers in concrete social issue, develops knowledge regarding the active commitment that must exist between the academy and the community, mediated by ethical principles and social responsibility (Pope Francis, 2015).

With the use of different dynamics conceived between students, teachers, and communities, it was intended to align the development of academic and transversal skills inherent to the student education as a person and as a professional. The impact of in-service learning in the "Empowerment to Protect" project, reveals to be a very positive educational experience.

The impact of student service learning in the "Empowerment to Protect" project has been shown to be an educational experience where students develop transversal skills in the academic, personal and professional scope (Marques-Vieira et al., 2021b). We perceive, through the lived experience, a form of transversal learning throughout the entire process (Silva et al., 2009). We also found that the development of transversal skills in organization, communication, analytical skills, autonomous learning, entrepreneurial spirit, creativity, teamwork, and ethical commitment, is achieved through the involvement in an experiential education (Scannell & Newstrom, 1994). The development of skills is accompanied by teachers in scientific and pedagogical guidance in moments of partnership with students in

which the various skills inherent to the training process are trained (da Silva Góis & de Araújo, 2021). The trainings are carried out by several students, in the presence of teachers with whom the final discussion of each training is shared.

In view of the opinion expressed by the trainees, in which more than 50% refer to maximum satisfaction, we can conclude that our students prepared the sessions very rigorously, having transmitted all the knowledge in an unequivocal way and with great confidence. They show also, at the end of the training, a lot of confidence in the way they clarified all doubts that were raised. Scientific rigor was also certified by the teachers who accompany them and are part of this project.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The impact of our “Empowerment to Protect” project training in the community has been an educational experience where the human resources of partner institutions develop transversal skills in the prevention of infection by SARS-CoV-2. We reinforce that the fact that students are involved in concrete social issue develops their commitment to the community.

The limitations inherent in carrying out this study are related to the sample size and the lack of inferential analysis of the data, which does not allow generalization of the results.

This project may evolve other health issues, according to the needs identified in the community, keeping however the focus - the training for safe practices related to infection control, within the scope of health promotion.

This work is funded by National Funds through the FCT - Foundation for Science and Technology, I.P., within the scope of the project “UIDB/04279/2020”.

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# A CASE STUDY OF ENGAGED STUDENTS: UNIVERSITY OF SPLIT

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## ABSTRACT

The University of Split is the second largest university in Croatia. It is a university where many student associations are active. In this article, I would like to refer to those student associations that conduct informal education that aims to involve students more actively in the social life of the community. In this way, through the students engaged, the university itself becomes engaged in the life of the community. Therefore, in this article I will present and analyze the existing informal education programs conducted by the associations SplitMisli, Student Catholic Center and Forum Plus. My intention is to prove that such and similar educational programs can significantly contribute to the engagement of universities and students in the life of the local community and thus enrich its content and its societal relationships. Such programs significantly empower students, raise the level of study, and enhance the social atmosphere of the local community. The theoretical contribution of this paper is a proposal to extend the methodology of service-learning to informal educational programs, as well as to extend the concept of the engaged university to those methods of indirect involvement which are described in the article.

**Key words:** students, engaged university, critical thinking, informal education, SplitMisli

## 1. INTRODUCTION

University of Split is a public institution that treasures the knowledge as a public good embedding it into the local and wider community through transfer of technology and that treasured knowledge. The key activities of the University are directed toward students so they can be adequate and responsible active members of society. In its strategic documents, the University of Split focused on four main areas: science and research; students; society and transfer of technology and knowledge; and organization of the University. When we speak about university that is engaged in wider societal context, we mainly consider third strategic area (society and transfer of technology and knowledge) and it is not a false because when we look at these strategic goals, we see goals such as strengthening the economy and entrepreneurship in the region, the introduction of innovative procedures and solutions to socio-economic problems or fostering the culture of development. And in relevant literature we can see that this is a corner stone of a concept of engaged university and service learning as primary methodology of that concept. But there are other notions or elements of this concept: public engagement with research; engaged teaching; social responsibility; and knowledge exchange. An engaged university does not treat public engagement as an ‘add on’ or fringe activity. It embeds public engagement into the way it approaches its work. Typically, engaged universities will have activities in place which incorporate public engagement into their research, knowledge exchange, teaching, and social responsibility. This means that engaged university have positive influence on society but also that society, through public engagement,

have influence on university. It is all about two-way flow of knowledge and insight between university and wider society.

Engaged research involves the community and genuine partners and apply universities' research capacity to address community problems and aspirations. This approach can result in knowledge transfer and exchange, the commercialization of intellectual property and spin of companies between university and community partners. Here in Split, we had a post-academic employment program that perfectly meets these criteria for engaged research. In this program the universities' partners were one commercial bank, the county, and several small businesses. We can mention teaching bases of the University of Split as an example of knowledge exchange. Engaged research and knowledge exchange promises significant social and environmental benefits, many of which are economically quantifiable. Through engaged research activity, universities can contribute to improvements in community and educational outcomes and to economic growth. Typically, engaged research brings more than one discipline to bear on a problem. Therefore, this often requires engaged research activities to be transdisciplinary (using the many disciplines in the context of application), opportunity driven, and demand driven. Engaged teaching is aimed at closer connection with labor market needs, teaching curriculums at university and students. Engaged teaching and learning includes various types and forms of educational process, such as work integrated learning, internships, international experiences, and exposure to curricula that are informed by real world problems and solutions promise many benefits for students and for their communities. These two elements are mostly mentioned in the relevant literature, and I would like to add here another element that is not directly within the competence of the university, but for which the university can and must provide all the necessary prerequisites. It is a model of 'exploitation' of existing infrastructure and human capital found in student associations and their informal educational programs. Therefore, in what follows, I will briefly present the University of Split and three student associations as a case study of this new element within the concept of engaged university and service-learning methodology.

## **2. A MODEL OF INTERSECTIONAL EDUCATION: CRITICAL, INFORMAL, AND HOLISTIC**

Engaged university contribute to the society mostly through knowledge-based research and teaching processes. And it does so directly by carrying out its mission and standard work that had to be done for university to function: organizing formal education for students, providing knowledge, research, and funds for scientists, but it can also be indirectly involved and engaged by providing all necessary elements required for different informal educational programs carried out by students' organizations or civil society organizations from local community. This implies educational pluralism at university which can provide not just formal and experiential education (required by service learning), but education that can provide "integrated and holistic approach to the whole person. This includes intellectual, spiritual, moral, and social dimensions of person, which is, in its intrinsic dignity, the fundamental and basic value of every society." (Petrušić and Rapić 2022, 169) By providing *all necessary elements* for flourishing students' organizations and their informal educational programs, university is engaged indirectly but essentially into local community and society. At the same time these organizations and informal educational programs can use universities' other resources that are available, such as professional expertise of professors, halls and funds of the university, as well as academic and professional literature from university libraries.

One of the main pillars of the educational pluralism, that can be achieved indirectly by university's strategic orientation toward relevant social engagement, is the critical thinking. And since there is only at the Faculty of Philosophy the course on critical thinking (run by prof. Bruno Ćurko and as elective

course) I think that it is the task for university to provide relevant education to students in critical thinking. And the university can achieve this in cooperation with students' associations – as it does in Split. The critical thinking is important because it empowers students for reflective, reasonable, and responsible social actions and thus directly contributes to the positive effects to the achievement of the goals set before engaged university. “Critical thinking is a set of genuine educational tools for discriminating the fake from the true, the hidden from the transparent and is, as such, a necessary method for any relevant educational venture within the current in-crisis state of affairs. Critical thinking is an essential skill.” (Petrušić and Rapić 2022, 171) Therefore, I will briefly present here the way in which the University of Split has meet this need to develop critical thinking in students because “contemporary education requires an integrated and holistic approach to the whole person within the contextual framework that can be described as a pluralistic and multi-levelled contemporary society.” (Petrušić and Rapić 2022, 177)

When the University of Split is in question, since here I want to present it as a case study of engaged students, these prerequisites (*all necessary elements*) are met by the university's significant investment in student programs, all through the University Student Council which publishes two different tenders. And these tenders are focused on programs of students' associations, students individually and students' councils that are active at University of Split. The total amount provided for student projects is about one million kuna in the academic year, and each year about fifty student projects are funded through these tenders. One of these projects is *A school for critical thinking* (ASCT) run by a student association *SplitMisli*.

### 3. A SCHOOL FOR CRITICAL THINKING

*SplitMisli* (*SplitThinks*) is a student association founded in 2012 with the aim of promoting, developing, and improving the quality of cultural and social life of young people; ensuring informal education of young people in Split and at the University of Split; encouraging socializing and better cooperation among young people, and increasing the influence of young people on the work of public local bodies of the city and the University. Members of *SplitMisli*, who come from different cultural contexts, as well as from different faculties of the University, are committed to the basic principles of the association such as respect and appreciation of others and different opinions, argumentative and peaceful discussions on relevant social issues, media culture literacy and the promotion and protection of human dignity and human rights based on that dignity which is inalienable to every person. The joint mission of the members of the *SplitMisli* association is a fairer and more humane society in which young people will be a key factor and a supporting element of the entire society. Innovation and creativity of students will contribute to the smart, sustainable, and inclusive development of the community, which will directly have positive consequences in relation to the quality of life of each individual in the city of Split.

*A school for critical thinking* is informal education composed of several different modules through which students learn the basics of critical thinking, train themselves in the formulation of clear and logically based argumentation, critical reading and understanding, as well as appropriate models of public communication and representation of their articulated views and opinions. The purpose and goal of the program is to train students for critical thinking and the use of critical tools such as: Occam's razor, reverse engineering, blended learning, thought experiments and others. The program is implemented in the summer semester on a weekly basis (one meeting per week), where students in addition to lectures and workshops have certain tasks that they must complete during the week. It is mainly about critical reading of the media and critical analysis of various comments on social networks, but also reading serious literature from the history of philosophy, art and science. Upon completion of the program, students must present their acquired skills in a simulated discussion of an important social

issue. And after the end of the program, students generally remain active in the association and organize various public events, debates or simply become more actively involved in the life of the local community. Approximately twenty students participate in the program and the vast majority of participants later take on some responsible functions in society, whether in the media, civil society or politics.

There are other programs and projects funded through the mentioned tenders, and here I will briefly present other two students' association and their programs: Student Catholic Center Split and Forum Plus Croatia.

#### **4. ACADEMY FOR LEADERSHIP AND SOCIAL PROJECTS OF YOUTH CATHOLICS**

The Student Catholic Center Split is a non-profit civil society organization led by lay believers, which deals with young people in the spirit of the Christian worldview, with special emphasis on students. The work of the association is inspired by Holy Scripture and the tradition of the Church, as well as by Catholic social teaching. The task of the association is to support young people in developing their qualities with the aim of their personal growth and with the desire to actively participate in society in a well-organized way, both jointly and individually, in accordance with Christian values. There are several programs run by the association, such as Youth volunteers center and Youth academic circle and lot of projects devoted to promoting Christian values in society. In the context of engaged university, since the Student Catholic Center is a student organization, I will just mention the project named 3D Formation. What is important, regarding almost all the programs and projects, is their interconnectedness and orientation towards the integrity of the human person in specific cultural context.

The 3D formation project is a project for young people aged 18 to 30 aimed at the holistic development of the whole person. It lasts for three years, and each year refers to work in a different field regarding personality. The first year involves working on oneself, the second year working on one's spirituality through spiritual exercises lasting 40 days, while the third year is preparation for taking actions in society. In the first year, a group of 8 to 12 students is established. These groups grow together through weekly meetings. Each group has its own animator/leader who is prepared by professionals - associates (psychologists, pedagogues, priests...) to work in a group and to lead that particular group. In addition to group meetings, 3D formation consists of joint meetings, trips, socializing, social experiments (the group gets a task and do something constructive together) and alike. All this serves to form a complete individual in groups who can implement their talents in society. In this way, the Student Catholic Center enables young people to actively participate in the life of the local community, gives them resources, tools and knowledge and skills to be able to implement fundamental Christian values in society - through their own developed personality and social projects.

The other association I wish to present here is Forum Plus Croatia. Forum Plus is aimed at encouraging young intellectuals toward complete personal formation and active social inclusion, personal affinities, talents, competencies, and professional orientation with the aim of contributing to the wider community. The entire program consists of five modules implemented at three levels (local/university, national and international) with four main objectives: networking, mentoring, education, and initiative. The idea of launching a platform to foster the social inclusion of young people has been growing and evolving for several years. Thanks to the persistence of young people and the support of many, the first National Forum plus conference was held at the University of Split in 2012. Since then, it has been held continuously every year. Forum Plus strongly believe that providing the youth with education, networking, and tools for coordinated action will empower them to achieve the greatest good together in community. This is crucial in any sincere attempt to make this world a better place, with a just and merciful community in which no one is excluded or oppressed.

In the context of engaged university, I will present here the Forum plus academy for leadership (F+A) that is implemented on local level in eight universities in Croatia: Split, Zadar, Dubrovnik, Varaždin, Slavonski Brod, Osijek, Rijeka, and Zagreb, then on the national level through national conference, and on the international level through the European conference which is held every year in the EU Parliament in Brussels. The goal of the program is to provide support to young people on several levels: the path of personal excellence; connection with young people, university professors, entrepreneurs and experts who share the same values and desire for a better Croatian society; education and tools necessary for leadership and social inclusion; independent development of a social project with a mentored process of university professors and experts. Methods and processes of the program relate to lectures and workshops of university professors, entrepreneurs, and experts, then to forums of participants in the form of group discussions and brainstorming, exchange of ideas and independent study of literature and other relevant resources.

Both projects have the goal of increasing the level of knowledge, competencies and abilities of students in order to be able to actively participate in social life. The University supports them through financial support through the University Student Council tenders. In this way the university is indirectly but essentially engaged in wider societal context, contributing to the growth and development of a society in which itself acts and carries out its mission.

## **5. CONCLUSION: EXTENDING OUR CONCEPTS AND METHODOLOGIES**

In the relevant literature, the service learning is mainly defined as formal learning based on personal experience intended to engage learners in hands-on practice with guided reflection to increase competency-based learning outcomes and enable learners to contribute to their communities. (Hou 2022, 95) In this way, by implementing service learning into its curriculum, the university become engaged in wider social context. In this paper I argue that we can and need to expand this concept of service learning and include student associations, or civil society organizations with their informal educational programs, as partners that can provide other conceptual framework for indirect engagement and contribution of university toward local society. And to do so I presented University of Split as a case study for indirect engagement through engaged students.

In my opinion, the informal educational programs provided by students' associations are better (or at least complementary) candidates for bridging the gap between academic learning and community implementation, since it doesn't require additional interventions in existing university programs, while on the other hand it motivates the student community to a stronger involvement in the life of the society. It seems to me that these kinds of informal educational programs are better suitable and better fitting into the concept of engaged university, and as such can be a better option – regarding methodology and existing educational pluralism – for implementing service learning. They go beyond traditional ideas of classroom learning, practicum training or off-campus volunteering (but at the same time include all these elements of formal learning), and since they are created by bottom-up approach (by students themselves), they are much closer to real social issues and possible sustainable solutions.

Therefore, in conclusion, I propose to extend the methodology of service-learning to informal educational programs developed by civil society organizations (in this case by students' associations), as well as to extend the concept of the engaged university to these methods of indirect involvement that leave room for subsidiarity and solidarity, and which motivate student community for stronger involvement in the life of the local community.

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# CAPACITAR PARA SALVAR: A CITIZENSHIP EXPERIENCE WITH SCOUTS

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## ABSTRACT

“Capacitar para Salvar” is a school intervention project in its ninth year of existence, supported by workshops of health education about basic life support, and is developing around the promotion of the degree in Nursing of the Portuguese Catholic University. The “Capacitar Para Salvar” project is extremely relevant since the main cause of death in Portugal is cardiovascular diseases on that account, the capability to intervene increases the victim's survival rate. The project's main objective is to train students for a civic intervention as health-promoting agents, preventing the disease and building a healthier society, where providing these experiences is also educating for citizenship with repercussions for social cohesion. In 2020, the Portuguese Catholic University integrated the Learning-Service methodology, which is based on the idea that the best way to learn is by practicing and, therefore the “Capacitar Para Salvar” project promotes training moments in its workshops, meaning 50% of the time is dedicated to simulating and training. These experiences allow skills referring to spirituality and social responsibility to be developed as a team, such as resilience, motivation, stress resistance, perseverance, and optimism, in order to form committed citizens.

**Keywords:** Learning in Service; Basic Life Support; Citizenship

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Cardiopulmonary arrest is a lifesaving situation characterized by a sudden loss of cardiac function in a person with or without a previous diagnosis of heart disease. It is a fatal episode if adequate maneuvers are not performed in a timely manner (immediate cardiorespiratory resuscitation) and, preferably using an automated external defibrillator, which can double or triple the victim's probability of survival (American Heart Association, 2020).

In Portugal, cardiovascular diseases are the main cause of death, where, per year, about 10 thousand people suffer from sudden cardiac death. This situation, being more prevalent in older age groups, can also affect young people with undiagnosed and asymptomatic heart disease. About 20% of deaths occur unexpectedly and, of these, half are attributed to sudden episodes (Serviço Nacional de Saúde, 2020).

According to the National Health Plan, revised and extended to 2020, health promotion and protection emphasizes the importance of obtaining health gains individually or collectively, through common objectives that prove to be determinants in health. The integration of sustained efforts from all

sectors of society and the use of strategies based on citizenship, equity and access, quality and healthy policies, enhance health gains (Direção-Geral de Saúde, 2015).

Based on the mission of the Universidade Católica Portuguesa “to produce and share critical, innovative and socially relevant knowledge, at the service of the integral development of the individual and the common good”, as well as training people, cultivating science and renewing the country and the world by the excellence of example (Universidade Católica Portuguesa, 2016) and considering that the Human Being is conceptualized as a person who is materialized in a health project, taking care of himself, others, things and the world around him, we support the intervention of *Capacitar para Salvar*.

This project began in 2012, with the aim of holding workshops on basic life support. Its general objective is to train young people for civic intervention, as health promoting agents, preventing disease and building a healthy society, where raising these experiences is also educating for citizenship with repercussions for social cohesion. It is also supported by specific objectives, on which the training sessions are based, where it is intended that young people acquire knowledge about: the chain of survival; the basic life support algorithm; the recovery position; airway clearance and cardiopulmonary resuscitation (compressions and insufflations). In order to increase proximity to the community, a public Instagram® page was created (@capacitarparasalvar) where digital content on the subject is shared.

The project is implemented not only in elementary and secondary schools, but also in other contexts, from which we highlight the Scout communities.

The Scout movement is a work of a national, international and universal character, with the aim of providing each nation and the whole world in general with young people who are physically, morally and spiritually strong (Barrosa, 2020). Scouting, at an international level, aims to encourage education for peace, through a spirit of understanding and solidarity between people, awakening in young people a respect for interculturality, making them citizens of the world (Corpo Nacional de Escutas, 2015). Scouting instills in young people the importance of teamwork, organization, a spirit of mutual help, altruism, friendship, empathy, and love. Thus, important characteristics are acquired for the development of competences in the scope of service to the community, which stands out as one of the main objectives of this document.

Scouting has become a social force in the communities where it operates and promotes moments of great development, constituting itself as an important partner in many social and civic intervention projects (Palhares, 2004), such as “*Capacitar para Salvar*”.

These trainings are based on the In-Service Learning methodology. This methodology relates academic learning to the perceived needs of the community, providing the student with a basis for identifying their own difficulties and acting on them, in a safe environment (Ministerio de Educación - Gobierno de Chile, 2007). It is possible to develop important skills for nursing practice, which are related to skills acquired through scouting.

Throughout this article, it will be possible to find a contextualization of the “*Capacitar para Salvar*” project, its association with the in-service learning methodology, as well as its application in groups and populations with social impact, such as Scouting, as how it can develop important skills in the student, and the results obtained in the studied population.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

In-service learning is an educational methodology that aims to relate academic learning to service to the community, promoting in students a broader and deeper understanding of the contents included in the curricular units, at the same time with a greater sense of civic responsibility. In this pedagogical model, students develop their knowledge, skills and competences through experience and intervention in the face of a previously identified need in the community, mobilizing a continuous process of guided

reflection (Bringle, Hatcher & McIntosh, 2006), which only materializes when the service learning and community service are related and complement each other (Howard, 1998 cit in Kezar & Rhoads 2001).

The relationship with the community makes it possible to apply this methodology to schools, social initiatives, public institutions, non-profit organizations, institutions for people with disabilities, and other contexts and aims to strengthen students' relationships with the community and provide stimuli for their personal development and civic participation (Waldstein & Reiher, 2001). This includes active involvement in solving real-world needs, identifying and clarifying competencies, developing a learning process, and setting aside time for critical reflection (Leming, 2001).

As a community service and on a voluntary basis, the focus of the experience centered on the service must remain in total balance with the benefits of the provider, that is, a student, creating the synergies of a capable and lasting in-service learning in its essence.

In-service learning is built on equal partnerships between students, faculty and community partners, and involves a complex interaction with service activities, curriculum content and learning outcomes (Furco, 2019).

The interaction established between the various stakeholders, therefore, to a great diversity of learning programs, whose concepts are integrated in the Capacitar para Salvar Project, so that in recent years' enormous progress has been made through the expansion to groups and populations, with great social impact, as is Scouting's case.

This initiative has allowed students to achieve their technical learning objectives by carrying out projects where they apply the acquired knowledge (Sliwka, 2004), “accessing the social importance of the knowledge they have acquired through their own actions” (Sliwka, 2004, p. 3), improving three fundamental domains: academic learning, civic learning and personal development (Bringle et al., 2016).

In the same way, each moment of interaction and the proximity developed with the teachers, allows a better understanding, not only of the academic content, but also of the attitudes and values that they gradually develop and put at the service of each citizen.

Among the skills developed are the ability to plan, manage priorities and time, transfer knowledge, organization, reflection, critical thinking and evaluation of interventions carried out in the community. It also makes it possible to deepen scientific knowledge and intervene directly with the community identified as the target of care and/or training in a specific area of intervention (Ministerio de Educación - Gobierno de Chile, 2007). This methodology in which “Capacitar para Salvar” is integrated, therefore, constitutes an important axis for citizenship, assuming a structuring and unavoidable pillar in the formation of young people, because at the same time it contributes to the construction of personal and social identity, promotes the acquisition of knowledge and the development of skills that enable them to exercise responsibly in democratic citizenship and respect for the dignity of the Human Being.

### 3. RESULTS

After the workshop, consisting of theoretical training, followed by the practical simulation component and clarification of doubts, a questionnaire is applied to the trainees, in order to better understand the target population and what impact it had, as well as to suggestions.

Two questionnaires suitable for the age groups of the participants were developed, one applied to trainees between 5 and 10 years old and another applied from 10 years old onwards. At the end of the sessions, the answers are transcribed into an Excel® document and subjected to further data analysis.

The data presented reflect a training carried out at Agrupamento 504 de Palmela, a group of scouts composed of elements between 5 and 63 years old. In this sense, several training sessions were carried out, being adapted to the age groups of the target population.

After analyzing data referring to the questionnaires applied to 24 children, it appears that 11 (45.8%) children are female, 10 (41.7%) are male and 3 (12.5%) did not respond. The session had 1 (4.2%) child with 5 years old, 4 (16.7%) children with 6 years old, 6 (25%) children with 7 years old, 4 (16.7%) children with 9 years, 2 (8.3%) children with 10 years and 3 (12.5%) did not respond.

Regarding the school year, 3 (12.5%) children study in the 1st cycle, 2 (8.3%) in the 2nd cycle, 1 (4.2%) in the 3rd cycle, 3 (12.5%) in the 4th cycle and 15 (62.5%) children did not answer the question.

When asked if they considered that training was important, the 24 (100%) children responded positively (yes).

About having seen a person feel bad, 14 (58.3%) children responded affirmatively, 9 (37.5%) responded that they had never seen anyone feel bad before and 1 (4.2%) answer was annulled due to a double answer (yes/no).

All children (100%) responded positively that, after training, they would help someone who was feeling unwell. In total, 22 (91.7%) children said they knew how to resuscitate and 2 (8.3%) said they still did not know.

All (100%) said they enjoyed training on mannequins; 1 (4.2%) child suggested that they would like to “call the ambulance”, 6 (25%) that they would like to “train mouth-to-mouth resuscitation” and 17 (70.8%) did not answer the question.

About the most important thing in session 2 (8.3%) children mentioned “learning to save lives/empowering” and 22 (91.7%) children did not answer the question.

The 24 trainees (100%) carried out the theoretical-practical components of the workshop in person.

Regarding the data extracted from the questionnaires applied to people aged 10 or over, it appears that of the 43 adult trainees, 19 (44.2%) are female, 23 (53.5%) are male and 1 (2.3%) did not respond. The ages are between 10 and 63 years old; of the 43 trainees, 3 (7%) are 10 years old, 8 (18.6%) are 11 years old, 3 (7%) are 12 years old, 1 (2.3%) is 13 years old, 6 (14%) are 14 years old, 5 (11.6%) are 15 years old, 6 (14%) are 16 years old, 3 (7%) are 17 years old, 1 (2.3%) is 19 years old, 2 (4.7%) are 21 years old, 1 (2.3%) is 22 years old, 1 (2.3%) is 45 years old, 1 (2.3%) is 53 years old and 1 trainee (2.3%) is 63 years old. Regarding the school year, 4 (9.3%) attend the 9th grade, 4 (9.3%) attend the 10th grade and 6 (14%) attend the 11th grade. Of the 43 trainees, 29 (67.4%) did not answer the question. Of the 43 trainees, 35 (81.4%) considered the workshop essential, 7 (16.3%) very important and 1 (2.3%) important.

It appears that 14 (32.6%) had previously performed basic life support training, 29 (67.4%) had never performed any training in the area.

Given the reason why, eventually, they would never have undergone training on basic life support, 3 (7%) were unaware of the existence of these trainings, 9 (20.9%) did not know where they could take them, 2 (4.7%) did not consider it to be of interest to them, 15 (34.9%) had already heard about these training courses, but had never had the opportunity to do so, 14 (32.6%) did not respond.

When asked if they had seen a cardiorespiratory arrest, 4 (9.3%) answered affirmatively, 39 (90.7%) had never seen it.

Of those who had witnessed a cardiac arrest, when asked about their performance, 3 (7%) did not act, just watched, 1 trainee (2.3%) asked for help and approached the victim in order to assist.

After the workshop, 29 (67.4%) trainees feel prepared to act in a situation of cardiorespiratory arrest, 12 (27.9%) feel prepared, but still have some doubts, 2 (4.7%) would only do so if there was no other option.

After the session, 40 (93%) felt motivated to learn more about the topic, 2 (4.7%) did not feel motivated and 1 (2.3%) did not answer the question.

In view of the methodology of the session, 23 (53.5%) trainees evaluated it as essential, 19 (44.2%) as very adequate and 1 (2.3%) as adequate.

In view of the trainees' suggestions, they were grouped into 3 categories: 2 (4.7%) suggested training other skills, 1 (2.3%) suggested more training material and 5 (11.6%) suggested carrying out more training sessions/other training venues. 35 (81.4%) did not answer the question.

As for the most important in training, the responses were grouped into 5 categories: 10 (23.3%) considered everything important, 7 (16.3%) considered the practical component,

17 (39.5%) learning to save lives, 1 (2.3%) the theory, 1 (2.3%) the trainer- student/methodology interaction. 5 (11.6%) did not respond.

The 43 trainees (100%) carried out the theoretical-practical components of the workshop in person.

The global analysis of the results shows that the population aged between 5 and 10 years old is mostly composed of female elements, with a higher incidence in the 7 years old. Most did not answer which school year they attend. Regarding the importance of training, all the results indicate its relevance. We found that most children claim to have already witnessed a person feeling bad, so mobilized for civic duty - helping others - all said that after training they would help someone who was feeling bad, and the majority claims to know how to revive her.

Regarding the practical component of the training, all the children reported that they liked to train on the mannequins, and most would also like to train the respiratory component, which would be done using a pocket mask and not "mouth-to-mouth breathing" as they mentioned, but this is not possible given the context of a SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. On the most important aspect of the session, they considered skills development - learning to save lives/empower. All trainees carried out the theoretical-practical session in person. Regarding the questionnaires applied to people between 10 and 63 years of age, it is known that the target population consists mainly of male elements, with a higher incidence in 11 years of age. Due to the lack of response, we do not know which school year they mostly attend, and for a part of the population the question does not apply because they are no longer of school age. Regarding the importance of training, all the results indicate that it is very important, with the majority reporting never having carried out any training in the area, despite already having knowledge of it, but never having had the opportunity to carry it out.

Most individuals say they have never witnessed a cardiac arrest. After the session, a large part of the trainees feels prepared to act in a situation of cardiorespiratory arrest and motivated to learn more about the subject.

When asked about the methodology of the session, most trainees evaluate it as very adequate and suggest holding more training sessions and also in other places. As for the most important aspect of training, the importance of saving lives/training was mostly mentioned. All trainees carried out the theoretical-practical session in person.

With the adult population, the most mentioned suggestion is related to the holding of more training sessions and training in other places and the most valued in training is the competence developed to learn how to save lives. The simulated practice reinforces the knowledge acquired in the context of theoretical training and seeks to reflect a possible reality by anticipating it, in a controlled and safe context, thus reinforcing the development of skills.

The response to social needs identified with community partners and the contact with new target populations generates new teaching-learning challenges that are overcome by carrying out simulated

practice training and guided reflections during briefings and debriefing. The educational experience based on the curriculum, through the holding of basic life support training sessions for the lay population, promotes, according to the elements that make up the “Capacitar Para Salvar” Project, an increase in autonomy, self-esteem, communication skills, resilience in the face of adversity and a sense of civic responsibility.

## 4. CONCLUSION

To prevent death in cardiorespiratory arrest, the rapid detection and use of a set of maneuvers known as cardiorespiratory resuscitation are extremely important. The dissemination of this type of knowledge in the community helps anyone to act in these situations and may even triple the chances of survival.

The “Capacitar Para Salvar” Project follows the methodology of in-service learning, which main purpose is to interlink academic knowledge and community service, allowing to deepen in scientific knowledge while investing in the community. This methodology gives the participants the opportunity of developing a set of important skills as well as critical thinking and reflection. It is an effective method for students and teachers to interact with the community and their needs to enhance their personal development, civic

learning, and academic learning. In this case study, the different age groups were endowed with the skills and knowledge to aid people and act in case of cardiorespiratory arrest.

Most of the participants had never received training in basic life support and admitted having already witnessed a cardiac arrest situation, but not felt qualified to offer support to the victim. After the training offered by Capacitar para Salvar, more than half of the participants felt prepared to act in a situation of cardiorespiratory arrest and are more motivated to learn about the subject. Those that participated in the training, classified saving lives as “very suitable” and showed further interest on more training.

Therefore, the “Capacitar para Salvar” Project not only promotes the connection between the University and the Community, but also articulates the importance of acquiring personal values and responsibility among students, while fostering learning through experience.

It can be concluded that the great need and major importance of projects like “Capacitar para Salvar” in our society is a partnership between college knowledge and community, specially giving people skills to know how to save lives.

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# INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF THE SERVICE-LEARNING AS A TOOL IN HIGHER EDUCATION IMAGE BUILDING

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University of Split

## ABSTRACT

In the past decade, there has been observed increasing importance attributed to the social responsibility of the universities. More and more rankings, which are the basis for measuring each university's success, consider the social activities of the universities as one of the dimensions of measurement. Sustainability culture in the management has become one of the preconditions of the success of today's universities. Still, the question that arises is, do the students, who are the main target group of the universities, feel the same way? Service-Learning is a modern pedagogy that combines social activism with learning (officially recognized through the curricula). These activities are linked to one of The United Nations 2030 Agenda 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This pilot research examined whether students are aware of the Service-Learning institutionalization at their university and whether students connect university image with the Service-Learning activities. Furthermore, it was tested whether institutionalization of the Service-Learning activities is related to their satisfaction. The data will be collected using the online survey, and the research will be conducted with the students of the University of Split (undergraduate and graduate study level) during March 2022. The collected data from the survey was analyzed using the IBM SPSS tool.

**Keywords:** Service-Learning institutionalization, higher education, image, satisfaction

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions (HEIs) do not operate in isolation. Their connection and intimidation of many stakeholders from the environment are unquestionable. In the higher education area, there are many different stakeholders existing and affecting the higher education institution. Houston (2008) emphasizes that all stakeholders functioning in the higher education area can be divided into internal and external. Internal stakeholders are students, academic staff, administrative and support staff, and organization management. External are competitors and partners, an industry that includes current and future employers, and other market players, society as a whole, and the state. As Alcaide-Pulido and Gutiérrez-Villar (2017) state, today HEIs are facing a diverse and often contradictory set of demands coming from a variety of stakeholders: students and their families, academics and university administrators themselves, employers and companies, local and regional communities, the media, government and its agencies, national and international assessment bodies, investors, etc. In order to improve university management, it is crucial to define the image that HEI has created in the community among different internal and external stakeholders.

Society plays a significant role in today's efforts to create future employees who are ready to meet the needs of the labour market. According to Milligan Moriatti & Oreopoulos (2004), society needs individuals who can make sense of their environment and that is where the main role of another mission

stands. Today's focus in HEIs is on the long a student-centered approach, learning from a real-life example, and developing the specific skills – which moves the focus from the traditional transmission of knowledge. Students need to learn how to act proactively, work in teams with students from other study areas and react to social incites and problems. Focus on “other” missions leads to the development of so-called “third missions”. The third mission refers to the creation of intentions the university is developing except the first mission (teaching) and the second mission (research). It is the third mission that develops the relationship between higher education and society. According to Ćulum (2011), the “new” dual role of the university becomes to be the bearer of positive changes that contribute to social development, and the entrepreneur that contributes to economic development. In this endeavor, mutual partnership and interaction between universities and non-academics is developed.

All activities that take place in interaction with internal and external stakeholders lead to the creation of the image of HEI. However, depending on what kind of image HEI wants to create, certain interactions need to be managed. With the growing importance of the “third mission”, and the lately ever-present *Sustainable Development Goals* (UN, 2015) their implementation through the work of HEI is becoming extremely important. The importance of interaction with society is beginning to be especially valued with certain rankings, which especially appreciate the implementation of the SDGs into everyday functioning (for example Times Higher Education ranking<sup>1</sup>, WURI ranking,<sup>2</sup> AACSB<sup>3</sup>etc.). The greatest progress in awareness towards sustainability and interaction with society has been achieved through 17 identified goals that were adopted by all UN Member States in 2015, as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The goal if this plan was to set up a plan with a period of 15 years for the implementation. By implementing these goals into everyday functioning, universities are becoming a valuable segment of society. Although this topic is becoming more and more attractive today, according to Salam, Iskandar & Ibrahim (2019), there is still a lack of research on the role of Service-Learning in the higher education sector especially outside USA

These days, when building an image of the institution is crucial, it is interesting to test whether community-engaged activities can contribute to the level of the image that is being created. In this research, the authors presented a pilot study conducted at the University of Split. University of Split (UNIST) began with a Service-Learning activity started in 2015 with a first Service-Learning project in cooperation with some faculties at UNIST with *Sunce* Association (project titled: *Responsible for nature*). In the following 6 years, additional 6 projects on the thematic were implemented and one of them was oriented to the creation of the S-L Centre at the Faculty of Economics, Business, and Tourism. In the year 2020, UNIST was ranked as the 15<sup>th</sup> university in the world with a Service-Learning example of the Ethic value. In 2021 another WURI ranking was recorded (21<sup>st</sup> position in the world) and S-L become an integral part of the University strategy. The biggest step forward was recorded when it began to be implemented the project of the European University of the Seas (SEA-EU) since one of the tasks that UNIST is in charge of, is the creation of the SEA-EU S-L center at the alliance level. Special emphasis was put on those parts of the engagement by joining the European Universities of the Seas (SEA-EU) alliance together with the other five European universities. Alliance is oriented to the community approach, and encouraging of the Service-Learning activities by the creation of the Service-Learning Centre of the alliance is a special task. Through those activities, it can be concluded that the University of Split has started with the process of the Service-Learning Institutionalization.

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1 <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings>

2 <https://www.wuri.world/>

3 <https://www.aacsb.edu/educators/accreditation>

## 1.2. What is Service-Learning?

Service-Learning is a form of teaching in which a student participates in a work/project/activity that is considered useful for society, and most often within one of the civil society organizations. Thus, students formally achieve a certain number of ECTS credits within a certain course. Three parties, faculties/teachers, students and NGOs, benefit from this model<sup>4</sup>. Bringle, & Hatcher (1999) emphasize the importance of ECTS credits and reflection for students. They state that Service-Learning is a course-based, ECTS credit-bearing educational experience in which students a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility.

As stated by the Dwight & Eyer (1994), the beginnings of the Service-Learning concept can be tied to the 1967 and the work of Robert Sigmon and William Ramsey at the Southern Regional Education Board. The main concept is focused on the engagement of the students on real-life issues. In Service-Learning courses, students participate and reflect. They participate in a service activity for a non-profit organization. Afterward they reflect on the service activity. The process is organized in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). In the Service-Learning activities, it is important to have a link with the curriculum, there must be reciprocity present, and a reflection made. Chiva-Bartoll and Ruiz-Montero (2019) are emphasizing the following conditions that must be met in order to define learning as a Service Learning:

- 1) the need for a curriculum-linked with the subject in which it is applied;
- (2) there must be reciprocity, understood as the need to integrate, balance, and evaluate learning and service objectives;
- (3) there must be a reflection, centered on interiorizing the learning that emanates from the experience and on encouraging the students to know themselves;
- (4) student decision making must be present in all phases of the process;
- (5) attention must be paid to a real need; SL programs cannot remain in hypothetical cases.

Service-Learning is testing traditional models where the focus is on the course and not a student. By including students in the Service-Learning, students are active co-creators of their own education and they are learning through their own experiences.

Ferrari and Chapman (2014), explained the difference between Service-Learning and volunteerism and internship. The difference lies down in the fact that the Service-Learning is more focus on enhancing students' understanding of their theoretical knowledge through service experience in the community and reflection on that experience.

The influence of the Service-Learning at the HEIs is high. To summarise, it is changing the way that professors view the connection between classroom pedagogy and learning (McCarthy & Tucker, 1999). Students become socially responsible members of the society, they understand better the course materials by integrating theory into practice, it encourages transforming deep learning about real problems into real community service. Teachers become aware of their social role and contribute to the development of the society together with the universities that take the role of the socially useful University and work on bringing the academic community closer to the society. There are many benefits from implementing Service-Learning into practice but Hamond (1994) defines also some shortcomings like

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.unist.hr/studiji-i-nastava/drustveno-korisno-ucenje>

the lack of time and resources needed for the development together with an effort that needs to be undertaken to quality evaluate students' progress.

### **1.3. Higher Education Institution Image**

*“Create an image for your company or your competitors will do it for you.” – Keever (1998)*

Image in general is different when compares to the institutional image, where institutional one refers to the mental perception of individuals and audiences about the organization (Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990). It can be defined as the mental representation of a real object that acts in that object's place (Capriotti, 1999). It is important to emphasize that image is a psychological component and that there are many influences that form it. Specifics are especially pronounced when it comes to the image of institutions. While corporate image can be described as the overall impression made on the minds of the public about the organization (Barich and Kotler, 1991). The creation of the image can be related to many different influences of the physical and behavioral attributes. It is a very complex construct and sometimes it is hard to clearly explain what has influenced on its creation. The image of the higher education institution is not absolute but relative to the images conveyed by other HEIs. Ivy (2001) stated that it is a function of the strategies that HEIs use, how they are implemented, and how they are perceived by their public. Although there is much research on image, Kazoleas et al. (2001) state that those who talk about institutional image, especially when it comes to the image of hospitals, and universities - are still missing.

### **1.4. Satisfaction of students at the higher education institution**

The goal of every HEI is to create conditions that make students satisfied. Therefore, numerous studies have been done so far to identify what exactly affects student satisfaction and whether there is a link between image and student satisfaction. Satisfaction is a complex construct that is made of a complex set of beliefs or knowledge, emotions (feelings), and behaviour intentions (Aldemir & Gulcan, 2004). When it comes to the satisfaction of the students, the specifics of the concept become even higher. Previous research about student satisfaction showed interesting results. Rodić Lukić (2015), finding out it “remained trapped in student admissions offices, where it strictly fulfils the sales and promotional function.” Vega-Vazquez et al. (2013) research show that satisfaction depends solely on the quality of the lecturer or that it depends on the overall perceived level of HEI quality (Raghavan & Ganesh, 2015).

Student satisfaction can be described as a short-term attitude that is the result of the evaluation of educational experience by students. Student satisfaction occurs in the case of performance in higher education institutions that meet or even exceed the expectations of students (Elliott & Healy, 2001).

Some previous research has shown that the students who are participating in the Service-Learning activities are more satisfied with their studying (Hammond, 1994) and that is the reason why this relationship is particularly observed in this pilot study. In looking for a number of ways in which student satisfaction with education can be increased, perhaps Service-Learning can be considered a useful tool.

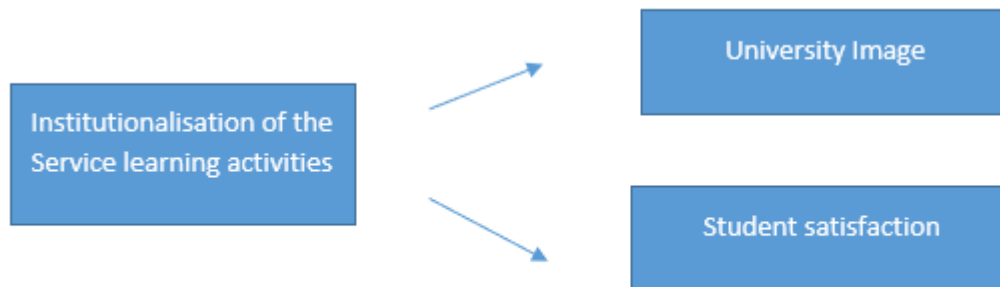
## **2. PREVIOUS RESEARCH**

There are numerous studies linking the image and satisfaction of students such as (e.g., Azoury, Daou & Khoury, 2014). Students as the most important stakeholders in higher education (Wagner Mainardes, Alves & Raposo, 2012) are one of the most deserving of creating a good image of HEI. It is to their satisfaction that the number of recommendations is considered as one of the basic conditions for the development of loyalty (Annamdevula & Bellamkonda, 2016). This research focuses on managing Service-Learning activities in the context of creating an HEI image. Also, based on the research

(Casile et al. 2011), there is a link between student satisfaction and undertaking Service-Learning activities, so this hypothesis was tested in this research as well.

In addition, since the image of HEI is extremely important, the question arises as to whether socially-oriented activities such as Service-Learning can be related to creating the image of HEI.

Based on the above, two hypotheses were set in the pilot study, which was tested by online survey on UNST students.



*Scheme 1: Proposed conceptual model (authors)*

H1: There is a positive significant relationship between the institutionalization of the Service Learning activities and the university's image

H2: There is a positive significant relationship between the institutionalization of the Service Learning activities and student satisfaction.

### 3. METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

The pilot research was made using the surveys that were conducted at the University of Split in the period of March – to April 2022. The survey was created online, on the *Limesurvey* platform. The survey was shared via email addresses of academics interested in the Service-Learning activities or who are supporting research activities in general. They were asked to spread the questionnaire to the students, studying at their faculties, around of the University of Split (undergraduate and graduate study levels). The responses were rated using the Likert scale, with values ranging from 1 to 5 (where 1 was - I completely agree, 2 - I agree, 3 - Neither agree nor disagree, 4 - I do not agree and 5 - I completely do not agree). When measuring satisfaction levels, students were offered a scale with five levels (from very satisfied to very dissatisfied). The collected data was analyzed using SPSS (Version 23) program for data management. The total rate of responses was 142 from which, the authors collected 59 full responses.

For research purposes new instrument was proposed, using three different constructs: the institutionalization of the Service-Learning activities (SL), university image (UI), and student satisfaction (SS). Additional questions were added at the end of the survey with the aim to identify the demographic variables of the respondents.

For the University Image, Alcaide-Pulido, Alves & Gutiérrez-Villar (2017) scale was offered with four variables and 15 items. This scale was created by a combination of different scales previously created for other research:

- External Communication and Values (5 items)
- National and International Awareness (4 items)
- Economic Value (2 items)
- University Facilities (4 items)

A detailed explanation of the variables and items is shown in the table in continuation (Table 1.).

**Table 1.** Scale for University Image by Alcaide-Pulido, Alves & Gutiérrez-Villar (2017)

External Communication and Values  Alcaide-Pulido, Alves & Gutiérrez-Villar (2017)	My university has a good web-site
	My university is present in social networks
	My university is committed to society
	My university conveys ethical values and social responsibility
	My university conveys values of environmental responsibility
National and International Awareness  Alcaide-Pulido, Alves & Gutiérrez-Villar (2017)	My university is recognized nationally
	My university is recognized internationally
	My university enjoys a good academic reputation and prestige
	My university is well-placed in university ranking
Economic Value  Alcaide-Pulido, Alves & Gutiérrez-Villar (2017)	My university offers good value for money
	At my university the price is right
University Facilities  Alcaide-Pulido, Alves & Gutiérrez-Villar (2017)	At my university classrooms are well equipped technologically
	At my university the number of students per class is appropriate
	At my university subjects generally have a good theoretical/practical balance
	My university campus is of an appropriate size

**Source:** Author's Analysis

For the Satisfaction scale, 4 main items were offered that are generally used when testing the satisfaction of the higher education institution (Hennig-Thurau, Langer, & Hansen, 2001; Helgesen & Nettet, 2007; Rojas-Méndez et al. 2009, Dado et al. 2012, Rodić Lukić, 2015). The list of all the items can be seen in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Scale for satisfaction:

Satisfaction  Hennig-Thurau, Langer, & Hansen, 2001; Helgesen & Nettet, 2007; Rojas-Méndez et al. 2009, Dado et al. 2012, in Rodić Lukić, 2015.	I am generally satisfied with the overall educational service of the university
	My opinion of the university is favourable
	I am satisfied with what I get at the university
	As a student of this university, I met most of the expectations that I had before enrolling

**Source:** Author's Analysis

For the scale that measures Service-Learning institutionalization, an instrument was used, called CAPSL, developed by Bringle, R. G., & Hatcher, J. A. (1996). It was created by nine variables with 28 items.:

- Planning (5 items)
- Awareness (3 items)
- Prototype Resources (4 items)
- Expansion (4 items)
- Recognition (4 items)

- Monitoring (1 item)
- Evaluation (2 items)
- Research (1 item)
- Institutionalization (5 items)

CAPSL describes a model for the development of Service-Learning in universities at the institutional level (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). The list of all the items with accompanying variables can be seen in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Scale for institutionalization of the Service-Learning

Planning	My university formed a planning group of key persons for service leaning
	My university engaged survey institutional resources and climate
	My university visited other similar campuses that have Service-Learning strategy
	My university Developed a Campus Action Plan for service learning
	My university Formed an advisory committee for the service leaning
Awareness	My university Informed key administrators and faculty groups about Service-Learning and program development
	My university joined national organizations for service- learning
	Staff at my university attend Service-Learning conferences
Prototype Resources	My university identified and consult with exemplary programs in higher education
	My university obtained administrative commitments for an Office of Service-Learning (e.g., budget, office space, personnel)
	My university developed a means for coordinating service learning with other programs on campus (e.g., student support services, faculty development)
	My university applies for grants for service leaning
Expansion	My university discusses Service-Learning with a broader audience of administrators and staff (e.g., deans, counsellors, student affairs)
	My university support attendance at Service-Learning conferences
	My university collaborates with others in programming and grant applications
	My university arrange campus speakers and forums on service learning
Recognition	My university publicizes university's Service-Learning activities to other institutions
	My university participates in conferences and workshops of service leaning
	My university publish research on service learning
	My university publicizes Service-Learning activities in local media
Monitoring	My university collects data within the institution (e.g., number of courses, number of faculty teaching Service-Learning courses, number of students enrolled, number of agency partnerships)
Evaluation	My university compiles the annual report of the Office of Service-Learning
	My university includes service learning in institutional assessment
Research	My university conduct research on service learning within the institution and across institutions
Institutionalization	At my university, service is part of the university mission statement and Service-Learning is recognized in university publications
	At my university Service-Learning is an identifiable feature of general education
	At my university, Service-Learning courses are listed in bulletins, schedules of classes, and course descriptions
	My University has different sponsors for regional or national conferences on service learning
	My university has budget commitments to sustain Service-Learning programs

**Source:** Author's Analysis

The collected data from the survey was analyzed using the IBM SPSS tool.

## 4. RESULTS

At the beginning of the research, at first, the authors analyzed whether students who participated in the research had any previous experience with Service-Learning. The results showed that 75, 58% of tested students had no previous experience and 16,95% of students participated in the S-L activities. Similar results were obtained when analyzing the international experience of the students. According to the results, 71,19% of respondents confirmed that students had no previous Erasmus exchange international experience.

Most of the respondents participated in volunteering (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Volunteering experience

Volunteering experience	Yes	No
Percentage of respondents	55,93%	42,37%
Frequency	33	25

*Source: Author's Analysis*

When authors tested what kind of the faculties are responses coming from across the University of Split, they concluded that the biggest number of respondents were from:

- Faculty of Economics, Business, and Tourism (64,41%)
- School of Medicine (27,12%)
- Faculty of Law (1,69%)
- University Department for Health Science (6,78%).

Most of the students were studying at the first year of the graduate study program level (45,76%), 30,20% of students were from the third undergraduate study program level, 13,50% students from 2<sup>nd</sup> graduate study program level, and the rest from the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> undergraduate study program level.

Most of the respondents are between 23-23 years old (47,46%).

At first, Cronbach Alpha was made with an aim to test the internal consistency of scales and subscales for University Image (Table 5). Cronbach Alpha as a test According to the authors Felder and Spurlin (2005), an acceptable level is > 0.7. A value above 0.8 is considered better and 0.90 excellent. This scale shows a satisfactory level.

**Table 5.** Cronbach Alpha for the **Image construct**

Cronbach's Alpha - IMAGE	N of Items
0.754	4

*Source: Author's Analysis*

In the continuation, Cronbach's Alpha for the Institutionalization of the Service-Learning construct was also made. The results showed good reliability of the scale.

**Table 6.** Cronbach Alpha for the **Service-Learning institutionalization**

Cronbach's Alpha - INSTITUTIONALIZATION of the S-L	N of Items
0.952	8

*Source: Author's Analysis*

The Cronbach Alpha was also done in order to test the consistency of the Satisfaction of the students. The results showed also an appropriate level of the reliability.

**Table 7.** Cronbach Alpha for the Satisfaction construct

Cronbach's Alpha – SATISFACTION	N of Items
0.870	4

*Source: Author's Analysis*

A descriptive statistic was made for all the variables of the Image construct. Following results were shown (Table 8). The biggest value had variables that determine Economic Value (2,63) and the lowest National and International awareness (2,00).

**Table 8.** Descriptive statistics for Image

Variable - IMAGE	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
External Communication and Values	53	1.00	5.00	2.23	0.59
National and International Awareness	52	1.00	5.00	2.00	0.64
Economic Value	32	1.00	5.00	2.62	0.97
University Facilities	57	1.25	5.00	2.53	0.74

*Source: Author's Analysis*

Descriptive analysis for the Satisfaction showed an average value of 2,91 (Table 9).

**Table 9.** Descriptive statistics for Satisfaction

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Satisfaction	59	1.25	5.00	2.91	0.943

*Source: Author's Analysis*

When analyzing the variables that make the Institutionalization of the Service-Learning constructs, the results showed that the biggest mean has the variable Planning (3,63) and the lowest one – Monitoring (3,27).

**Table 10.** Descriptive statistics for Institutionalization of the Service-Learning

Variable – S-L	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Planning	59	1.20	5.00	3.63	1.33
Awareness	59	1.00	5.00	3.51	1.35
Prototype Resources	59	1.00	5.00	3.49	1.45
Expansion	59	1.00	5.00	3.53	1.51
Recognition	59	1.00	5.00	3.49	1.51
Monitoring	59	1.00	5.00	3.27	1.79
Evaluation	59	1.00	5.00	3.60	1.65
Research	59	1.00	5.00	3.32	1.75

*Source: Author's Analysis*

### Hypothesis testing

H1: There is a positive significant relationship between the institutionalization of the Service Learning activities and university's image

In order to test the H1 hypothesis, a correlation was made between the Institutionalization of the Service-Learning activities and the university image. The research showed a positive, statistically significant correlation, indicating a value of 0,573.

**Table 11.** Correlation between Service-Learning Institutionalization and Image

			<b>Image</b>	<b>SL Institutionalization</b>
Spearman's rho	Image	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	0.573**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	0.001
		N	59	59
	SL Institutionalization	Correlation Coefficient	0.573**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001	.
		N	59	59

*Source: Author's Analysis*

In order to test H2, a correlation was made between the institutionalization of the Service Learning activities and student satisfaction.

H2: There is a positive significant relationship between the institutionalization of the Service Learning activities and student satisfaction.

The research showed a positive, statistically significant correlation, indicating a value of 0,341 (Table 12).

**Table 12.** Correlation between Service-Learning Institutionalization and student Satisfaction

			<b>SL Institutionalization</b>	<b>Satisfaction</b>
Spearman's rho	SL Institutionalization	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	0.341**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	0.008
		N	59	59
	Satisfaction	Correlation Coefficient	0.341**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.008	.
		N	59	59

*Source: Author's Analysis*

## 5. CONCLUSION

In the last decade, the way of teaching has changed from the traditional setting of a classroom to a new, community-engaged way of teaching and learning. New modern pedagogies have started to develop together with a Service-Learning. This is a modern pedagogy that brings benefits to all included stakeholders (teachers, students, and community representatives). Although many benefits of using this modern pedagogy have been exposed, still it is not enough included in the curricula (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000). Increasing pressures to which HEI's are exposed today, together with the growth of

competition in the education sector, are pushing HEI to pay more attention to the analysis of their stakeholder needs and expectations. Since students are the most important stakeholder of each HEI (Wagner Mainardes, Alves & Raposo, 2012), the question arises as to how their satisfaction can be managed.

If the social role of HEI today is a kind of obligation, and by this pilot research, it is proven that the institutionalization of Service-Learning affects student satisfaction (H2) as well as the image of HEI (H1). Although, the social dimension of the HEIs - a term coined in the early years of the Bologna Process (Crosier & Haj, 2020), has been gaining more and more importance lately. Especially with the popularization of UN Sustainable Development Goals. Since, Service-Learning is connected with one of the UN goals (Theme No. 4: Quality Education), provides a basis for change in society. Some authors particularly problematize the growing importance of S-L activity as one of the tools of public relations as community engagement is increasingly represented in the rankings of universities (Raddon & Harrison, 2015), but its positive significance for society is unquestionable. The positive connection that this way of socially-engagement can have on the image of HEI has been proven in this pilot study, so it can be concluded that there is potential. To verify it, it would be necessary to test it on a larger sample. As Raddon & Harrison (2015) state, this phenomenon has grown up and developed in the United States of America, but in Canada, Europe, and other continents it is still in the early stage of development. The biggest rebound was achieved when former American president Obama declared this period when we are living in a period called "the new era of service". By this act, he signed the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, allocating over a billion dollars to Service-Learning. Europe is high away from this approach, but by focusing on the benefits of the Service-Learning small steps forward can be undertaken and great benefits for the institution obtained. One of the small steps forward has been made also at the University of Split in the period from 2015 regarding Service-Learning. Today it engaged more than 500 students across the University of Split (authors research) and became an integral part of the mission growth of the European University of the Seas (SEA-EU) alliance.

Although this pilot study was conducted on a small sample, it clearly proves that there is a statistically significant association of these valuable constructs. Therefore, based on the results, the data can be concluded that both hypotheses can be accepted.

The main limitation of the study is considered to be the fact of using a small sample in the pilot research. In addition, it would be interesting to test whether students from the economic study programs value differently Service-Learning activities in comparison with students from other fields and disciplines. The recommendation for further research would also go in the line of expanding this research to all SEA-EU partner universities. All those six universities have a Service-Learning as a mission of growth.

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# DILLEMAS AND TENSIONS AS DRIVERS OF CHANGE IN ENGAGED RESEARCH AND LEARNING COMMUNITIES

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## ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the tensions and dilemmas inherent to engaged teaching and research practices. We build on a multiple-case study to explore their potential as catalysts for change at individual, group and institutional levels. The cases were documented as part of a strategic project that ran for 4 years (2018-2021) at Vrije Universiteit Brussel. The project aimed at better aligning the university's offerings with both needs and opportunities of its urban surroundings. We adopted a mixed-method approach to scrutinize the experiences of the participants in the activities under study (lecturers, students and partners). Our dataset draws on direct observations, document analysis, surveys and reflective dialogues. The paper is organized in four parts. In the first section we will conceptualize engaged teaching and research practices as 'boundary work' building on Engeström's Activity Theory. Second, we will define four types of dilemmas investigated in this study: conceptual, cultural, political and pedagogical. Third, we will illustrate occurrences of change resulting from activity-system contradictions, drawing on a tool we developed earlier: the engagement CUBE. We close the paper with a series of reflective questions that might support academics in further developing their practices of engagement.

**Keywords:** engaged research and teaching; boundary practice; agentic/transformational learning; campus-community partnerships

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the transformative potential of dilemmas and tensions characterizing engaged teaching and research practices. It draws on the experiences gained in a strategic project that ran for 4 years (2018-2021) at Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), Belgium. The question guiding this project was: 'What does it take to be an authentically engaged urban University?'. Staff members with diverse disciplinary backgrounds and professional experiences were invited to take part in an institution-wide Learning Community (LC) for exploring this question while at the same time supporting one another in developing new engagement initiatives, aligned with VUB's philosophical pillars as well as with the needs and opportunities of the university's urban surroundings. Data were collected through direct observations, document analysis, surveys and reflective dialogues. Data-analysis was inspired by Activity Theory and was organized building on a collaboratively designed tool: the engagement CUBE. We believe that this paper is a helpful contribution to the field of engaged scholarship and pedagogy, both from a theoretical as well as a practical perspective. We will conceptualize engaged practices as 'boundary work,' and will explain how we used the engagement CUBE to recognize contradictions and dilemmas as sources of change.

## 1.1 Engaged teaching and research practices: what, why, how?

In this paper we use Community Engaged Research and Learning (CERL) as an umbrella concept for: ‘Knowledge creation and sharing activities where people with diverse backgrounds are brought together to work around societal challenges and contribute to positive change’. With this *working definition* we seek to overcome seemingly conflicting approaches and explore a broad range of campus-community initiatives. We use the concept of ‘engagement’ (and the corresponding adjective ‘engaged’) for highlighting three guiding principles: (i) the ambition to address real-world problems and stimulate participants to critically reflect and act upon their personal and collective responsibilities; (ii) the aspiration to create an intellectually challenging learning environment that allows people with diverse backgrounds to actively participate in, and take ownership of their joint activities, building on diverse forms of expertise, needs and aspirations; and (iii) the intention to foster individual and collective change capacities and actions.

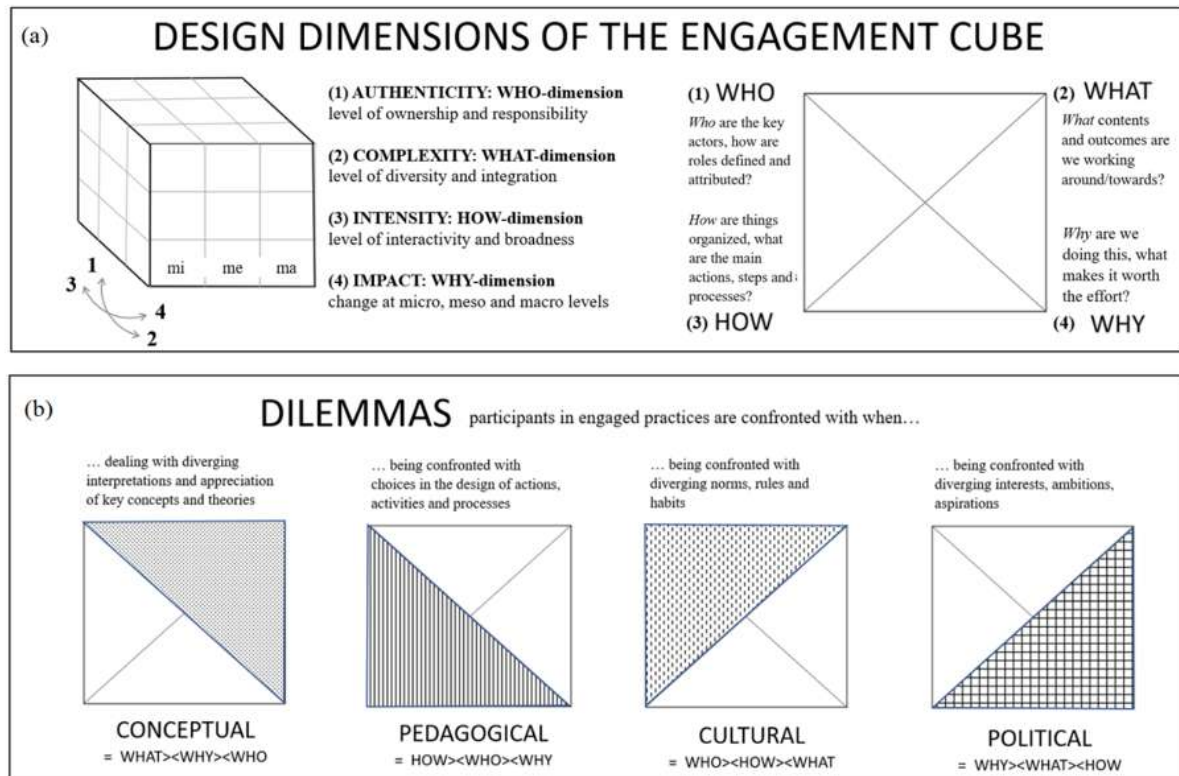
## 1.2 Approaching engaged practices as boundary work

We conceptualize CERL-initiatives as boundary crossing practices that take place at multiple levels: the individual or intrapersonal (micro) level; the interpersonal or group (meso) level and the intergroup, institutional, or societal (macro) level. Akkerman and Bakker (2011) defined a boundary as a ‘sociocultural difference leading to discontinuity in action or interaction’. They describe boundary crossing activities as ‘the efforts to establish or restore continuity across different perspectives or practices’. Research points at the potential of such processes of fostering ‘expansive learning’: learning in which new knowledge is acquired through collaborative inquiry resulting in a significant change (Engeström, 2001). As argued elsewhere (Moriau, 2022), the authors of this paper believe that urban environments - due to the socio-ecological challenges they typically accommodate - offer unique opportunities in this regard. At the same time, we feel that there is a need for more appreciation of the risks, constraints and difficulties that one needs to deal with in such environments. We will argue that unleashing the full potential of engaged practices entails much more than just the creation of a ‘welcoming space’, allowing diverse people to take part in a ‘collective learning journey’. It demands a critical position, guided by active exploration of power relations and imbalances and the ambition to not only oppose the injustices encountered but also to actively shape more just, equitable, and empowering conditions.

## 2. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 The engagement CUBE

The framework that was used for analyzing the contradictions and dilemmas experienced by the participants in the CERL-cases under study, draws on a tool that was developed as part of the LC-trajectory: the engagement CUBE (see Moriau *et al.*, 2021 for a more detailed presentation). The CUBE aims to support CERL-participants in navigating the complex fabric of engaged practices, by facilitating reflective dialogue. It is to be considered an interrogative tool rather than a prescriptive one, helpful for addressing four questions brought forward by Engeström as key elements in developing and analysing learning ecologies: (1) *Who* are the subjects of learning, how are they defined and located?; (2) *What* do they learn, what are the contents and outcomes of learning?; (3) *How* do they learn, what are the key actions or processes of learning?; and (4) *Why* do they learn, what makes them make the effort? (Engeström, 2001).



**FIGURE 1:** (a) The engagement CUBE with its four design dimensions (authenticity, complexity, intensity, impact), three levels of boundary-crossing (micro-mi, meso-me, macro-ma) and guiding design questions (who, what, how, why) creating interconnected tension fields, and (b) the four types of dilemmas covered in this study (conceptual, pedagogical, cultural and political) with their respective tension fields.

The CUBE is characterized by four design dimensions affecting CERL-activities and their outcomes: the level of authenticity (WHO-dimension), complexity (WHAT-dimension), intensity (HOW-dimension), and impact (WHY-dimension). Three interconnected levels of boundary crossing are visualized: micro (mi), meso (me), and macro (ma). Rather than ‘flat playing fields’ these environments need to be imagined as ‘bumpy terrains’ for they span diverging logics, time dimensions, quality standards, histories, interests, levels of status and power (Cockburn *et al.*, 2018). In this study, the CUBE was used both as an organiser as well as a heuristic tool, fostering ongoing dialogue about and reinterpretation of the collected data. The aim was to document, analyze and describe emergences of four types of dilemmas (conceptual, pedagogical, cultural and political), as visually represented in Figure 1 and described in the next sections.

## 2.2 An activity system conceptualization of boundary interactions

We used Activity Theory to extend the notion of dilemmas and tensions to the context of *engaged* boundary work. Within an *activity system*, participants in a collaborative practice (WHO-dimension of the CUBE) are portrayed as subjects interacting with objects to attain specific outcomes. The object of the activity system is the goal or motive (WHY-dimension of the CUBE). The interaction between subject and object is mediated through tools (or technologies) and skills (or competencies). Similarly, the relationship between a subject and its community is mediated through rules. The affiliation between community and object is mediated through a specific division of labor or tasks. Together, these three elements (tools, rules, tasks) make the HOW-dimension of the CUBE. The content and topics that are central to the activity system can be regarded as the WHAT-dimension of the CUBE.

Research indicates that looking at the tensions emerging from contradictions between the diverse elements that shape an activity system, is crucial for understanding what motivates particular (inter)

actions, dynamics and developments (see for example McMillan, 2009). Windschitl (2002) distinguishes four types of dilemmas (cultural, pedagogical, conceptual, and political ones). We will draw on his characterization and propose a perspective that is applicable to engaged practices building on the CUBE. We define cultural dilemmas as tensions people come across when being confronted with diverging norms and rules, trying to navigate what is important, to whom and why. Pedagogical dilemmas will be used for pointing at challenges that arise when participants in engaged practices consider the question of how to organize their actions, activities and collaborative processes, with whom and to what end. We label dilemmas as being conceptual in nature, when tensions are the result of diverging understandings and interpretations, arising in the process of defining, translating and internalizing theories and concepts in negotiation with diverse beliefs and aspirations. Political dilemmas are defined as challenges that arise when participants need to navigate diverging interests or aspirations, considering power relations and imbalances. Figure 1 visualizes the occurrence of these four types of dilemmas and their corresponding tension fields.

### **3. PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to identify the transformative potential of contradictions and dilemmas encountered by participants in engaged teaching and research initiatives. In addition, this study aims to propose guidelines for working with such tensions in an authentic manner, meaning that they allow one to observe, read, analyze and address real-life issues by fostering agency (voice and choice) in accordance with one's needs and aspirations on the one hand, the complex nature of the studied challenges on the other. Hence, this paper intends to answer the following questions:

- What are the contradictions and dilemmas experienced when taking part in engaged teaching and research practices?
- How can one work with such tensions with the aim of fostering an agentic/transformative learning experience?

### **4. MATERIAL AND METHODS**

#### **4.1 Data collection strategy**

Data were collected using a mixed method approach during a four years' timespan (Jan 2018 - December 2021). Quantitative and qualitative methods were combined to scrutinize the different parties involved in the cases under study: students ( $n \cong 500$ ), academics ( $n \cong 30$ ), and societal partners ( $n \cong 50$ ). The baseline measurements and follow-up surveys were taken online through Qualtrics and Google Forms and contained a mixture of open-ended and closed questions. The follow-up study among lecturers was carried out after they had completed the LC-trajectory and consisted of a written reflection and a post-survey performed in Qualtrics. During the LC-trajectory, additional data was collected through chatterboxes, direct observations and reflective dialogues. The follow-up studies among students and partners consisted of two focus group interviews following a semi-structured interview guideline derived from the baseline measurement as well as a post-survey performed in Qualtrics. Additionally, a number of available documents were analyzed: policy notes, strategic plans, course sheets and reflection papers. Table 1 presents an overview of the collected data.

	LECTURERS	STUDENTS	PARTNERS
<b>BASELINE MEASUREMENTS</b>			
<b>PERIOD</b> N = <b>METHOD</b>	2018	2019	2018
	253	79	90
	<b>SURVEY</b> Lecturers were asked about their experience with and attitudes towards CERL, their expectations, perceived barriers and the added value of Brussels for developing CERL strategies were surveyed.	<b>SURVEY</b> Students were asked about their experience with and attitudes towards CERL, perceived needs and barriers, and the added value of Brussels for developing CERL strategies were surveyed.	<b>SURVEY</b> Societal partners were asked about the societal challenges they are addressing, actions they take, need for CERL collaborations and desirable ways to work with HEIs.
<b>FOLLOW-UP STUDIES</b>			
<b>PERIOD</b> N = <b>METHOD</b>	2019 -2021	2019 -2021	2019 -2021
	26	154	59
	<b>SURVEYS &amp; PERSONAL REFLECTION</b> Course unit characteristics and (re)design factors through the LC trajectory were surveyed. Lecturers were asked about their experience with and (changed) attitudes towards CERL, and the (expected) benefits of their (re)designed CERL-pilot.	<b>SURVEYS &amp; FOCUS GROUPS</b> Students were asked about their experience with and (changed) attitudes towards CERL, the benefits experienced from the CERL projects they participated in.	<b>SURVEYS &amp; INTERVIEWS</b> Societal partners were asked questions about the outcomes of their CERL collaborations and the process (i.e. satisfaction with the collaboration).

**TABLE 1:** Data collected to analyze the experiences of the participants in a selection of CERL initiatives developed at Vrije Universiteit Brussel.

## 4.2 Data analysis process

The presented study was designed as a collective case study (Yin, 2018). The case to be investigated was in how far dilemmas experienced in engaged teaching and research practices can foster ‘transformative learning’ (Lotz-Sisitka *et al.*, 2015). The data-analysis method can best be described as ‘thinking with theory’ (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013), which has been presented as a process of *plugging* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) theory, previous research findings, collected data, and the researchers’ perspectives into one another. We first engaged in the following two activities: (i) reading the collected data to develop an understanding of how participants described their experiences; (ii) identification, analysis and characterization of the described/observed dilemmas. This iteration allowed us to develop an activity-theoretical understanding of conceptual, pedagogical, cultural, and political dilemmas as represented in Table 2. A second iteration allowed us to read the dilemmas through the lens of the engagement CUBE. We analyzed our findings by identifying contradictions between activity-system dimensions as sources of change. The outcomes of this reading will be discussed in the next section.

DILEMMAS	EXAMPLES
<p><b>PEDAGOGICAL</b></p> <p>examples of identified activity system contradictions:</p> <p>structure ↔ autonomy                      flexibility ↔ transparency                      pre-described ↔ open-ended                      oversight ↔ authenticity                      creativity ↔ efficiency                      ...</p> <p><b>HOW&gt;&lt;WHO&gt;&lt;WHY</b></p>	<p><i>"How do you achieve an honest and objective evaluation in groups where not all students make the same contribution? The result delivered depends strongly on the cooperation and guidance with peers and partner. Is it fair to build in this uncertainty?" Morgan (academic)</i></p> <p><i>"There were times when I could or should have been better supervised. I think, I could have been provided more guidance in defining the goal of the project, so that I could make more of it. This freedom and autonomy came at a price. The price of being efficient." Claribel (student)</i></p>
<p><b>POLITICAL</b></p> <p>examples of identified activity system contradictions:</p> <p>performance ↔ learning                      continuity ↔ change                      engagement ↔ reputation                      loyalty ↔ critical distance                      innovation ↔ transformation                      ...</p> <p><b>WHY&gt;&lt;WHAT&gt;&lt;HOW</b></p>	<p><i>"You know when you arrive with a microphone, it's scary for a lot of people, it makes them run away, so it pushed me to take time to put people at ease, it also led me to an intense reflection about my personal attitudes, my status and freedom of expression: what can be said, is not said... ? Navigating this tension was really enriching. I worked on a very sensitive and tense issue. It wasn't easy to create an atmosphere for free speech. It carried me a lot." Claribel (student)</i></p> <p><i>"As (precarious) post-doc I see that my career development is mainly determined by the amount of money I bring in and the number of scientific publications I produce, meaning that spending time on anything else (CERL activities for example) is potentially 'at my own risk'. I often wonder: is it worth it?" Witty (academic)</i></p>
<p><b>CULTURAL</b></p> <p>examples of identified activity system contradictions:</p> <p>self-organised ↔ expert-led                      management ↔ innovation                      control ↔ trust                      practical ↔ theoretical value                      rigor ↔ relevance                      ...</p> <p><b>WHO&gt;&lt;HOW&gt;&lt;WHAT</b></p>	<p><i>"Now I am the only one in our organisation, there used to be more of us but we had to compete against colleagues saying 'master theses, where are you putting your time into...' If students mail them, they redirect them to our website to look up information they need, whereas I will ask more questions, get back to them, that is my attitude". Brand (partner)</i></p> <p><i>"The biggest evolution I have experienced regarding how I function in a team is not always wanting to be in control. Since I was working together with students from other disciplines, I didn't really know what to expect from them. That uncertainty was a strong factor in the beginning." Claribel (student)</i></p>
<p><b>CONCEPTUAL</b></p> <p>examples of identified activity system contradictions:</p> <p>complexity ↔ integrity                      integrative ↔ specialized                      niche ↔ transfer                      clarity ↔ broadness                      renewal ↔ orthodoxy                      ...</p> <p><b>WHAT&gt;&lt;WHY&gt;&lt;WHO</b></p>	<p><i>"A major challenge is my inexperience in this field. I really see the potential, but at the same time it feels very risky. It really is uncommon practice in my discipline." Clean (academic)</i></p> <p><i>"Currently I struggle with the definition of 'community'. I believe the format I apply in my Master course can be described as a community-engaged practice, however I do not know whether the additional partners I have in mind would fit in this approach." Michaela (academic)</i></p> <p><i>"When writing out research questions, I often find it hard to define the scope: is it suitable for a master thesis or wide enough for a PhD? It would be useful to receive certain guidelines on this: from which perspective can we describe the research topic, what is feasible in one academic year..." Theresina (partner)</i></p>

TABLE 2: Four types of dilemmas encountered in engaged practices and the activity-system contradictions they originate in, illustrated by excerpts from the reflective dialogues of and follow-up interviews with participants in the CERL-cases under study, names have been pseudonimized.

## 5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 5.1 Drivers, benefits and barriers of/for CERL

The baseline measurement was carried out in order to gauge the potential support for, and the expected benefits of CERL-strategies amongst lecturers and students. 253 lecturers participated in the online survey, of which 101 respondents fully completed the survey. The results showed a clear willingness to introduce CERL and a recognition of its relevance. The surveyed staff members seem to value engaged practices as a means to (1) meet the societal missions of our university (mean: 5.29 – SD: 1.56 on a 7 point scale); (2) shape attractive learning environments (mean: 5.01 – SD: 1.51); (3) offer education that motivates students (mean: 5.08 – SD: 1.56); (4) make academic expertise accessible to societal partners (mean: 5.15 – SD: 1.55) and (5) gear education and research activities to societal developments (mean: 5.20 – SD: 1.57). The baseline survey with students showed that they expect to learn in close interaction with professionals, fellow-students and - to a lesser degree - citizens. The participants in the survey (n=79) recognized the importance of personal development in the context of academic training, and indicated that the opportunities to learn from real-world situations were too scarce. Students who had registered for a CERL module, did so to support citizens or organisations (n=25); to achieve personal

fulfilment (n=23); to work on their personal development (n=8), to build a network (n=4) and to gain professional experience (n=2). A majority of the respondents (81%) thought that societal engagement should be embedded and valued in the curricula (in the form of ECTS or a mention on the diploma).

The post-surveys and focus group interviews reveal that lecturers value the positive impact of their CERL-initiatives on student motivation, satisfaction, involvement, and performances. *“Our students are tomorrow’s changemakers. This kind of learning encourages active citizenship and fosters student agency and responsibility”*, one of the interviewed lecturers stated. Students appreciate the societal relevance, the added value for their personal development, understanding of societal developments and needs, and enhanced self-awareness: *“In collaboration with other students, you get to know yourself better... you gain more insight into your own strengths, your added value in a team. Also, you learn to organise and read collaborative processes better and gain experience in dealing with complicated group dynamics.”* Students also appreciated their CERL-experience because of the societal relevance. Working with authentic cases and collaboration with professionals and peers in the local urban context was brought forward as being highly motivational and having a positive impact on their study experience. The societal partners valued the inspirational input of students, the academic expertise and additional resources and capacities the activities had brought to their organisations and/or projects *“This was a great collaboration,”* one of the partners reacted, *“keeping us sharp and making us reflect on things we might usually not focus on.”*

Yet, our studies also highlighted some important hurdles and concerns. Students pointed at the dense structure of their study programmes and the heavy workload they had experienced. Despite the benefits, they also expressed disappointment and frustrations due to free-riders, unclear (learning) goals, poor organisation and guidance. Students stressed the importance of curricular embedment, thoughtful time allocation and well-considered alignment of educational goals and societal aspirations of the CERL-initiatives. During the focus discussions, a plea was made for more thoughtful consideration of the added value of group work. *“There’s no gain in having to deal with an assignment in a team, if you can also handle it on your own. This should be avoided.”*, said one of the students. The interviewed academics acknowledged these challenges. One of the interviewed lecturers put it as follows: *“Community-driven projects are very demanding. There’s so many things one needs to consider... I often wonder: am I doing my job well enough?”* Lecturers emphasized the importance of adequate infrastructure and resources. They were concerned about the lack of recognition that involvement in engaged practices received and pointed out that central coordination is key to sustain partner relationships and ensure adequate monitoring. The societal partners were concerned about their lack of time to provide adequate supervision and stressed the need to be supported in translating their needs and expertise to the academic context. Our interviews also pointed at the risk of one-sided benefits and ‘over-partnering’; confirming previous research indicating that not all campus-community initiatives are truly beneficial (see for example Mitchel *et al.*, 2012).

## 5.2 Looking at dilemmas and contradictions through the engagement CUBE

The activity-theoretical analysis of the CERL-cases, fostered an interesting reading of the collected data. It allowed us to explore the four types of dilemmas and identify their underpinning contradictions, as illustrated in Table 1. At the same time, we came to realize that the described/observed dilemmas are rather complex and stratified and quite often do emerge from interactions between various dimensions. The first pedagogical dilemma shown in Table 1, for example, has a political dimension (Who is formulating the intended outcomes and evaluation criteria?), a conceptual (How are the intended outcomes defined and/or understood?), and a cultural one (What are the underlying principles, beliefs and/or traditions that are inspiring these definitions and ways of handling?). Because of this finding, we engaged in a second iteration of data-analysis, using the CUBE as a dialogic tool. This cycle

allowed us to relate the identified dilemmas to the four design dimensions of the engagement CUBE (authenticity, complexity, intensity and impact).

Both students, partners and academic staff members were found to struggle with the question of authenticity. One of the students questioned whether authentic learning and engagement should be imposed, arguing this might affect the level of commitment: *“I was a bit worried about the fact that this module is compulsory for some students. This made me fear that they might not be involved with their full conviction.”* Another student expressed difficulties with being entirely genuine towards her fellow students: *“I am afraid of disappointing my teammates. I fear that my critical attitude might ruin it for everyone.”* The interviews revealed that participants were troubled with the roles they had been assigned. One of the community partners, for example, stated: *“You know, when it comes to doing research, that’s not my cup of tea... I’m more a doing-kind-of-person.”*, while one of the LC-participants argued: *“As a researcher, I am often approached as an ‘omniscient’. I sometimes feel more like a consultant than a scientist. Moreover, this type of work is often commissioned or demanded to help solve problems rather than to develop knowledge. This raises all sorts of questions about my role and position.”*

Many of the observed/described dilemmas can be linked to the difficulty of balancing the intensity and complexity levels of engaged practices, especially in relation to the ambition of adopting authentic strategies. One of the interviewed partners, for example, said: *“Although the students managed the assignment autonomously, it might have been useful to have more regular interim contacts and adjustment opportunities.”* A senior academic pointed out: *“Sometimes, the presented problems need to be answered, decisions need to be made, before students have their work done. We do not always have the same timeline as the community partners.”* A student added: *“Being in our training bubble, it is not always easy to connect with people from the work field. It took us a long time to really understand each other and define the scope of our project based on shared expectations.”* Another lecturer added: *“When you start from a theoretical exercise, you tend to miss many things. Hypothetical cases tend to be less complex, less layered. But working with a real-life case is challenging. I think partners expect more from us than what we can deliver.”*

The data-analysis also revealed dilemmas that link to the impact-dimension of engaged activities. For example, one of the participating students said: *“We would have liked to have realised something with a bit more practical value, but given the strong investigative character of our project, this was not feasible in terms of time. So we had to choose.”* A similar concern was raised by one of the academics: *“Given the minimal time and resources the organisation has to devote to this project, it is very important to strive for a win-win. You really hope that you can deliver something that benefits the partner organisation. On the other hand, the process must also be instructive for students, they must be given the opportunity to grow, to gain experience. That is not always an easy balancing act”*. Lecturers were not only concerned about the needs of their students and partners, and whether or not they would be able to meet them, they also expressed concerns about the repercussions of failing to deal with the challenges they came across: *“The organisations involved are not always easily accessible, as they too are struggling with a lack of time and resources. This involves a lot of pulling and hauling... and even then, you are not sure whether it will lead anywhere. This puts our reputation as a research group at risk”*, said one of the researchers.

### **5.3 Tensions at the campus-community boundary as drivers for change**

We found that dilemmas and contradictions can provoke changes in attitudes, expectations and ways of handling at individual (micro), group (meso) and institutional (macro) levels. One of the students stated: *“I tend to take over when my groupmates start lagging behind. That always makes me nervous, so I jump in and take over their tasks, because I’m afraid of failing. This project was different. I was much more dependent on my teammates. I couldn’t jump in for them. In the beginning that felt scary,*

*but it turned out to be a great lesson.”* Quite often, the experienced tensions led to more flexible project designs, build-in boundary-crossing techniques and capacity building strategies, resulting in approaches that more explicitly consider forms of friction, resistance or tension by design, as illustrated in this quote: *“We used to assign students to a topic and organization ourselves. From this year onwards the students are free to choose a topic and contact organisations that would be interested to join in a collaboration. Together with this partner, the students define the research questions and goals of the project. This, we expect, will allow for a more intrinsic student motivation and more in-depth alignment with the goals of both the organisations and the students”*. Adaptations also guided more explicit tasks and roles scoping, definition and attribution, as expressed by this student: *“I learned that looking at which talents are in a team is crucial... one needs to work with what the team has to offer, distribute roles starting from what each one wants to bring in, even if those personal goals are not always similar... I learned to value disagreement more thanks to this project “*.

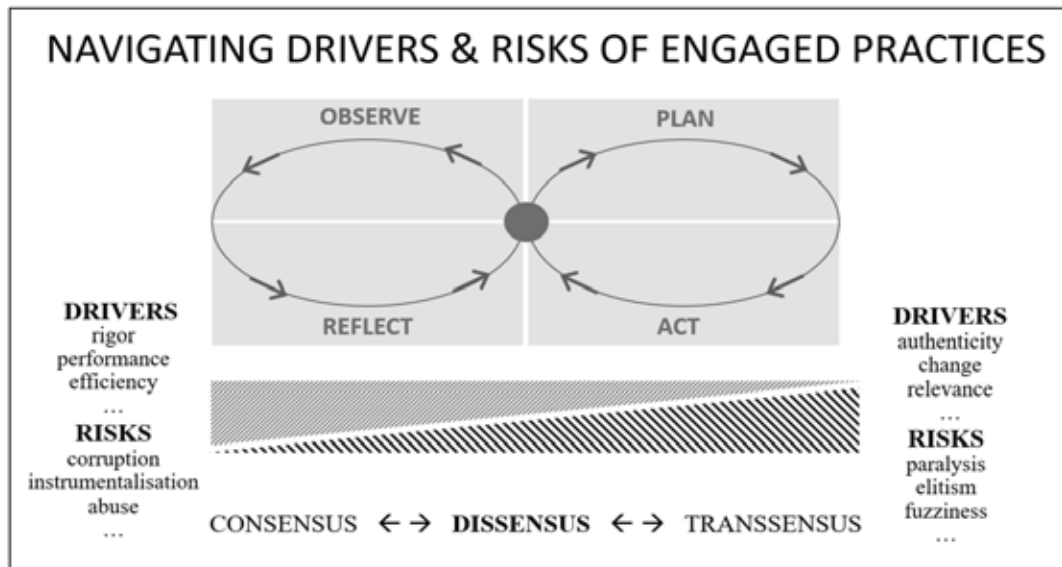
In agreement with earlier research (e.g. Schuiling and Vermaak, 2017), our study demonstrates that contradictions can be conceptualized as sources of change. However, our study also indicated that not handling tensions with care and consideration comes with risks. The risk of instrumentalization, corruption or - worse - harm and abuse, as expressed in the following statement made by one of the interviewed partners: *“To be honest, sometimes we jump in knowing that having the logo of a university on our documents will make them much more prestigious. It’s all about the credits, really.”*. Another partner added: *“I’ve had this experience where I felt to be asked just because of my exotic name and skin colour. I was called in to tick the box, that’s how it felt.”*. On the other hand, when one is overthinking and/or fails to translate observations and experiences in well-considered actions, dilemmas can turn into paralysis, cynicism, sectarianism or apathy as expressed by the following interviewees: *“Sometimes I feel hopeless. I see very clearly what the problem is, but as a (precarious) postdoc you have so little room for change. It makes me feel desperate at times.”*, and: *“Regularly, I find myself dealing with this kind of crisis where I start wondering... Who cares about all this? Who will benefit from my work? For whom am I doing all this? Will it remain in academia? What’s the point of all this?”*.

We found that engaged practices can help reframe learning spaces, by enabling co-construction of knowledge; redressing traditional hierarchies; and developing forms of *radical collegiality* (Fielding, 1999). However, our findings also point at the need for conscious exploration and translation of dilemmas and their underlying contradictions, through ongoing dialogue; challenging participants in the ‘activity system’ to articulate both motivations and needs, excitements and fears. This, we believe, entails much more than individual competences and commitment. The participants in our study stressed the need of being able to work in well-resourced and appreciative environments. The presence of and interactions with critical friends/peers was considered very important in this regard, as brought forward by a student. *“I think that the fact that one can work in a team or not, changes a lot. It helps you to keep a certain rigor. So it plays on the academic level. But it also helps you to stay motivated, to give meaning to your work. If I could have worked with other students in a more structured manner, I would have been able to dig deeper into the question.”*. One of the interviewed academics added: *“Thanks to the opportunity to take part in the learning community, I have a much better sense of what needs to be done to develop a CERL-project successfully and what the potential pitfalls are.”*

#### **5.4 Navigating campus-community boundaries**

Our observations confirm that tensions are inherent to collaborative practices, emerging from contradictory but interrelated elements in activity systems. Working through contradictions in that sense is at the heart of ‘engaged practices’ rather than a distraction from it. It requires active reading and analysis, mediation and negotiation. The confusion, frictions, dilemmas and other forms of crisis that one encounters at the boundary, can act as ‘critical incidents’ that fuel the iterative cycles of planning,

acting, observing and reflecting (see Figure 2), allowing CERL-participants to navigate the levels of authenticity, intensity, complexity and impact that best fit the purpose, desires and context worked within/towards. Tensions, in that sense, challenge CERL-participants to span negotiable boundaries, while at the same time collaboratively define threshold levels for the non-negotiable ones, so that they engage in ‘responsible activities’ rather than ‘neutral acts’.



**FIGURE 2:** The four-phased engagement cycle, allowing to work with/through dilemmas and tensions in engaged practices building on cyclical iterations of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, where both drivers and risks are critically considered, guiding three types of decision-making: a dissensus, consensus or transsensus approach.

In the process of navigating these tensions and negotiating how to handle them, different modes of decision-making can occur. The first response could be described as ‘either-or’, entailing a deliberate choice imposed by a situation characterized by an unresolvable ‘dissensus’. A second type of response relies on a ‘both-if’ or ‘consensus’ model, in which the contradictions creating the tension are considered complementary and combinable if the parties come to agree on some necessary adjustments of their initial arguments, options or actions. A third type of response is the ‘and-more’ or ‘transsensus’ approach, which involves the connection of oppositional pairs, with an aim to transgress to something new (Mostmans and Moriau, 2022). In that sense, we believe that boundary zones hold a potential of ‘qualitative phase transitions’: moments of change resulting in (an) altered entity/ies or condition(s).

## 6. CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

With this paper, we hope to inspire further dialogue, reflection and experimentation, infusing Higher Education with practices of engagement that encourage participants to work with the dilemmas and conflicts they come across; rather than that they will try to harmonize or avoid difficult conversations, choices and acts. We found that using an Activity Theory conceptualization is a useful manner to foster ‘fertile tensions’ (Berger, 2020) building on a more critical reading and understanding of the contradictions that lay at their roots, and believe that the engagement CUBE can be a helpful tool for navigating and addressing the necessary questions in this regard. In working towards a better understanding of engagement processes and the boundary zones in which they occur, one should carefully consider the nature of the ‘boundary infrastructure’: What are the rules that characterize these spaces? In what ways are or can they be ‘contradictory’ or ‘dangerous’? For whom? How will they affect the type of the knowledge development and sharing taking place? Second, it is important to consider the role of the boundary workers carefully: Who do we consider to be the brokers? In what way will they be

assigned this task? How are they prepared to meet this responsibility? What are the challenges they might come across? How will they address power asymmetries? What level of risk-taking do we consider acceptable? Where do we draw the ‘safety-line’?

Building on our findings, we would like to point at the need to move beyond risk-averse practices in academia, for they tend to reduce processes of knowledge development and sharing to technical undertakings, stripped from their social and political dimensions and - by doing so - fail to realize their transformative potential. Engeström (1999) suggests that an activity system is always ‘a community of multiple points of view, traditions and interest’. Participants, he argues, ‘carry diverse histories’, and the activity system itself holds multiple layers and perspectives ‘engraved in its artifacts, rules and conventions’. This multi-voicedness is multiplied when working at the boundary of interacting activity systems. It can be a source of trouble as well as a source of innovation. Following Strumińska-Kutra (2016, p.17), we would therefore plead for intentionally balanced approaches “critical in aspiration, pragmatic in practice and constructivist in its understanding of self, context, and tasks” and invite engaged scholars, students and practitioners to embrace both paradoxes and risks they come across as catalysts for genuine change.

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# EUROPEAN SERVICE-LEARNING INSTITUTIONALISATION AND ITS ROLE IN HIGHER EDUCATION SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT: CONCLUSIONS FROM THE FIRST SURVEY

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## ABSTRACT:

To expand and deepen an institutional self-reflection framework for community engagement in higher education, service-learning is one dimension of teaching and learning that can play a significant role. With it in mind, EASLHE has been producing knowledge around the institutionalization of service-learning in European higher education, intending to support institutions based on their different perspectives of thought and practice. This paper shows the conclusions of the analysis of 56 questionnaires from 12 European countries. After all, it seems that the grand purpose of service-learning of instilling in students a sense of civic engagement, responsibility and social justice for positive social change in society, has more slight than substantial evidence. It is not clear if institutions understand the social contexts and socio-cultural practices in which learning takes place. Therefore, institutions should promote service-learning networks of interaction that could be shaped and driven by the competencies of all involved. At the same time, higher education institutions should be supported to effectively develop incentive policies for all stakeholders, foster self-organisation, be aware of their institutional constraints to avoid damaging outcomes, and pay attention to the informal and hidden dimensions of everyday institutional reality.

**Keywords:** EASLHE, Institutionalization, Engagement, European universities.

## 1. THE ROAD TO THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF SERVICE-LEARNING

As mentioned by Europe Engage (2017) the main purpose of service-learning is about instilling in students a sense of civic engagement, and responsibility and working towards impactful social change within society.<sup>1</sup> For some reasons that are not clear at the moment, the number of service-learning projects at the European Level is becoming more robust (Furco & Norvell, 2019). But at the same time, as McIlrath et al., (2019) put it, more efforts need to be made to know more scholarly about service-learning within Europe. Such a scholar or academic approach needs to be managed in a way that would shed light on the framings that service-learning providers have been operationalised across the different national civic, political, social, religious and cultural contexts, and the difficulties and barriers they have faced. These efforts will not only present national new understandings but also “a series of common transnational considerations, contextual perspectives and barriers experienced in different European countries where service-learning is embedded or beginning to take root” (Aramburuzabala et al., 2019: 230).<sup>5</sup>

It is clear to us that Butin's thesis on the limits to service-learning need to be overcome in order to make it viable and powerful within higher education institutions (Butin, 2006). But although this work does not translate the European reality, we understand that there are more considerations that must be made within and beyond the pedagogical, political and institutional issues present in that thesis. For instance, Aramburuzabala et al., (2019) added the social approach to politics, turning Butin's political limits into a socio-political domain that needs to be addressed collectively. Instead of Butin (2006) that reduced the pedagogical limits of service-learning to the categories of race, ethnicity, class, (im)migrants status, language, and (dis)ability, Aramburuzabala et al., (2019) increased and deepened the breadth of this category to the most specific issues of linguistic and cultural translation and adaptation.

In addition to that, they alerted us to the fact that if one wants to augment the low levels of existence of service-learning in European higher education institutions, efforts must be made to move it from the peripheral context to a more centred institutional circle of curricular politics and practices. And, agreeing with Butin that higher education institutions need to control their service-learning knowledge production (expertise and research), Aramburuzabala et al., (2019) widened the scope of institutional issues. They stated that higher education institutions should be supported to take logistical considerations, such as promoting and fostering the establishment of coordinating infrastructures, funding, rewards and recognitions, time, assessment tools for the evaluation of projects, sustainability of the service-learning programs, quality standards, and co-involvement of students, university staff and community partners.

The socio-political service-learning considerations move our sight to historical factors, interpersonal and inter-organizational relations, civic society strengths, civic participation and engagement, public sphere politicisation, and the role of local neighbourhoods and communities. The linguistic and cultural translation and adaptation of service-learning take us to the context of epistemological diversity derived from the multiple definitions of service-learning that researchers, teachers and students have in Europe, which obliged us to foster a dialogical posture between the various European academic institutions. The contextual and national considerations aim for the emergence of opportunities for students to detect and act upon communitarian problems and the real needs of others at the local level. That is done by applying newly acquired curricular knowledge and skills actively, and progress in their learning while developing civic competencies. But in fact, the logistical considerations are the ones that blend all these particularities and glue them to stay locally connected and to add more value to society, and thus, complete the university's third mission.

One of the most important logistical issues that play a decisive role in glueing the socio-political, linguistic, cultural, and contextual considerations on service-learning implementation at the European level in higher education institutions, is the institutionalization of service-learning. Our work at the European Observatory of Service-Learning in Higher Education (EOSLHE) seems to move in that direction. In fact, as service-learning implementation grows, it looks decisive that higher education institutions develop institutionalization processes of sustainability assessment, because otherwise the continuity of service-learning might become jeopardised (Ribeiro, et al., 2021).

As is known, the European Association of Service-Learning in Higher Education (EASLHE) has been proposing the institutionalization of service-learning with the aim of promoting civic engagement to the development of a fairer society and to the improvement of academic and social learning that favours the development of the students' competences<sup>6</sup>. In its *Policy Brief*, the Association is calling for a European framework that fosters the institutionalization of service-learning<sup>3</sup>.

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6 See <https://www.eoslhe.eu/easlhe/>

Specifically, EASLHE is manifesting that, if higher education institutions want to improve student learning, developing social responsibility, and strengthening the communities, they must recognize the efforts of the teachers fostering Service-Learning projects, develop teaching training programs on that, give visibility to the projects, support them within the framework of teaching innovation. Not only that but also guarantee at all times the rights to health and safety of all the relevant people involved, and create stable governance structures supporting the planning, management and evaluation of such socio-educational projects.

A few years ago Meijs et al., (2019) affirmed that, as the number of service-learning projects at European level is becoming more and more robust, further research was needed to, not only unlock the full range of factors that might be impeding the institutionalization of service-learning, but also to examine the ways different factors influence and interact between themselves. Two years later, EASLHE built and developed a survey based on European service-learning research on institutionalization literature. Through this instrument, EASLHE is seeking to provide institutional, faculty, student, and community information that could contribute to moving towards a more integral community engagement. This survey was spreaded among European higher education service-learning providers, and data was collected.

Therefore, the general objective of this full paper is to briefly present ten critical detections on service-learning institutionalization, which are expanded and deepened in the *Research Report on Institutionalization of Service-Learning in European Higher Education* and on the *Guidelines for the Institutionalization of service-learning in European higher education*, which and can be consulted at EOSLHE<sup>7</sup>. These are critical considerations that, hopefully, might improve new insights and strengthen our beliefs about the most appropriate manners of fostering, promoting and supporting the institutionalization of service-learning in European higher education institutions, in a sustainable way.

## 2. SUCCINCT METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The survey was the result of an inductive investigative path with the aim of later arriving at a model of knowledge about the institutionalization of service-learning in Europe. Based on the European literature review, the authors managed to provide information on indicators that favour and affirm the institutionalization of service-learning. Starting by finding indicators, (sub)components and dimensions, the authors stayed focused on institutional involvement, funds allocation and financial strategies, coordinating unit/support infrastructure, rewards and recognition of students and teachers, planning of didactical issues, research, integration in teaching guides, institutional advertising and support, individual responsibility, and in partnerships with the community.

Based on the work of Bringle and Hatcher (2000), the authors followed a scale of types of evidence whereby selecting *No Evidence*, respondents meant that institutionalization of service-learning in their institutions did not exist. *Slight Evidence* meant that institutionalization of service-learning in their institutions existed, but it was not integral nor enduring. *Clear Evidence* meant that institutionalization of service-learning existed, it was enduring but not meaningful. *Substantial Evidence* meant that institutionalization of service-learning existed, it was enduring, it was integral and therefore transformative of the work of stakeholders in terms of educating on civic commitment. In terms of statistical analysis, the researchers worked with qualitative, discrete, exhaustive, mutually exclusive, nominal, and ordinal variables. The researchers also used content analysis, categorical and relational to the information derived from the comments of the respondents.

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<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.eoslhe.eu/eoslhe-reports/>

### 3. THE SO-CALLED TEN CRITICAL DETECTIONS ON SERVICE-LEARNING INSTITUTIONALIZATION

Between April and September 2021 (6 months), EOSLHE collected 56 responses from 12 different European countries. Most of the respondent institutions were of state public administration and the respondents laboured mostly in schools, faculties, centres and institutes. The most referred object of respondent's work was education, followed by social issues, then mental health, humanities and business and management. The most repeated category about the institutional position of the respondents was the teaching staff. Most of the increase in the number of new institutions carrying out service-learning projects took place in 'public' institutions, and almost half of the service-learning activities were singular initiatives, having any form of institutional service-learning structure.

Concerning *institutional involvement*, although there seems to exist a lot of this factor among higher education institutions, and social responsibility appears in the institution's mission statements, the institutionalization goals are not so strongly defined at the institutional level, not permeating all the different institutional, political and practical levels. Thus, we are not sure if the institutional mission statement expresses its commitment to higher education's civic responsibility of educating people for democracy and participation. Noticing that the substantial evidence of service-learning embedded at cross-institutional levels is very low, it is legitimate to wonder if the leadership is or is not committed to a service-learning agenda of ongoing support, and if there are sustained results or accomplishments reflected in institutional culture. Based on this, it is relevant that the service-learning managers have the space and conditions to stay focused on conceiving, managing and evaluating boundaries, creating conditions that may enable the discovery of their own forms of institutional involvement *de facto*.

Regarding *funds allocation and financial strategies*, more needs to be done to turn the respondents aware of any kind of funding and financial strategies for the institutionalization of service-learning. Hardly any support was shown to ensure that students with greater difficulties participated equally with others; the support that exists for the service-learning programs is more internal rather than from external sources. Higher education institutions need to be supported to have clear administrative and management procedures to promote transparency and fairness in the management of service-learning budgets; the institutions that have such transparency and fairness procedures do not execute them adequately resulting in inadequate transparency and fairness of budget management. Based on this, we wonder if it would be appropriate for the students to pay for their participation in service-learning projects in order to distribute the financing of the activities. Also, it is important that higher education institutions should foster continuous efforts to guarantee the transparency and fairness of the financing procedures, even more, when one of the sources of the future seems to be getting financial support from private companies.

Considering *coordination units of infrastructure support*, although the number of service-learning projects has been growing at the European level, there is no substantial evidence of such coordination units, and when they exist, lack regularity, permanence, and intentionality for the purposes of institutionalising service-learning. This leads us to the need of implementing more offices or coordinating units across institutions, and within specific schools, faculties, and academic centres in order to take care of service-learning student affairs and other administrative issues. Also, it is important to develop more advisory boards of multiple stakeholders, ensuring collaborative strategic planning, goal setting and mutuality of benefits for all involved in service-learning events. Still, albeit there are institutions promoting students' learning outcomes assessment, institutions need to promote and facilitate this practice among teachers and other social entities involved. For that, efforts should be made for assisting and facilitating frequent assessment relationships between community partners and various curricular and co-curricular activities in the institution. Also, students need to become aware of opportunities

and be provided with manners to exert a leadership role in the development of service-learning in their institutions.

In terms of *rewarding and recognition of students and teachers*, it has been detected that most institutions are not providing any form of rewards and recognition to students and teachers. Among those who did it, it hasn't got a permanent and integral institutional reward plan. More needs to be done to increase the prevalence of rewards for teachers such as institutions releasing time, providing grants, assigning sabbaticals in regular appraisals or in the tenure processes. Also, institutions should provide more enduring and meaningful professional opportunities to innovate service-learning teaching practices. Time, resources and other conditions for teachers to implement and evaluate service-learning programs have to be allocated. And in the case of students, other forms of recognition besides credits should be born. What must be reached is an institutional balance between external and internal rewards. An academic climate that actively supports and engages people in service-learning could be one indicator of the existence of that balance.

About *teaching planning* in the process of institutionalization of service-learning, teachers have been embedding it in their tuition, and there are also quite a few ones that say they are doing it off record, without being part of the integrated planning of the didactic act. However, service-learning is not substantially more embedded as we approach the microlevels of institutional analysis. Truly saying, the occurrences of substantive evidence do not increase significantly towards the work of departments of institutions than at the analytical institutional levels. Generally speaking, higher education institutions are offering service-learning to students with equal opportunities,

regardless of whether they are distance learning students, students with disabilities, or part of gender minorities. Nevertheless, these opportunities need to be more meaningful for these students. And, service-learning courses should get a more community-based dimension enhancing the acquisition of (inter)disciplinary knowledge.

Concerning *teaching principles*, even if service-learning activities are being conducted, and pedagogical activities involving emotional and cognitive skills are integrated into the curriculum, it seems to be clear that teaching through service is not given centre stage in higher education institutions. For this to happen, institutions should facilitate opportunities for faculty to renovate their teaching methods, employing a reflective teaching methodology that maximises the value of integrating service-learning experiences with the curricular goals. Still, institutions should look for administrative mechanisms of support for faculty to redesign their curricula to incorporate national or international service-learning activities and reflect on those activities. And, should be developed mechanisms of support for faculty to design interdisciplinary service-learning activities.

Regarding *research*, although institutions are gradually undertaking service-learning research, it is also true that there is a large section that does so without any form of continuity, recurrence, or systematisation. The research agenda of higher education institutions does not seem to be developed in partnership with the community, and thus does not significantly promote collaborative or participatory research with the other social actors participating in these projects. Also, higher education institutions need to provide significant training on service-learning research and turn resources more accessible. Scholarships need to be allocated towards research that addresses issues defined by community participants and that includes students in the process of inquiry, along with community partners, involving them in defining, conducting and evaluating service-learning participatory research and teaching. Also, it is relevant for higher education institutions to capture the singularities of the service-learning experiences, confronting researchers and the meanings of those involved in the activities.

Considering *institutional advertising and support*, higher education institutions should be supported to develop web sections, databases or catalogues on service-learning initiatives, and to satisfy the

needs of the projects using higher education institutional expertise. Online frameworks to submit students' and/or teachers' candidatures/proposals for service-learning projects should be developed. Also, the projects should be advertised throughout institutions. What is quite evident are the institutional initiatives to encourage service-learning and support the participation in projects of all students regardless of their age, class, culture, or race.

In terms of *social justice*, the projects have been focusing on the development of awareness, social responsibility, and capacities to deal with complex societal issues, enabling students to choose and act meaningfully and deepening students' potential and commitment as change agents. But in the case of social justice, we have noticed that higher education institutions need to be supported to develop critical debates on issues related to power, privilege, and social inequalities. Also, on critically examining issues such as racism and equal opportunities. Still, we would like to challenge these institutions to connect themselves to the global movements in favour of social justice and democratic social change. Maybe this would be a positive strategy for increasing student engagement, learning outcomes, professional skills, attitudes toward community service and social justice, as it can also further entrench racial stereotypes and bias.

About *partnerships with the community*, we have noticed collaboration agreements/protocols of intent between the higher education institutions and community partners and that responsibilities are agreed upon among all stakeholders. We have also noticed that the partnerships are engaging different stakeholders in responsible and challenging actions for the common good. Nevertheless, the data shows that higher education institutions should be more prone to defining guidelines in order to guarantee adequate community involvement and equal partnerships, as well as coupling more substantial resources with those of the institution. Such a coupling attitude is fundamental to fostering the development of reciprocity, endurance and diversity of partnerships supporting community and academic interests and student goals. Still, the community partnerships should place more focus on matching service providers and service needs amidst changing environmental circumstances.

#### 4. PRELIMINARY REMARKS

Fresh news coming from Austria tells us service-learning projects can help to develop competencies related to working with diverse groups and their needs, building links between school and community, and taking initiatives to engage in social problems (Steed-Vamos, Laven & Singh, 2022). From Germany, Derkau (2021) related that service-learning was an internationally proven teaching and learning method that has been used in German schools and universities for two decades, linking technical content with experiences, education and social responsibility. From Portugal, Pais, Dias and Benicio (2022) agree that “when academic learning is integrated with community experience, students gain both personal/social and academic skills. They also develop leadership and communication skills and critical awareness on the one hand and time and resources management and the ability to adapt and respond to challenges of the realworld on the other, all seen as beneficial for the transition into the labour market” (p.1). These are some examples of recent documents stating the benefits of service-learning in higher education institutions. Some more could be cited to show that the number of service-learning initiatives has been gradually growing in the last 10 years in European higher education institutions. But in order for service-learning to grow in a systematic, sustainable and enduring manner, higher education institutions must be supported to institutionalise service-learning.

Being institutionalised means that service-learning is becoming a dimension of the nature of the institutional program of higher education institutions. This means service-learning has been growingly considered one manner of inscribing institutional culture, primarily in the students, and also in the wider community. It means that it has been considered in the social process of transforming institutional

values and principles into action and subjectivities through specific and organised students' professional work. For that to happen, we have made all these considerations, or detections as we call them, as signal points of view of the first European survey on service-learning institutionalization. Of course, we are aware of the limitations of the survey. But all the considerations are pointing out the fact that the so-called transformational change in the universities (the integration of the third mission) involves, undoubtedly, the creation of new institutional contexts that can break the hold of dominant patterns in favour of new ones. Patterns are not directly controlled by any group of individuals, but stay open for many crucial ideas. Overall, and going deeper than the issues of networks of interaction, incentive policies development, and self-organisation, the people seeking to institutionalise service-learning should be supported to stay aware of their institutional constraints to avoid damaging outcomes, and pay attention to the informal and hidden dimensions of everyday institutional reality. More than agreements/protocols, and assignments, all the stakeholders should be involved in contributing to community-based education, shaping institutional involvement to maximise its benefits to the community, and providing substantial opportunities for service-learning advocates and ambassadors to express their particular agency needs, and encouraging partnerships reciprocity. This so-called community-based education is a fundamental issue for the institutionalization of service-learning because the creation of contexts and reciprocal learning moments is fundamental to this end. Stakeholders are discovering that reciprocal ignorance has been their starting point. The arrival point is the shared production knowledge as diverse as their national and local societal contexts.

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# SERVICE-LEARNING ACTIVITIES AND PROGRAMS IN THE ASSOCIATION SUNCE

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Association for Nature, Environment and Sustainable Development Sunce

## ABSTRACT

The Association for Nature, Environment and Sustainable Development Sunce conducts service-learning activities (hereinafter: SL) as a host organization for additional professional practice and a teaching base for students of the University of Split. The Association's SL programs are based on participatory learning methods. To the greatest extent possible, young people are encouraged to participate in the development and implementation of ideas that will contribute to environmental protection and the achievement of sustainable development. During the implementation of each cycle of the program, based on the reflection and evaluation of students, teachers and mentors from the Association Sunce, possible new steps are identified that will improve the implementation of the program. The Association Sunce also provides support to higher education institutions and civil-society organizations in the Split-Dalmatia County and beyond. For those interested in establishing the SL program, we offer training for the implementation of SL, training on participatory learning methods applicable in the process of education for environment and sustainable development, as well as training on various topics related to the environmental protection and sustainable development.

**Keywords:** service-learning, sustainable development, participatory methods, education, student projects.

## 1. SERVICE-LEARNING - INVOLVEMENT OF STUDENTS IN NATURE AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

### 1.1. Service-learning as a tool to encourage youth participation

The core of service-learning (hereinafter: SL) is the connection of scientific teaching content with socially useful work, i.e. the development of competencies through civic engagement. Civic engagement and active participation are important prerequisites for the sustainable development of society, and thus the protection of nature and the environment. In SL projects, there is a close connection between curricular content and practical work in a partner organization. Student engagement in non-profit organizations and public institutions contributes to better understanding of real challenges and easier understanding and adoption of theoretical content. Through the participation of a higher education institution in SL projects, students take responsibility for the implementation of the project outside their institution by engaging in the local community. Young people are so actively involved in solving real and existing tasks and problems in their environment.

### 1.2. Education for sustainable development

In the rapidly changing world, young people need to be enabled to acquire specific skills in order to be able to actively participate in social processes, i.e. to solve future problems. The educational concept of education for sustainable development offers methods and educational content through which

young people acquire the knowledge, values, attitudes, and skills needed to sustainably shape society. It starts from the living environment and experiences of young people, introduces innovative and participatory learning methods, deals with environmental, economic, and social issues, both global and local. The basic principle of education for sustainable development is participation. The word participation is of Latin origin and means participation, participation, participation, co-determination, involvement. Today it is often used, and in spoken language, participation is understood as participation in decision-making that affects both one's own life and the wider community. Involving young people through participatory methods and forms of learning should always be linked to important areas of sustainable development (climate, energy, water, fair trade, biodiversity, healthy nutrition) as this is essential for acquiring skills important for responsible future shaping (de Haan, 2008). It is the starting point of SL as a method of learning and teaching. This pedagogical concept enables young people to become actively involved in society and to participate in solving social problems.

### **1.3. SL - a method of connecting learning with social engagement**

SL comes from American civic education, i.e. education for democratic action and active citizenship, and is based on the idea that students through social learning and civic engagement acquire a democratic way of thinking and acting. SL as a method of learning and teaching in the United States is often practiced in both schools and universities. It is based on combining theoretical teaching content with practical work for the common good. In SL projects, young people address the needs of their city, their city district or society as a whole, thus contributing to the common good. Projects can be implemented in the social, cultural, and political fields as well as in the field of nature and environmental protection.

## **2. SL TOPICS IN THE FIELD OF NATURE AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION**

Protecting the interests of the environment and nature as a dimension of sustainable development is a pillar of improving the common good and contributes to preserving the quality of life in the natural and built environment. The field of nature and environmental protection provides various opportunities for the implementation of SL projects.

### **2.1. Sustainable tourism**

As one of the leading tourist destinations in the Mediterranean, Croatia attracts visitors primarily with its unique and well-preserved nature. Since tourism is mostly associated with the coastal area, it is an important economic branch of the Split-Dalmatia County. Tourism activities have a significant impact on the environment. Rapid development, poor infrastructure, low environmental awareness, and insufficient implementation of environmental protection measures cause many problems. The increase in the number of tourists affects the rapid development of the coastal area and contributes to increasing problems in the field of waste management, water supply, wastewater management, energy consumption, illegal construction, etc.

### **2.2. Sustainable waste management**

Irresponsible waste management is a major problem in Croatia, in the Split-Dalmatia County, and especially in Split as the second largest Croatian city. In line with EU guidelines, important laws and regulations have been passed in recent years, but the necessary measures to avoid the generation and reduction of waste are still not a priority in either the private economy or utilities. Such a deplorable state of the waste management system has many detrimental effects on drinking water, air, sea, soil,

climate, human health, and the well-being of other beings. The practice of waste management in Split is still very far from the waste management system that is in line with the principles of circular economy, the principles of the European Union, but also Croatian legislation that puts avoidance and reduction of waste, then reuse and recycling.

### **2.3. Public participation and access to information**

Successful protection of nature and the environment can be achieved only with the active involvement of all members of society. Public participation in nature and environmental protection in Croatia has its legal basis in international legislation, especially the Aarhus Convention and in Croatian environmental legislation. The three pillars of the Aarhus Convention relate to the right of access to information, the right to public participation and access to justice (Hoekstra and Mekonnen, 2012). However, despite the existence of a legislative framework that obliges, ensures, and enables public participation in Croatia, it is not yet implemented at a satisfactory level that would ensure quality decision-making and ultimately environmental protection. The key reason lies in the lack of awareness of the importance of this topic as well as in the lack of education and encouraging the development of competencies for the successful implementation of these participatory processes, both among those responsible for their implementation and citizens and organizations involved.

## **3. SL ACTIVITIES AND PROGRAMS OF THE ASSOCIATION SUNCE**

### **3.1. Previous experience of the Association Sunce in SL programs**

The Association Sunce implemented the first structured programs of SL in cooperation with the School of Natural Sciences and Engineering in Split in 2014. Recognizing the opportunities provided by such programs in achieving the basic goals of the Association Sunce related to education and strengthening knowledge and skills for environmental protection and sustainable development and encouraging civic engagement in this sector, the Association Sunce began cooperation with colleges. An important factor in directing some activities to the organization and implementation of such programs is their contribution to strengthening the organizational and professional capacity of the Association Sunce. Namely, through cooperation with faculties, the knowledge and skills of the involved employees and volunteers are strengthened. At the same time, it contributes to the education of students, new young generations, potential future volunteers, associates or even employees of the Association Sunce.

Association Sunce Split has had, since 2015, implemented several pilot programs of service-learning in collaboration with four faculties in Split: Faculty of Economics, Business and Tourism, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Faculty of Chemistry and Technology, as well as the Department of Marine Research. These faculties, in cooperation with the Association Sunce, have so far implemented two significant SL projects primarily aimed at the development and implementation of SL at universities: “Students Learn Citizenship – Service-Learning for Nature Conservation and Environmental Protection” (2016-2018) jointly conducted by the Association Sunce and the German Society for Environmental Education - Deutsche Gesellschaft für Umwelterziehung (DGU), with significant support from the German Environmental Foundation - Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt (DBU) and “P.A.T.I.! Practical-Active-Together-Interdisciplinary! – Service-Learning Programs for the Environment and Sustainable Development” (2018-2020). Also, in the period from 2015 to 2018, the EU project “Responsible for Nature” was implemented in which part of the activities related to the development and implementation of SL in cooperation with the Faculty of Economics, University of Split and the Association Sunce.

SL programs on environmental protection and sustainable development developed in cooperation with the Association Sunce and partner faculties were among the firsts of their kind in Croatia. Experiences and guidelines for their design were mainly obtained from international examples, including a study visit to universities in Germany that provide SL. The study visit was organized within the project "Students Learn Citizenship – Service-Learning for Nature Conservation and Environmental Protection".

In the implementation of the SL program, special attention was paid to the results in relation to student education, but also to achieving the goals of environmental protection and sustainable development in the local community. Also, attention was focused on the challenges and possible solutions that the pilot implementation of SL has produced.

### **3.2. Educational programs for students as a tool to strengthen influence and encourage participation**

The project "Take Part in Sustainable Development" (2013-2015) was implemented in partnership with the German institution Deutsche Gesellschaft für Umwelterziehung (DGU), and was funded by the German Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt (DBU). The partners in the project were the primary schools "Pujanke", "Mejaši", "Kamen-Šine" from Split and the primary school "Trilj" from Trilj. Within the project, three different educational programs were designed and implemented: Composting, Green Reporters and Sustainable Student Cooperatives. The goals of all programs for children and young people were to develop awareness of the interconnectedness and interdependence of the living world, encourage readiness for active and responsible participation in the community and develop skills to identify problems in the community and solve them in collaboration with others. To contribute to the change of teaching methods and greater inclusion of the topic of environmental protection and sustainable development in educational processes, Association Sunce has conducted and is still conducting educational programs, activities and seminars for both teachers and students.

### **3.3. Educational activities for students - new opportunities to gain experience**

In addition to the pupils, Association Sunce also tried to create new opportunities for students to gain professional experience and volunteer for the purpose of protecting nature and the environment, contributing to reducing the gap between theoretical and practical knowledge. From the current point of view, future experts who will deal with nature protection, who are studying natural sciences, lack knowledge about management and economics and social (socio-economic) views of nature protection due to lack of interdisciplinarity and "soft" skills. At the same time, the topic of nature protection is completely absent from the study programs of social, technical, and biomedical orientations.

### **3.4. SL and professional practice as models of student education and connections with higher education institutions**

In addition to the need for greater influence and encouragement of active involvement of young people, in addition to volunteering, SL and the organization of professional practice in cooperation with individual faculties proved to be excellent models.

The basic idea of SL is to connect theoretical teaching content with practical work in non-profit organizations. Through the participation of a higher education institution in SL projects, students take responsibility for the implementation of the project outside their institution and engage in the local community. SL is always linked to education and must be based on the curriculum and the idea of working for the common good. This is how it differs from other extracurricular volunteer activities, as well as from mandatory professional practice. Namely, in volunteer work the focus is on the common good,

but there is a lack of connection with the curriculum. Professional practice is related to the curriculum, but it lacks the idea of the common good, ie the focus of students on voluntary, non-profit engagement.

The two-year project launched by the Association Sunce in 2016 “Students Learn Citizenship – Service-Learning for Nature Conservation and Environmental Protection”, had project partners, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Faculty of Chemistry and Technology, Faculty of Economics, Business and Tourism and University Department of Marine Research from the University of Split.

A two-year project aimed at connecting theoretical and practical knowledge by implementing a program of SL “P.A.T.I.! Practical-Active-Together-Interdisciplinary! – service-learning programs for the environment and sustainable development” was completed by the Association Sunce and project partners of four Split faculties: Faculty of Chemistry and Technology, Faculty of Economics, Business and Tourism, Faculty of Law, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences and the Association of Alumni and Friends of the Faculty of Chemistry and Technology.

Following the mentioned project, in 2016 the Association Sunce became a host organization for additional professional practice for students of the Faculty of Economics, Business and Tourism, but also from the academic year 2017/2018 a teaching base for the University Department of Marine Research, the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Split and the Faculty of Law in Split. Teaching bases aim to connect practice, science, and research work in order to acquire specific practical knowledge, skills and competencies.

### **3.5. Participatory methods of education as the basis of educational programs**

What extends in all the mentioned educational programs are participatory methods, and they imply the participation of pupils and students in the decision-making process itself. The school and the higher education institution can provide a safe space in which participatory learning methods practice participation and build the necessary competencies, such as communication skills, collaboration, complex thinking, planning and critical thinking. Involving pupils and students in participatory forms and methods of learning should always be linked to important areas of action for sustainable development (e.g., climate, energy, water, fair trade, biodiversity, healthy eating) as this is essential for acquiring competencies for responsible design of the future. Participatory methods aim to encourage and achieve the involvement and co-determination of pupils and students. These are simple methods that can be easily integrated into the work process and do not require any special structural prerequisites and can be used depending on the need and content of teaching or project.

### **3.6. Models of SL programs**

#### ***3.6.1. Model 1. SL Program - Public Events on Sustainable Waste Management and Sustainable Tourism (2016-2017)***

The program was implemented within the project “Students Learn Citizenship – Service-Learning for Nature Conservation and Environmental Protection”. The concrete result of the SL program was the implementation of four public events organized by students on the topics of sustainable waste management and sustainable tourism, with the aim of informing and raising public awareness of the importance of environmental protection and nature. The program was conducted on two occasions, over two semesters, for two groups of students. In both cases, the program consisted of four workshops: an introductory workshop, a workshop on sustainable waste management and sustainable tourism, a workshop on organizing public events and working with the media, and a workshop on planning activities and events. The program also included event preparations, consultations for students, reflection on the course of the program, a public event, and a final workshop in which a reflection on the SL

program was conducted. By involving students from different faculties in team work on a joint project, an interdisciplinary approach was achieved in the development and implementation of these student projects. All teachers involved developed individual plans for integrating SL into the curriculum of the subject within which the program was implemented.

### **3.6.2. Model 2. SL Program - Public Participation in Responsible Natural Resource Management (2015-2017)**

The program of SL was implemented within the EU project “Take Part in Sustainable Development”. The main goal of establishing a program for students of the Faculty of Economics, Business and Tourism was to increase the participation of young people in monitoring the management of public goods and natural resources. The program aimed to acquaint students with the right to access information, emphasize the importance of openness of local government and the effectiveness of natural resource management. By participating in the practical activities of the project, students had the opportunity to acquire knowledge and skills, think independently and draw conclusions about the possibility of exercising the right to access information, the level of openness of local government and management efficiency. The program was implemented over two academic years and enabled students to participate in specific activities of the Association Sunce on the project using their theoretical knowledge, but also expanding their experiences of teamwork and interdisciplinary work. The concept of the SL program differed for individual groups of students involved, depending on the plan of project activities in which the students were involved and the subject within which the program was implemented. The result of the program was the contribution of students in analysing the level of information and public involvement in the management of protected areas in Croatia and the analysis of legal obligations related to public participation in environmental procedures at county levels developed by the Association Sunce. As with the first model, the teachers involved developed individual plans for integrating SL into the curriculum of the subject within which the program was implemented.

### **3.6.3. Model 3. SL Program – P.A.T.I.! Practical-Active-Together-Interdisciplinary! – Service-Learning Programs for the Environment and Sustainable Development (2018 - 2020)**

This model was developed as a result of knowledge and experience gained from the implementation of the first two models, the identified problems and solutions that emerged, and the evaluation of implemented SL programs. The program was developed within the eponymous ESF project “P.A.T.I.! Practical-Active-Together-Interdisciplinary! – Service-Learning Programs for the Environment and Sustainable Development”. The SL program was conducted during one semester. By implementing this project, the implementation of an SL program was envisioned to happen four times for four different groups of students. At the beginning of each semester, the Association Sunce included eight students from four faculties in Split and, in cooperation with faculty members, implements an SL program with them focused on sustainable development and the environment. Within each cycle, each group of students, although not dealing with the same topics, goes through three structurally or methodologically the same workshops during which knowledge, skills and values are transferred. The workshops are in order:

- introductory workshop aimed at conceptualizing and structuring program activities;
- motivational workshop with the aim of learning about the types of motivation, building personal motivation and acquiring knowledge about the motivation of others, applicable specifically to student projects and activities;
- group reflection workshop designed as an activity to raise awareness of the learning process and the acquisition of reflection skills.

These workshops were intended for students as basic actors and can be aimed at employees and teachers involved in the project. Each program cycle ended with a final celebration with the aim of presenting the results of the work and evaluating the completed program. Between and after the workshops, continuous consultation, mentoring, group, and project work was carried out with students and all project participants, teachers and mentors of the Association Sunce. The goal of the program was the development and implementation of student projects aimed at solving specific environmental problems identified by students through the implementation of the program. The results of the programs implemented are the following student projects:

“Don’t Be Like an Ostrich” is a project with the topic of raising awareness of the importance of separate waste collection. Working on the project, the visual identity and slogan of the project were created, and then a website of the same name was created and promoted, which contains instructions for separate waste collection in Croatian and English and a map of the Split student campus with the exact locations of separate collection containers.

“Sustainable Tourism” is a student project aimed at promoting sustainable tourism. Students designed a lecture on sustainable tourism with the aim of promoting it among the young and student population. Also, they conducted an ad hoc cross-section of the existing knowledge of their colleagues on the topic of sustainable tourism, the results of which showed low awareness of the student population with the concept of sustainable tourism.

“Renting Green for Nature Protection – Saving the Household Budget through Sustainable Tourism” is a project through which students organized a fun and educational public event to promote sustainable tourism and Dalmatia Green program within the Association Sunce. After researching the market on the possibilities of savings, using the criteria from the Dalmatia Green program, they decided to present the results at a public event at the Faculty of Economics, Business and Tourism in Split. In addition to students, faculty teachers and private landlords also attended the public event. The event was accompanied by a raffle for all involved, whose packages included eco-sets for cleaning, energy-saving light bulbs, gear reducers and similar gifts from associates of the Association Sunce.

“Don’t Put Everything in the Same Bin!” is the student project which aimed at encouraging separate waste collection. As part of the project, students designed and set up containers for separate collection, as well as accompanying informative and educational materials at six faculties in Split and one university. The installation was covered by the media and contributed to raising public awareness on this topic.

“Watch Out! - Ecoquiz” is a project through which students designed and conducted a pub quiz on ecology. In addition to participating in the design of the quiz, students were responsible for the full organization of events, ensuring the visibility of events, participants, etc. The main purpose of the ecoquiz was to draw the attention of Split citizens, primarily students, to pollution and ways contribute to their preservation.

Facebook campaign: “Dalmatia Green - Certificate for ‘Green’ Private Tourist Accommodation Facilities” is a student project focused on sustainable tourism, i.e., Facebook campaign lasting eight weeks during which one post was published per week on Facebook and Instagram pages of the Association Sunce. Prior to designing the campaign, the students studied information on previous research under the Dalmatia Green program to improve the promotion and visibility of the certificate. They also conducted a survey with a sample of current renters with a certificate to see how much their participation in the Dalmatia Green program has helped them attract new guests.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The new decade is expected to bring many challenges, both in the field of higher education and in environmental protection. These challenges, in turn, will require new solutions and rapid adaptation.

The cooperation between the Association Sunce and higher education institutions in Split has been strengthened through many years of implementation of SL programs. Greater integration of the topic of environmental protection and sustainable development in the curricula of the faculty, greater interest of students, but also higher education institutions for environmental protection and greater involvement in the local community has been achieved. Furthermore, several concrete student projects have been implemented, which are often upgraded and increase public awareness, but also the introduction of concrete and applicable solutions to achieve environmental protection. In the coming period, it will be necessary to find ways to ensure the sustainability of these programs. Cooperation and partnership of the Association Sunce and higher education institutions on various projects related to environmental protection and encouraging the active involvement of young people is one of the ways in which it can contribute to the sustainability of the SL program.

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# REVEALING THE THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL BASIS OF THE “CASCADING SERVICE-LEARNING MODEL” IN THE CONTEXT OF TEACHER TRAINING

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents, based on the experience gained in its formulation and implementation, the theoretical-practical basis of a particular service-learning model, known as “cascading service-learning model”. This model has been characterized in Anglo-Saxon literature but we can rarely find it referenced in our academic and educational context. Following this model, university students (undergraduate and postgraduate) together with students of non-university educational levels, generally preschool, primary or high-school students, identify a particular community need and work together to comply with it through the development of a service-learning project. This model contributes to generating two learning spaces that configure what currently calls a third or hybrid space. That is, a new formative space, less hierarchical and characterized by the ongoing negotiation of the participants on the practices and on the meanings of such practices regarding the training of future teachers. This paper adopts a theoretical-practical approach driven by the following three guidelines: a) conceptualize what we mean by “cascade service-learning model” in the field of initial teacher training; b) indicate some examples that illustrate the implementation of the model; and c) identify some aspects of the model that can be valuable for the training of prospective teachers.

**Keywords:** cascading service-learning model, initial teacher training, pre-service teachers, inclusive education, third space.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Service-learning is a pedagogical proposal that combines learning with community service through the implementation of a structured project that involves both learning by doing and learning from reflecting on what is being done. Because of these two aspects, it is considered in the educational field as a valuable tool for the development of the so-called key competencies, in the case of infant, primary or secondary education levels and also of vocational competencies, when higher education or university studies are concerned.

As pointed out by Bates et al, (2009), the engagement of pre-service teachers and novice teachers in service-learning experiences not only contributes to their personal and professional growth, but also allows them to acquire a valuable strategy that they can put into practice in their future teaching practice.

As many studies have highlighted (Aramburuzabala and García, 2012; Castellan, 2013), service-learning can play an important role in developing professional awareness and certain competencies of training teachers. The implication of pre-service teachers in such projects, contributes to developing

aspects related to teaching professionalism that few of the disciplines that make up the curricula of teacher training programs are able to offer, such as:

- Narrowing the gap between “theory and practice”, so present in academic formulations of university curricula.
- Articulate the teaching-learning process from a constructivist approach.
- Bringing professional competencies into action.
- Developing experimental learning and cooperative work formulas.
- Connecting the contents in a realistic way with the community and with the school environment.
- Laying the needs of vulnerable groups and collectives at the core of the curriculum.
- Contributing to the development of a meaningful, relevant, sustainable and ethical curriculum.

This paper focuses on a particular formula for the implementation of service-learning strategies known as the “cascade model”. This formula intends to characterize how it contributes to the training of prospective teachers. For this purpose, we will describe it, we will unveil its pedagogical keys and its potential as a didactic training strategy, but before we do all this, we will briefly outline how a group of teachers at the University of Cadiz (Spain) first learned about it and have progressively made it our own to provide it with unique aspects emanating from our own way of understanding and developing service-learning in our teaching practice.

## 2. MODELS DO MATTER

Different modalities and formulas of service-learning have taken shape over these years during which service-learning has been consolidating. At first, the different types were distinguished mainly with regard to operational and procedural aspects: beneficiaries of the service, educational level of the students who carried it out, purpose of the service, degree of connection with the rest of the contents in the curriculum, etc. This resulted in a number of modalities, such as: direct service-learning, indirect service-learning, university service-learning, research service-learning, etc.

The focus of the debate, and therefore also the differentiation between models, has gradually become more centered on politics and ideology. In this sense, one of the most widespread classifications is proposed by Mitchell (2008), based on one previously proposed by Morton (1995), where a differentiation between traditional vs. critical service-learning is established/proposed/stated/made. Particularly, in the Latin American framework, two of the most consolidated modalities within the critical perspective are: solidarity-based service-learning (Mendía, 2012, 2013; Tapia, 2006), and service-learning oriented towards social justice (Aramburuzabala, 2013).

With respect to the training of teachers-to-be, a multiplicity of approaches, conceptions and ways of understanding and implementing service-learning that entail ideological, pedagogical or epistemological aspects have also appeared. As Chivas, et al, (2018) point out, these should be taken into consideration in order to avoid “inadvertently reproducing technical and hegemonic educational patterns, ethnocentric approaches, highly simplified and depoliticized treatments, patronizing services, etc.” (p. 28). As we have already pointed out in a previous work:

If we were to analyze how this type of practices are articulated from the curriculum theory (Kemmis, 1998), we would realize that an enormous amount of university Learning and Service proposals are based more on a humanistic or practical perspective rather than on a critical approach; many of them are even based on a utilitarian technical perspective of the service-learning strategy as a systematized tool. (García & Cotrina, 2015b, p. 12).

Investing in service-learning as a valuable strategy for the initial and ongoing training of teachers (García & Cotrina, 2012), compels us to rethink the role we assign to it within the framework of the development of a critical, inclusive educational model, committed to equity and educational quality. This allows us to answer the question posed by Castellan (2013), in relation to this issue: “Does the Model Matter?”, by stating that both the approach and the model do matter with regard to the objectives and purposes that motivate the development of service-learning as a methodology committed to educational and social change and transformation.

Nevertheless, the aim of this paper is not to delve into the analysis of the ideological and pedagogical implications behind the different approaches, which we have already addressed in other papers (García & Cotrina, 2012, 2015a, 2015b). Instead, we intend to focus on the pedagogical implications of a particular formula for the implementation of service-learning known as the “cascade model” and particularly in relation to the development of inclusive education, although we will first describe how we came to learn about this model and how we adopted it.

### **3. AN EMERGING MODEL**

As teachers of disciplines related to the attention to diversity and inclusive education, we have always been concerned about incorporating didactic strategies consistent with inclusion into our classroom practices. This has led us to approach more or less innovative methodologies such as: project-based learning, problem-based learning, universal design for learning (UDL), cooperative learning, collaborative work, action-research, case studies, etc., which have allowed us to bring into practice the conceptual, procedural and attitudinal aspects in our subjects.

In the years prior to incorporating service-learning to our teaching, in order to develop the practical skills that were already taught in the different fields, we used to ask our students (pre-service teachers) to complete a work project or research of an empirical nature. This usually acquired the form of a case study, a collaborative action research or the evaluation of programs and services through questionnaires. In our endeavor to systematize our classroom practices and to continue incorporating innovative teaching methodologies and strategies consistent with inclusion into our teaching practice, we discovered service-learning at some point during the 2011-2012 academic year. The review of the works by our colleagues from the Zerbikas Foundation in the Basque Country, the Centre Promotó Aprenentatge Servei in Catalonia or the Plataforma APS Madrid led us to connect (García & Cotrina, 2015a) with a pedagogical proposal that, from the very beginning, we believed had an extraordinary potential, since it allowed us to integrate many of the teaching strategies that we had been already implementing, and also to provide them with a broader critical and transformative pedagogical sense (García & Cotrina, 2015b).

With the discovery of service-learning, we were able to expand our classroom offer using this new strategy, and in many cases, we could refocus our former teaching activities towards formulas where students should specify more explicitly the purpose of the project they intended to undertake (service) and how it would contribute to an active acquisition of knowledge (learning). On the other hand, for every project, we requested our students to have it orientated based on two key aspects associated to inclusion (Echeita & Ainscow, 2011): a) identifying barriers that may limit or condition students’ participation and learning success within the educational environment; b) paying attention to the collectives, groups or individuals who suffer or face such barriers and who, therefore, might be considered as vulnerable. This orientation (focuses) was also gradually expanded to Final Degree Works and Final Master’s Works.

It is obvious, from the preceding paragraphs, that most of these projects, which ended up becoming service-learning projects, required the connection of our university students with other students and

teachers at lower educational stages, so that these projects could be implemented in non-university centers and contexts. All of this generated a collaborative and partnership network favouring the development of service-learning projects, that used school contexts as the environment for the development of the service.

When reviewing the literature specialized on service-learning, in an attempt to substantiate and systematize our own practices, we identified several formulas (proposals) concerning teacher training, that fall within the so-called “cascade model”. In this regard, particularly revealing was the work by Winterbottom, et al, (2013, p. 42).

A cascading knowledge of practice service-learning model is one where the teacher educators teach service-learning pedagogy to the pre-service teachers (PST) who are actively involved in service-learning. The pre-service teachers (PST) then teach service-learning to the children in their field placement classrooms via the implementation of service-learning projects.

The similarities of the “cascade model” with our own way of understanding and implementing service-learning as a training strategy led us to characterize our model as “cascade service-learning” (Cotrina & García, 2016, 2018. From that moment on, we started to emphasize and systematize those aspects of the model that endowed it with its own identity, i.e. that provided it with a greater potential with respect to the training of prospective teachers in the field of attention to diversity, and that were in line with the contents in our subjects connected with inclusive education. Such aspects could be listed as follows:

- Taking the educational context as the scenario for the development of service-learning strategies/projects.
- Strengthening the interaction of university students and teachers with students and teachers at other educational stages.
- Trying to focus the university students’ service-learning projects on the suppression or mitigation of barriers that vulnerable students may encounter and that restrict their participation and learning.

By promoting the cascade model among other colleagues responsible for other disciplines, it started to be implemented in disciplines that were not directly connected with the attention to diversity, where the concern for barriers and vulnerable groups had not always been present, or at least it had not been so as a core issue.

#### **4. THE CASCADE SERVICE-LEARNING MODEL**

We could view the “cascading model” as a particular formula for the development of service-learning in the context of initial teacher education. This model, based on the work and proposals of Anglo-Saxon authors such as Castellan, 2013; Tinkler and Tinkler, 2013; Winterbottom et al., 2013, is characterized by connecting teachers and students from different educational stages with the final purpose of dynamizing, designing and implementing service-learning actions.

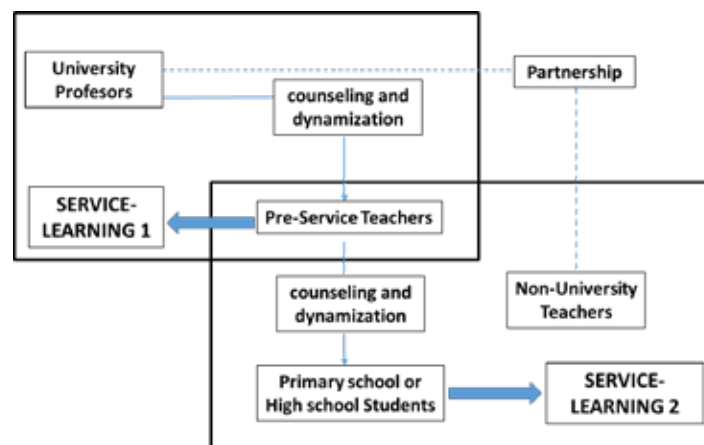
Its name “cascade model” derives from the fact that the counseling, as well as the dynamization and execution of the actions are cascaded among teachers and students from the different socio-educational levels and areas. It is important to highlight that in its development this model favors the development of different roles: participants, promoters, counselors, etc.

In our formulation of the model, university undergraduate and master’s degree students related to teacher training, together with students from non-university educational stages, usually kindergarten, elementary or high school students, identify one of the needs of their community and work together to

respond to it through the development of a service-learning project. In our case, the university students (pre-service teachers) assume as their main function, and core of their service-learning, to promote the development of the service-learning proposals presented by the students from the lower educational stages. This model implies the development of at least two interlinked service-learning proposals: the first one would be developed by the university students (pre-service teachers) as they identify a need in the school environment, and the second one, would be developed by the students from the lower educational stages, and intends to respond to the detected need.

The specificity and particularity of the cascading service-learning model is that at least two interlinked service-learning proposals are implemented and developed by students from different educational levels.

**Figure 1.** Characterization of the cascade model



**Source:** Own elaboration.

We should emphasize that for the development of their service-learning project (SL1) the university students (pre-service teachers) operate as a cooperative work team. That is, they form a small group, of normally between 3 and 5 students, who organize themselves and work face to face, strengthening their communication and negotiation skills with individual and collective demands, within a positively interdependent environment (of goals, tasks and roles) and jointly evaluating processes and results.

Broadly speaking, the development of a cascading SL1 requires the following steps:

- University students (pre-service teachers) begin by contacting a school in their area and then proposing the implementation of a service-learning 2 (SL2) project related to the attention to diversity. Normally the university professors provide assistance with this first contact.
- In a first visit to the educational center, the university students (pre-service teachers) work together with the teachers at the center - usually counselors or tutors of groups of vulnerable students - to identify the needs or barriers on which the project could focus and to decide which group of students will be invited to undertake the service-learning 2 (SL2).
- In the following visits, the university students (pre-service teachers) will work with the group of students who have been selected and with the center's teachers to specify the service project that they will undertake.
- The university students (pre-service teachers) work towards establishing the partnerships, while the selected students elaborate the operational development of the service.
- The selected students perform the service under the supervision of the university students (pre-service teachers).

- All the participants jointly celebrate the development of both service-learning project (SL1 and SL2).
- The school teachers, together with the pre-service teachers and the students who are implementing the service, co-evaluate the development of the ApS2 (SL2).
- The university students generate a dossier comprising the design, development and evaluation of the whole project and present the most relevant aspects of both SL1 and SL2 before the rest of their university class mates.
- The university teachers and students (pre-service teachers) co-evaluate the implementation of the ApS1 (SL1).

Obviously, this whole sequence of steps is executed in a flexible way, and in some cases certain actions may overlap with others.

The following is an illustration of a cascading service-learning project conducted by a group of our students, which they published for dissemination (Arjonilla, et al, 2018). In this cascading service-learning project, a group of three students from the Master's Degree in Secondary School Teacher Training (pre-service teachers), developed a service-learning project (SL1) that consisted in the creation of a volunteers' network formed by secondary school students from Columela High School in Cadiz (Spain) to provide support to an association that develops leisure and free time activities with vulnerable youngsters. In addition to the recruitment process, the students were trained on volunteering issues and on the service-learning strategy itself. The main learning and service objectives of the SL1 are listed below:

SL1 learning objectives:

- Identifying the social and educational needs of the environment.
- Learning to manage and drive a service-learning project.

SL1 service objectives:

- Setting up a network of young volunteers to support an association.
- To train students to perform volunteer work.

In addition, the students from the High School at higher level training cycles on sociocultural and tourism promotion and social integration developed a SL2 project, in which they designed and developed sport and other cultural activities for underprivileged children.

SL2 learning objectives:

- Learning to design a plan for sport and cultural activities.
- Understanding and growing aware of how important the actions to favor the social and educational inclusion of underprivileged (young) people can be.

SL2 service objectives:

- Promoting the participation of young people in the activities developed by the association.
- Developing cultural and sport workshops for underprivileged young people.

With respect to the SL1, a high degree of compliance with the objectives that had been set was achieved. All of the planned actions were carried out and good results were obtained, as a network of 21 volunteers received proper training.

In the case of SL2, a variety of operational obstacles limited the achievement of the objectives that had been set, particularly in terms of service. As a result, these objectives were only partially fulfilled.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Similarly, to a regular model, a service-learning cascading model can play a prominent role in the training of higher education students (Cotrina & García, 2016, 2018). In addition, we believe that this particular type of model contributes with certain elements that provide it with a precious added value for the initial training of prospective teachers, such as learning while in direct contact with their future professional context (the schools) and developing a collaborative work with currently practicing teachers. These two aspects contribute to interiorize their pedagogical knowledge and allow them to develop a more realistic view of what a teaching career is about.

One of the aspects that confers uniqueness to the cascade model is that it necessarily establishes a connection between two scenarios, university and school, based on educational criteria. The interaction between these two learning spaces configures what some authors (Gannon, 2010; Zeichner, 2010) call a third or hybrid space. That is, a new formative space, characterized by the ongoing negotiation of the participants on the practices and on the meanings of such practices regarding the training of future teachers (Taylor and Klein, 2015). In addition, this third environment allows the reconstruction in a collaborative and negotiated way of the respective roles and practices of teacher trainers, training teachers and students (Taylor & Klein, 2015).

With regard to attention to diversity and inclusive education, we believe that the cascading service-learning model is capable of influencing three aspects that are particularly relevant in the initial, but also ongoing, training of future teachers (García & Cotrina, 2015b):

- Learning about and putting into action an innovative methodology built on constructivist grounds and that combines cooperative learning with working on relevant project that pursue the improvement of schools.
- Adopting a strategy that contributes to reducing the barriers that hinder the participation and learning of students in general and vulnerable groups in particular.
- Moving towards a teaching professionalism that is more committed with a critical and inclusive educational model (Lópe & Suárez, 2020).

Finally, we would like to point out that we are currently engaged in a more precise definition of the model that encompasses all of its operational aspects and promotes a deeper reflection on its strengths and weaknesses through the assessment of its implementation. We expect this process to provide this model with an even deeper critical, transformative and inclusive sense.

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# SERVICE-LEARNING IN DENTAL EDUCATION. THE EXPERIENCE IN MALTA

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## ABSTRACT

Service learning has gained relevance in dental education in the past decades. Traditionally it is integrated in community dentistry as a key component of the dental curriculum. However emerging trends in our communities' demand further exploration and development of this notion. Community dentistry, through service learning, provides the framework for the student to understand the concept of social responsibility. Furthermore, it enhances the educational experience in the different aspects of dental education, including improving their clinical skills, self-confidence and empathy. At the same time, it proves to benefit the communities at large by providing access to oral health care.

In this paper, we present our experiences in service learning and growing as a community-engaged faculty by providing healthcare to vulnerable populations, creating programs and opening several clinical facilities, and finally earning the respect of the community. Service learning has become one of our greatest strengths as a Faculty.

**Keywords:** Service-learning, dental education, health disparities

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Service-learning has gained relevance in dental education in the past decades. It has been described as an educational method that provides mutual benefits for the dental schools and the community. It enhances teaching and learning, promotes social responsibility and addresses the needs of the community (Hood, 2009). Moreover, it increases self-confidence and facilitates the transition from student to professional (Leistner, et. al., 2017). Traditionally, service-learning has been a key teaching method in community dentistry. Recent trends in dental education promote this method in all areas of dentistry.

The Association for Dental Education in Europe has been facilitating the harmonization of the Dental Education for the last 45 years by establishing an undergraduate curriculum framework to guide higher education entities on the profile and competencies of the graduating dentist in Europe. These guidelines recommend that learning in the oral health field should follow competencies and learning outcomes in four educational domains: Professionalism, safe and effective clinical practice, patient-centred care and dentistry in society (Field, et. al., 2017). As a core ethical principle, patient welfare, respect to patient autonomy and commitment to social justice are of utmost importance (McLoughlin, et. al., 2017).

Moreover, article 34 of the EU Directive 2005/36/EU indicates that a dental student shall have “the skills necessary for carrying out all activities involving the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of anomalies and diseases of the teeth, mouth, jaws and associated tissues” (Article 34, EU Directive 2005/36/

EU). The ADEE and the EU Directive 2005/36/EU have provided the conceptual framework for change in dental education in Europe. Faculties have adapted by identifying means for successfully training their students and at the same time serve their communities, obviously the impetus for this change reflecting the individual experiences of the diverse communities at large. Furthermore, the FDI World Dental Federation envisions that oral healthcare, and therefore dental education, shall adapt to the increase in need and demand for oral healthcare by prioritizing vulnerable groups in our society and improving their quality of life (Glick, et. al., 2012).

These current trends in dental education as well as the needs of our community have marked our Faculty. In this paper, we present our experiences in service learning and growing as a community-engaged faculty by providing healthcare to vulnerable populations, creating programs and opening several clinical facilities, and finally earning the respect of the community. Service learning has become one of our greatest strengths as a Faculty. We believe that service learning has changed the way we do dentistry and the way we teach and learn. Our objective is to improve the quality of life in our community, starting with those that at the moment may be underserved in oral healthcare.

## **2. DENTAL EDUCATION**

### **2.1. Dentistry and the four main areas in Education**

Dentistry and the allied dental professional courses are healthcare courses that in most countries are taught separate from Medicine. It involves the study of the orofacial region and its relation with the body. These professions include dentistry, dental hygiene, dental technology, dental therapist and dental assistance. These professionals form the dental team in a collaborative approach.

Dentistry is defined as the “branch of healthcare devoted to maintaining the health of the teeth and other tissues in and around the mouth” (ADEA, 2022). In dentistry, there is a series of specialities, very much like medicine and surgery. These specialities are grouped in four different departments: Prosthetics and rehabilitation; Oral diagnosis, Paediatric Dentistry and Community dentistry. For teaching purposes, dental education works in a spiral fashion. On the final stages of the dental training, students integrate all aspects of dentistry to their patients. That is, the difficulty of the treatments increases but so does the level of dexterity and ability of the students to understand how each area of dentistry influences their management.

### **2.2. Community Dentistry and service learning**

Community dentistry is a broad term that defines an area of dentistry where there is a holistic approach on the population’s oral health. Community dentistry also represents Dental Public Health in which the aspects of oral health care are taken into consideration as a population, a specific group in the community and as an individual (Gallagher, 2005; Gallagher & Field, 2017). Dental courses, including dentistry and dental hygiene, offer community dentistry from the first year of studies until graduation. Aspects of prevention and health promotion are offered from the first year of studies and are applied in the clinical training and through service-learning in different community-based activities.

In the recent decades, the role of community dentistry in dental education has gained importance as it is considered to shape social responsibility in the training dental professional (Dao, et. al., 2005; Smith, et. al., 2006; Volvovsky, et. al., 2014). Community-based dental education has been introduced in most dental schools in different degrees aiming to provide community oral health education to their students and to provide oral health care to the vulnerable groups in their society (Mathu-Muju, 2018).

Community dentistry, therefore, involves all aspects and specialities of dentistry and enhances the educational experience in the different aspects of dental education. By organizing these outreach programmes, community-based dental education presents wide variety of clinical scenarios in which all skills of dental student are put to practice, including behavioural management (Daher A, et. al., 2012; Johnson, et. al., 2012; Goswami, et. al., 2018). Studies show that from the first year of studies, community care, through service learning, can meaningfully change the students' response to social justice (Furlini, et. al., 2018).

Service-learning in community-based dental education was introduced in dentistry in the different continents for a variety of reasons. In some dental schools, this educational method was considered initially to reduce costs of dental education and increase the possibility for training (Mathu-Muju, 2018). Some other dental schools envisioned this as a possibility to reach to vulnerable groups with difficult access to oral healthcare after identifying shocking oral health disparities as is seen in institutionalised older adults (Santucci & Attard, 2015) or geographically isolated populations (Agius, et. al., 2018). In the recent decades, dental schools are introducing service learning as a practice to reach out to other groups according to age, gender, race, geolocation, among others, considered vulnerable or presenting with restricted access to oral healthcare (Mathu-Muju, 2018).

Research on service-learning has proven benefits as a method of learning (Brondani, 2010; Dharamsi, et. al., 2010; Furlini, et. al., 2018; Attard, et. al., 2018). Our group performed a study on the students' perceptions following the introduction of service-learning in a teaching dental clinic in the major state older adults' home in Malta showing their willingness, preparedness and confidence to manage vulnerable patients as their time of exposure increased. (Attard, et. al., 2018). Nonetheless, community-based dental education should not limit itself to clinical training but activities that enable the student to reflect upon their experience (Brondani, 2010, Dharamsi, et. al., 2010, Furlini, et. al., 2018, Attard, et. al., 2018).

Finally, literature in community care and service learning in dental education suggest that the introduction of service learning in the dental curriculum goes hand in hand with the introduction of allied dental professional courses that expand the reach of oral healthcare in the different groups of the community (Mathu-Muju KR 2018).

### **3. EXPERIENCE IN SERVICE-LEARNING**

#### **3.1. Malta: A small country within the EU. Sociodemographic of Malta**

Malta is the smallest country in the European Union and has the highest population density. According to Eurostat, the population for 2020 was of 516,600 people in an area of just over 300 sq. km, with a density of over 1,400 inhabitants per sq. km. Malta is strategically located in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea between Tunisia and Sicily. It is a country with a thriving economy and a 3.1% unemployment rate (NSO Feb 2022).

#### **3.2. Dental education in Malta**

The University of Malta was established as a University in 1769. Currently, there are over 12,000 students in undergraduate and postgraduate courses. It has 14 Faculties, 19 institutes, 11 centres and 2 schools. The University of Malta has been graduating dentists since 1918. Our Faculty is the smallest, yet its presence in the Maltese society is strong as one of our strengths is our social responsibility and our presence in the community.

We offer four undergraduate courses and, currently, four postgraduate courses including the PhD. The undergraduate courses include a 5-year course in Master in Dental Surgery (MDS), a 3-year Bachelor course in Dental Hygiene (DH), a 3-year Bachelor course in Dental Technology (DT) and a 2-year Diploma course in Dental Assistance (DSA). Following the Article 34 of the EU Directive 36/2005, contact hours are distributed in lectures, and practical and clinical hours. The hour distribution is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Number of direct contact hours in each of the courses offered by the Faculty of Dental Surgery at the University of Malta. Number of hours are following the Article 34 of the EU Directive 36/2005.

<b>Course</b>	<b>Lectures</b>	<b>Practical/ Clinical Hours</b>	<b>Direct Contact Hours (Total)</b>
Master in Dental Surgery	1,170	5,215	6,385
Bachelor in Dental Hygiene	781	1,747	2,528
Bachelor in Dental Technology	660	2,200	2,860
Diploma in Dental Assistance	473	1,374	1,847

**Source:** authors

Although each course focuses on particular disciplines in dentistry, and as such are different in nature, we promote the interaction between the different courses earlier on in the respective years of studies, as we believe that the Dental Team is established in the early years of a career. This is achieved through integrated and joint clinical and practical training, outreach events organized by the Faculty.

The Faculty provides clinical training mainly in the Dental Teaching Clinic located in Mater Dei Hospital, the main hospital in Malta; Saint Vincent de Paul Residence for the Older Adults (SVPR); and the Mobile Dental Unit. The two latter are part of our Service learning focus and are the two pillars that have led us on an exciting journey.

The students are assigned a significant number of hours to service learning. Most of them occur in the residence for the older adults and the Mobile Dental Unit but also include outreach events and agreements to perform treatment to different vulnerable groups in our society. The latter take place in our main teaching clinic. Further to this, the University is building a new teaching dental clinic in our sister island, Gozo, to cater the needs of the population and as a direct response to epidemiological findings.

### **3.3. Projects in Community Service learning in Dental education in Malta**

#### **3.3.1. Our pillars: The Mobile Dental Unit and the teaching clinic at Saint Vincent de Paul Residence**

Between 2010 and 2015, the Dean and the academics of the Faculty of Dental Surgery, identified a series of needs in the community that required addressing. Data on the current oral health status of the Maltese population in terms of the WHO Global Oral Health Programme (WHO, 2003; Petersen, 2005) was scarce and we required a means to reach out and identify the needs in the community.

### **3.3.1.1. The Mobile Dental Unit**

For this, the Mobile Dental Unit (MDU), which is a fully equipped dental clinic in a truck, was inaugurated in summer of 2015. The Faculty of Dental Surgery envisioned reaching the Maltese population in their villages. This would also serve as a base for outreach programmes in health promotion that had been increasing in number in the recent years. Since 2015, the MDU has visited every week all villages in Malta and Gozo. Data of the oral health status of the population is continuously being compiled and we now have a clearer picture of the current oral health status of our population.

Faculty academics, and students from the dental surgery, dental hygiene and dental assistance courses provide a service as a dental team by educating the community, providing dental screenings, and carrying out educational interventions, dietary counselling and smoking cessation. Outreaches target towns and villages, local council community groups, schools, residential homes, special care institutions, workplaces, as well as national events organized by government entities.

The local businesses sponsor the activities of the MDU by providing oral care products such as toothpastes and toothbrushes that we distribute to the vulnerable and marginalised communities to enable better oral health.

On a dental screening in the MDU, patients are given an initial diagnosis of what is seen in their mouth. Options of management are explained. They can choose to have this treatment either at our teaching dental clinic, at the state dental clinic or at their private dentist. Many choose to continue treatment with our students.

### **3.3.1.2. Saint Vincent de Paul Residence for the older adults**

At the same time as the MDU was being planned, the Dean and the academics saw the need to provide training to their students in Gerodontology given the rising number of older adults living in Malta. Following several clinical research studies conducted in the area (Santucci, et. al., 2014; Santucci & Attard 2015a; Santucci & Attard 2015b), the Faculty along with the Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity and Saint Vincent de Paul Residence's, inaugurated the teaching dental clinic at Saint Vincent de Paul Residence in the summer of 2015.

Saint Vincent de Paul Residence (SVPR) was selected for this purpose as it is the largest state Residence for the older adults in Malta. Initially, the clinic catered for the older adults living in the residence. However, soon older adults in the communities close to the residence and other state homes for the older adults requested appointments for their residents. Other private homes followed in this petition. Currently, dental treatment is provided to all population over 65 years of age living in a home for the older adults or in the community. Most treatments are performed in-house while patients are referred to our main dental clinic or to the Dental Department of the main hospital in Malta for complex treatments. Students also perform supervised treatment to bed-ridden patients at the wards. Apart from this, they attend other residences in Malta to carry out health promotion.

The students are exposed to over 100 hours of clinical training annually in Gerodontology and perform most treatments while learning to modify their diagnosis and management according to the complexity of the medical history and the frailty of the older adults.

In 2018, our group performed a study on the perception of self-confidence in treating older adults after three years of the inauguration of the teaching clinic and six years following the introduction of specific study units on Gerodontology. Results showed that students gained confidence while progressing in their studies, and after a considerable number of direct contact hours, including receiving the theoretical component in Gerodontology. The trends varied as some students felt comfortable while treating the older adults in their first years of studies; then, as the complexity of the cases increased, so did their concern. On their last year of studies, after a number of treatments and hours, and their skills

improved, the students regained their confidence. Most agreed that the number of hours of clinical practice was good, while 20% expressed their interest in furthering their studies in Gerodontology (Attard, et. al., 2018).

Every year, the students are involved in activities to reflect upon their learning in the service learning activities. Fourth- and fifth-year dental students have a storytelling session of their experience in their SVPR rotation. The aim of this session is to facilitate reflection of their experience with a vulnerable population and clients who are in their end stage of life. They are instructed to write a 5-minute story of an event that has made an impact in them during the hours of contact. We organize a session in which all students read their stories to their peers and their tutors. The stories are compelling and emotional. They prove the positive impact of service learning in dentistry. Some of these reflections were published in 2018 (Attard, et. al., 2018).

### **3.3.2. Special Olympics**

In 2014, academic members of the Faculty specialized in special care and in paediatric dentistry, liaised with the Malta Special Olympics team to provide oral healthcare prevention and promotion within the Healthy Athletes, Special Smiles framework of Special Olympics Malta. Students from dentistry, dental hygiene and dental assistance as well as the full-time and part-time academics participate yearly offering their service to the athletes and their families. This year, the Special Olympics Invitational Games 2022 international competition is being organized in Malta between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> of May 2022. The event is expecting over 1,000 athletes who will visit the Islands to compete. This is the first major meeting for Special Olympics as we emerge from Covid pandemic. These athletes will be seen by our academics and our students as part of the *Special Smiles* screening services.

### **3.3.3. Outreach programmes in Smoking cessation**

In 2014, a study unit on the impact of smoking and smoking cessation was introduced to the programme in dentistry and dental hygiene in their second year of studies. Since then, every year, the students participate in several outreaches in the community to promote healthy living and smoking cessation. Behavioural aspects are covered in this study unit and is a good introduction for preclinical students to discussing healthcare issues with the population. In these outreaches, they explore the individual response to health promotion as well as the need for policies. Furthermore, smoking cessation is now an integral part of the Mobile Dental Unit events. Integrating smoking cessation to our curriculum, as well as to the outreach programmes and the Mobile Dental Unit events provides us with an opportunity to explore behaviour beyond the domains of dentistry. This helps the student to reflect on how behaviour and choices affect our lifestyle and the quality of life.

### **3.3.4. Outreach programmes in events**

The Faculty of Dental Surgery participates in most events of interest in the Maltese Islands. These include major events such as Notte Bianca and Science in the City. These events are organized in the city of Valletta every year and attract hundreds of thousands of people. The Mobile Dental Unit is placed in a prominent location in the city with people queuing for over one hour to be seen. The Malta Association of Dental Students meet with the organizers of the events a few months before and, with the help of the Deputy Dean, organize the event. Students from the early years participate in health promotion while those in the senior years give clinical advice to participants.

Further to this, the Mobile Dental Unit is invited to participate in events all year round, including health promotion events organized in villages, feasts, schools and fundraising events for health-related NGOs such Arka Foundation, an organisation that takes care of people with disability, and also

Puttinu Cares Foundation, a children’s cancer support group. Dental screenings, outreaches and other services also include entities such as Dar tal-Providenza, a long-term residence for people with disabilities; Agenzija Support, a governmental entity that cares for the people with disabilities; and Agenzija Zghazagh, an entity promoting well-being of young people.

In the recent months, the Malta Association of Dental Students (MADS), the student association integrated by students from the four courses offered by the Faculty, have been carrying out health promotion campaigns on television, schools, social media.

### **3.3.5. National Oral Health Surveys**

Between 2014 and 2015, the children national oral health survey took place (Gatt, et. al, 2017) while the adult national oral health survey started a couple of years after and is still ongoing. We consider that by participating in the survey they understand their social responsibility is within the community.

Many of the parents of the 2,500 children screened for the children national oral health survey requested treatment from the dental students. These students performed general dental treatments, including preventive, restorative and orthodontic treatment.

### **3.3.6. The Pandemic and the impact in Service learning in dentistry**

In March 2020 all clinical activities in dental education were cancelled in most of the World. In Malta, some activities partially resumed as early as in August 2020. Since the main teaching dental clinic is located in the main hospital in Malta, we were subject to strict infection control guidelines and measures depending on the country’s position in the Pandemic. Moreover, the measures of the Superintendence for Public Health in Malta did not allow the activities of the MDU or outreaches to take place until October 2020. Given the increased vulnerability of the older adults during the pandemic and before vaccination, most teaching activities were suspended in SVPR. However clinical services were still provided *pro bono* by the Faculty academics. In summary, only reduced activities in the main teaching clinic at Mater Dei Hospital were taking place. Our Service-learning activities were substantially reduced to the detriment of training our students.

In February 2021, after only one month of the vaccination campaign, Malta experienced its worst situation in the Pandemic with the hospital in the midst of serious challenges to maintain steady operations. All doctors and nurses were required in the hospitals and the Ministry for Health feared that the vaccination campaign would be curtailed. The authorities reached out to the Faculty of Dental Surgery for help. Soon students in different areas of health were asked to volunteer their time in the vaccination drive. Our Faculty prepared a roster for its students and academics, as well as dental professionals to volunteer. Within six hours of officially making this request in our Faculty, all available slots for four months were filled. Our students volunteered in this campaign until March 2022. Thanks to the collective efforts, Malta was the first country in Europe to have 80% of the adult population vaccinated by June 2021. By the end of July 2021, the Faculty’s students and academics had provided in excess of 100,000 hours of voluntary time in the vaccination efforts. In September 2021, at the start of the academic year, the MDU remained with restrictions of movement due to the public health measures. In order to continue with activities in the community, students were given a rotation in the vaccination centre at university. In 2022, all MDU activities have resumed and the mobile dental unit is back on the road.

The Pandemic might have stopped service learning activities in the community. Nonetheless, we celebrated the response of our students towards the vaccination campaign and volunteering their time. We understood how deep the outreaches throughout their course were engrained in them and how they understand their role in providing health to their country. This experience also underpins the notion of transferable skills, one of the tenants of UM’s teaching principles.

### **3.3.7. Our next steps in Service learning in dental education in Malta.**

The Coronavirus Pandemic may have interrupted our physical activities in the community, yet we continued planning. It gave us some time to regroup, organize new activities and establish links with other entities caring for vulnerable groups. In these two years, the University has signed a series of agreements with different entities for students to carry out dental management. In 2021, the University of Malta signed an agreement with the Foundation for Social Welfare Services, a governmental agency responsible for social services. This agreement was signed in favour of the child protection and alternative care directorates. The aim was to provide oral health promotion, prevention, and dental care to the over 750 children in alternative care, that is, in foster care and specific homes. In 2022, the same entities signed another agreement. In this case, with Aġenzja Sapport, the entity in charge of services for people with disabilities. Both projects have started and students are seeing for the needs of both children in alternative care, as well as people with disabilities. Beyond the dental care itself, these projects provide a framework for our students to experience the diverse realities of our society.

It is worth noting that the Faculty had modified the curriculum of the Masters in Dental Surgery in 2019 to incorporate a study unit in Special Care Dentistry.

Moreover, the MDU and the Faculty are planning our next moves towards promoting oral health in migrants, people with substance use disorder, people with eating disorders and Caritas Malta (a Church entity promoting social justice).

### **3.3.8. Gozo Teaching Dental Clinic**

Gozo is the sister island of Malta. It is located northwest and separated by a 7 km stretch of sea. It is 27.43 sq.km with a population of just over 31,000 persons (NSO 2021). Studies by our team suggest that this population is underserved, possibly due to its geographically isolated location thus leading to double insularity. These studies observed that the oral health problems in this community were more noticeable than in the Island of Malta. Among the recommendations of these studies, our group considered that the island required accessibility and availability of dental health services (Gatt, 2017; Schembri & Attard, 2017; Agius et. al., 2018) specifically by establishing a teaching clinic. The Ministry for Gozo and the Gozo Diocese supported this view and have fully supported the Faculty's endeavours on this project. The Gozo Teaching Dental Clinic is a soon-to-be reality. We expect this state-of-the-art teaching unit to open its doors by the Fall of 2022 and our students along with the Faculty academics will participate in this oral health programme. The students will benefit from the clinical training and from learning how health determinants such as geo-location and double-insularity can modify the oral health of a population. At the same time, the Gozitan community will benefit from accessible treatments.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

A Chinese proverb states that every journey starts with one single step. We embarked in the journey of service-learning initially thinking of answering some questions we had on the oral health status of our population. Little did we envisage that this would lead to a project to provide a service to the older adults. With these two ventures, our curriculum started changing and this created a cascade of events that led to ongoing projects and ideas that incorporate more programmes to tackle the oral health inequalities and needs of more vulnerable groups. At the same time, it would serve as the basis for community-based dental education.

Our students are the dentists of the future. Instilling the values of prevention, community dentistry and health for all, as well as prioritizing the care for vulnerable groups augurs well for the oral health of our country.

The Faculty of Dental Surgery of the University of Malta has greatly contributed towards health promotion in the community by enhancing the Preventive and Community Dentistry and Public Health curriculum and staff members; performing research to understand the needs of the community and acting on them; increasing the intake of students in different dental courses and emphasizing the importance of increasing the number of dental hygienists within the community; building the infrastructure for provision of community prevention and care in different localities in these small islands in order to improve access to dental services for all; reaching out to vulnerable and marginalised communities; liaising with several national government authorities such as the Ministry for Education and Ministry for Health to introduce preventive programmes in schools; and, educating on oral health at the individual and community level.

When we started the journey, we were unaware that this would not only benefit our students and the community, but that it would also change us, academics and staff of the Faculty, and the way we teach. Furthermore, we have gained respect in the community and the different governmental agencies who look for us for treatment of vulnerable groups. We have a long and exciting road ahead with an aim of a more equitable oral health in our community.

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# CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS OF SERVICE-LEARNING. A COMMUNICATION SCIENCE STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE

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## ABSTRACT

Rigorous and structured reflection is one of the key factors in the development of quality experiences in service-learning (SL) (Moledo et al., 2021). Certified service-learning (SL) students' reflection on past experiences can become a mentoring tool for current students enrolled in SL classes. Their feedback is valuable as it offers guidance, perspective, and significant mentorship. Having the examples of the sophomores is important for freshmen as they can identify challenges and benefits of developing SL projects, identify topics and resources, reflect upon their civic responsibility and civic engagement, and enable them to connect the dots between theory and practice.

The study was conducted using the qualitative research methodology of focus group interviewing to understand advertising and PR students' experience with a service-learning component embedded in the course curriculum. Students report improved soft skills (U.S. Department of Labor, 2013), personal growth and career adaptability, increased civic awareness and a deeper understanding of the importance of setting personal learning goals. Implications for students and faculty are discussed at the end of the article.

**Keywords:** Service-learning, reflection, communication science, mentoring, personal learning objectives

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Service-Learning

Service-learning has gained momentum in European Higher Education during the last twenty years. Traditionally implemented and promoted in the American realm, this educational practice continues to attract faculty and institutional staff across Europe. The European Association of Service-Learning in Higher Education defines Service-Learning (SL) as "an experiential educational method in which students engage in community service, reflect critically on this experience, and learn from it personally, socially and academically" (EASLHE Policy Brief, January 2021). The student is the real protagonist of SL, as he is involved in all the phases of the project, addressing a real need of the served community, makes connections to curricular objectives, and after implementing the SL project reflects upon the entire experience (Naval et al., 2011).

### 1.2. Benefits and challenges of SL

SL presents multiple benefits for students, faculty, universities and communities (Salam et al., 2019). For students especially, the development of communication skills has been attributed to participation in SL projects (Applegate & Morreale, 1999; Culic & Pavelea, 2022a), along with a vast array of other skills, like problem-solving, critical thinking, teamwork, intercultural skills etc. Significant learning

outcomes and knowledge acquisition have been documented (Bonastre et al., 2021). Service-learning also contributes to the development of civic values (Aramburuzabala, McIlrath, & Opazo, 2019) and civic responsibility (Marshall, 2015), in a nutshell to the personal, social and cognitive development of students (Yorio & Ye, 2012). Among the most important benefits of SL for students, career connections and career clarification, integration of theory and practice, sense of purpose and social responsibility, regard for cultural differences and taking part in an enjoyable experience were frequently listed (Oster-Aaland et al., 2004). The ranking of these benefits may change in time, but the list remains pretty similar. Salam et al. (2019) provide an extensive catalogue of potential gains for SL for all the actors involved.

But SL projects can be quite challenging for students who have not had the opportunity of getting acquainted with this kind of experience before college. They might have had volunteering experiences in high school, but service-learning distances itself from volunteering as it combines service provided to a community of place, identity or interest, with real needs addressed. CLAYSS (Centro Latinoamericano De Aprendizaje Y Servicio Solidario) argues that SL projects need to meet three requirements in order to be defined as such: 1) a solidarity service developed within a community, 2) the active involvement of students in all areas of designing, planning, implementing and evaluating the project, and 3) the link between learning contents and service (Regina & Ferrara, 2017).

SL helps the students apply their knowledge and skills in real-world settings and enables them “to make the world a better place” (Miller, 1997: 16). SL has been proven to have significant academic, personal, social and citizenship outcomes for students embarking on this journey (Conway et al., 2009). Previous studies have indicated mixed results in relationship to these outcomes (Eyler, 2002; Reinders & Youniss, 2006), but most of the research agrees that rigorous and structured reflection is one of the key factors in the development of quality experiences in service-learning (Moledo et al., 2021).

Along with reflection, other two key elements of SL placements within academic departments are to be taken into consideration: 1) orientation and training, and 2) meaningful service (Trethewey et al., 1999). The survey developed by Sellnow & Oster (1997), sent to communication departments chairs and later replicated in 2001, indicated that even though more students were involved in SL and have had the opportunity to develop their multicultural awareness and intercultural skills, little importance was given to meaningful service and structured reflection (Oster-Aaland et al., 2004).

### 1.3. Reflection in SL

Reflection on the experience tends to be “the hyphen in service-learning” (Eyler & Giles, 1999: 171), being described as the glue that sticks together service with academic learning. Reflection enables students to distance themselves from the SL experience, to get perspective, to use their critical thinking skills and find the higher meaning of the SL experience for themselves, the community and the academia. It invites students to connect theory with practice, to link the service activity with their own personal learning objectives, with the class content and objectives (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999), and with future career pursuits (Franta, 1994; Mitchell & Rost-Banik, 2019).

Godfrey et al. (2005) talk about the four Rs of SL: reality, reflection, reciprocity, and responsibility, giving the full potential of SL projects for students. Reflection though is oftentimes used only at the end of the project (Eyler & Giles, 1999), in the shape of either a reflective paper, a survey, journals, oral presentations (Lundy, 2007), or group discussions (Kretchmar, 2001). As Furco & Norvell (2019) indicate, reflection is highly important for the design of curricular objectives, and should ideally take place before, during and after the service. It is said that reflection is a muscle that needs practice. It can be learned and improved with practice (Ash & Clayton, 2004).

Certified SL students’ reflection on past experiences can become a mentoring tool for current students enrolled in SL classes. Their feedback is valuable as it offers guidance, perspective and significant

mentorship. Having the examples of the previous generation of students is important for current students as they can identify challenges and benefits of developing SL projects, identify topics and resources, reflect upon their civic responsibility and civic engagement, and enable them to connect the dots between theory and practice.

#### **1.4. Mentoring programs as a part of SL projects**

Mentoring programs usually involve a relationship between an older experienced mentor and a younger mentee (Rhodes, 1994), lasting on average three months or less, as previous studies show (Karcher et al., 2006). Premature termination of mentoring relationships is oftentimes caused by unmet expectations, lack of motivation among mentees, cultural differences, schedule and time commitments, lack of support from program staff, goals that are unclear or communication difficulties (Evans, 2005; Spencer, 2007).

Wells & Grabert (2004) show the efficacy of implementing mentoring programs combined with SL methodology. Mentoring can be therefore employed as an educational strategy designed to positively influence students' development and academic performance at different ages (Hughes & Dykstra, 2012; Hughes et al., 2010; Schmidt et al, 2004; Weiler et al., 2013), be it at-risk youth or other fellow college students. Not only older adults can become mentors, for in some cases, even though usually mentoring programs involve alumni or professionals as mentors for university students, roles can change and students become mentors for faculty (Leh, 2005).

Mentoring programs as a part of SL projects are excellent opportunities for both the mentors and the mentees (Schmidt et al, 2004). The relationship established between the two is of extreme importance. Especially for the SL projects, Hughes et al. (2010) recommend that mentoring programs include opportunities for socializing and friendship formation. Informally hanging out with the mentee and finding common interests and activities is thought to contribute to the building and maintaining of the relationships over time. Other recommendations from the same authors include:

- matching mentors and mentees based on common interests, goals and schedule, as indicated on specific interest forms completed at the beginning of the program;
- scheduling organized group activities (like campus visits or dining);
- offering orientation at the beginning of the program;
- placing attention to communication throughout the entire mentoring period;
- completing mentoring contracts prior to the start of the program, stating the number of hours, activities, goals and objectives (Hughes et al., 2010).

Different types of mentoring programs have been used in SL projects, but the cross-age peer-mentoring model in general seems to be one of the least expensive choices (Garringer et al., 2017). According to the National Mentoring Partnership (MENTOR), potential benefits of peer-mentoring for mentees include: academic engagement and retention, social support, connectedness, belonging and persistence especially for minority members or first-generation students, whereas for the mentors, identity development, prosocial behavior and a sense of giving back, increased support and community engagement, academic achievement and increased self-esteem have been found (in Kupersmidt et al., 2020). Combined with the benefits of service-learning itself, the effect on students is twofold.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

This study focuses on the reflective perception of sophomores regarding their SL project and how their reflection on the experience could become a mentoring tool for freshmen students. Previous authors have used focus-groups as a useful tool for critical reflection (Schmiede, 1995), allowing faculty to validate assumptions and beliefs influencing students' thoughts and behaviors. Seeskin (1987, in Collier & Morgan, 2002) saw focus-groups as suitable for the Socratic model for reflection. Students are encouraged to take into consideration different ideas and perspectives, to react to the thoughts of others, to get involved in the group discussion and create group dynamics and emerging states specific for focus-group interactions. As Collier & Morgan (2002) show, focus-groups can be effective tools in promoting community-based student learning through service-learning projects.

### **2.1. Participants**

We have developed two focus-groups with 13 sophomores, majoring in Advertising and Public Relations, who have implemented SL projects during the second semester of the 2020-2021 academic year, as a part of the Social Psychology introductory class. We aimed to discuss about their perception of the entire experience, which were the most challenging aspects, which was the most fulfilling experience, which were their personal learning objectives and whether they have accomplished them, and what kind of connection did they manage to make between the theory of social psychology and SL project. We were also interested to find out whether sophomores would be willing to take part in a mentoring program designed to facilitate freshmen navigate through the SL experience, how would they benefit from the program, and how would they see the implementation of this mentoring program. Students' projects revolved around diverse topics related to body positivity, sexual education, adopting animals, supporting local entrepreneurship initiatives, protecting the environment, or promoting feminism and reducing inequality. These students have been invited at the beginning of the school year to present their project to current freshmen students enrolled in the same class, as examples of best practices, also share their insights and answer questions, give recommendations. We have encouraged students to ask questions, to give feedback, to ask for tips & tricks, and to establish connections and networking resources for their own ideas of SL projects.

### **2.2. Protocol**

The interview protocol was guided by the extant literature on SL methodology and the use of peer-mentoring activities in SL projects. The interview had multiple foci, but for this study we have focused on students' reflection on the SL experience one year after completion.

### **2.3. Procedures and analysis**

Participants were sent invitation emails to participate in a freshmen Social Psychology class where they could present their SL projects from the previous year. The same students were then invited to take part in focus-groups on the feasibility of implementing a mentoring program for freshmen. Interviews lasted, on average, 93 minutes and were digitally recorded with consent, then transcribed verbatim and submitted to thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). We have reviewed the literature and the transcripts, created codes and analyzed data in order to make meaning among the answers of the participants (Boeije, 2002). We were interested in coding the data independently (over .85 intercoder agreement) to ensure coding reliability. We then negotiated the coding schema and made the proper adjustments (Lombard et al, 2002). After writing individual memos and further analyzing the data individually and jointly, we parsed the code into nine themes, presented in detail in the following pages.

### 3. RESULTS

#### 3.1. Students' perception on the entire SL experience

Most of the students taking part in the focus-groups agreed that the SL project was quite challenging. They perceived it to be complex, overwhelming at first, as this was their first encounter with the SL concept and methodology. As one student explained: "The beginning was quite difficult for me, as I did not know what service-learning meant. We didn't know where to start, what to search, how to find an idea that fit our interests and that would benefit the entire community." "I felt like the sky fell on my head", "It felt like a big task, difficult to accomplish. Impossible.", or, "It was one of the most challenging projects so far, as it was so complex. Now I fully realize that it was a complete experience". Service-learning methodology was presented in detail, according to the CLAYSS model (Regina & Ferrara, 2017) and this allowed students to organize their thoughts and actions, become aware of the complexity of the assignment.

Learning about the community needs has positively influenced students' level of civic responsibility and civic awareness. As several students mentioned: "Before discussing in class about some topics, you don't get to think too much about certain problems. But then you get a new perspective and it makes you think, and you start questioning what you already know. You start challenging your assumptions." Another one added: "You realize that you are a part of a community and you try to be active. You try to do things for yourself and for others, but not only what you think is good for the community, but also depending on their needs. The change starts with you. Take one step at a time."

#### 3.2. The most challenging aspects of the SL project

Simulating real-workplace interactions, students were not allowed to choose their teammates, and were alphabetically organized into teams of 4 or 5 students. The preset team composition was critical: "It took days for us to meet. We did not know each other before. We did not know each other's learning style, written proficiency, personality..." and as one sophomore shared with us: "For me, this was a tragedy. Even though now, when I look back, it was super ok, and I would not change it. When we first heard about it, it was really tough. It's hard to work even in a team where you get to choose your colleagues, not to mention in this situation".

But the most challenging aspect was related to teamwork and organization. As one sophomore deemed: "Project management and organization was problematic for us, even for the projects where we were allowed to choose our teammates", "I remember we had different deadlines, which helped us organize better. We took the project step by step and because we knew what was expected from us, we could concentrate on the task. For us the deadlines were very productive, but not all our colleagues would agree on this."

Group processes were perceived to be adverse by most students. The flow was impaired. Working with colleagues with conflicting views and different priorities and schedules, tested students' collaboration and decision-making skills: "It was difficult to synchronize the team. We had to negotiate and communicate with each other concerning the ways in which we would reach understanding. We had to find new ways of doing something, of collaborating and of engaging evenly within the project." Even though for some students the group productivity was fair and the satisfaction with the final results was high, the viability of the team suffered, as they argued that "Even though the whole experience was not entirely a pleasant one, at least now we know whom we would never pair up with again." As one student explained: "For me this project meant a whole new perspective on the teamwork concept. Every time my team and I now want to work with someone new, we have a set of rules to follow and if this does not strike a chord with you, you do not get to work with us". Defining roles within teams was problematic

for most students." The effort was meant to be equally distributed, but one would usually assume the leadership role and if that person would not have the skills to manage the entire team, the interaction would suffer. We had a self-appointed authoritarian colleague, who would prefer to give orders without listening to the opinions of others. For me it is difficult to find motivation and to work in such an environment. It is annoying and inevitably tension is created". Communication and compromise were demanding, and given the flawed time-management within teams, finding motivation was difficult.

The pandemic context added specific challenges. One of them had to do with the distance between team members. They had to deal with a new context, new situations, with the lack of information, and high uncertainty. Partnerships were difficult to establish, as students could not meet in person with community leaders and beneficiaries." Finding sponsors gave us a lot of headaches. We tried to contact them, to increase the visibility online, but people did not answer our calls. Sponsors were inflexible, but we managed to change the strategy and rowed the stroke home.". Distance itself was a big problem for team members' mindset." For me it was, honestly, difficult because I was at home. We were all at home. And we could not meet in person, and it was pandemic, and it seemed impossible". For others, communication with the institutions was flawed." We were working with a family type shelter and they had Covid, and we had to rethink the activities. The online interaction wasn't how we thought it would be. I was so disappointed. But then we left some activities out and reorganized the strategy, and the kids were so happy and we felt like this was worth it. But the obstacles were there, constantly, and we had to overcome many unexpected, unpredictable situations".

The pressure to move from changing attitudes to changing behaviors tested students. They felt like it was" a task too difficult to accomplish in such a short period of time [10 weeks]". One sophomore considered that:" At first I thought there are small chances to have such great results in only one semester".

Technology use was raising anxiety among students, as they had to organize webinars, plan events, do project management and also keep the beneficiaries engaged in the SL project." Easter was approaching, and it was difficult to bring people online". Still, some of the students remarked on the advantages of using the internet, especially for organizing events, because of Covid-19 restrictions. As it allowed them to participate in different online events, have guests from large distances, target diverse audiences in terms of geographic representation:" People did not know how to join platforms, how to attend events, so we had to learn first and then teach them how to do this". The amount of internet exposure has influenced their motivation throughout the pandemic." I was scared that the final project is not going to be as grand as we designed it. There were colleagues who gave up from the start, who didn't even consider launching the project. They were like: See you next year!". For some teams, the decision process when choosing a topic for the project was quite challenging. Where there were debates and compromises, the motivation level differed significantly among teammates.

### **3.3. The most fulfilling experience of the SL project**

Many students mentioned the service itself as one of the most fulfilling aspects of the SL project. For them, this was a way of giving back to the community, of exercising prosocial behavior and contributing to the life of the community.

Feedback from the participants encouraged them to continue with the SL project. As one participant noted:" We received messages from people saying that this has helped them in some way, that they have liked our initiative and that the project is worth continuing. They said there is a real need for this kind of project in Romania, so our hearts swelled with pride. I was like: wow, I cannot believe what an impact this project has". Another one noticed that" the children kept asking us when we would be back the next day and we felt like we were really helping them. And we felt really good!".

For most students, this meant a boost of self-esteem:" You gain a lot of confidence that you can do this. If I compare myself to last year, I see two different people". Another colleague added:" I was pretty sure that we will have a great project and we will receive a high grade. I honestly had no doubt, because I knew we had chosen an excellent idea, that every member of the team would love to develop. So, there was a lot of passion and enthusiasm we put into it".

Most of the students mentioned that the SL experience enhanced their communication skills, along with leadership, critical thinking, time-management, public speaking, entrepreneurial skills, self-discipline and work ethic. Communication skills, usually seen as soft skills (U.S. Department of Labor, 2013), are considered hard skills in the case of Advertising and Public Relations students. Through their SL projects, students learned how to become proficient in written and oral communication, how to create content, how to manage copywriting tasks, how to give presentations in front of different audiences, how to use social media, how to catch the attention and the interest of people and how to master the art of persuasion. Understanding the profile of the audience and designing communication interactions with diverse people was extremely significant for one student, who noted that "We practiced communication as we entered new areas: of entrepreneurship, of local producers, of families, social media audiences or NGOs. We interacted with people from spaces totally new to us. So, we had to adapt our communication to their needs and expectations. We experienced different kinds of communication, different strategies and techniques".

### **3.4. Personal learning objectives**

Personal learning objectives are intended to guide students' knowledge acquisition and skills development. They act as a map for knowing where you start from and which is the direction and the destination you follow. Unfortunately, for many of our students, this step was overlooked.

Even if students did not set these personal objectives, when asked what did they learn from the SL experience, they mentioned: patience and empathy, gratitude and appreciation (" I got to work with my high school teachers and this time I was the teacher. I felt like I was giving something back"), organization and prioritizing tasks, experience based learning, diversity and accepting ideas of others, compromising and conflict resolution, self-confidence and self-esteem, self-efficacy (related to career skills, like event planning, social media management, entrepreneurship, psychology and consumer behavior), personal growth (especially proactivity and initiative when confronted with tasks like calling partners, communicating with institutions etc.), and raised civic awareness on a wide range of subjects: animal cruelty, technology, cyberbullying, sexual education, hate speech, autism, ecology and environmental protection, and many others. This leads to increased career adaptability, as students develop their proactivity and initiative, learning goal orientation, clarify their beliefs about themselves, put their conscientiousness to the test, become future oriented thinking, and are open to new experiences.

### **3.5. The link between theory and practice**

Students were able to make connections between class content and the SL project:" Everything was related to social psychology in this project. Prosocial behavior, perception, cognition, stereotypes and discrimination, social influence, group processes, consumer behavior, self and others, attribution and locus of control. We breathed psychology." Connections were indicated to other class contents as well, like Online PR, Branding, Event planning, PR techniques or Personal Branding, showing the integrative side of SL projects.

### **3.6. Mentoring program**

Willingness to take part in a mentoring program designed to facilitate freshmen navigate the SL experience was expressed by students stating the advantages of such a program: "I would definitely be interested in taking part in a mentoring program. I know this would have been extremely beneficial for me last year. It would also be a great opportunity to share what I have learned, to use my experience to ease their way through. We know it is difficult. We have encountered the same obstacles." Another student opinionated: "Sometimes you do not know where to start, so you just need a small hint, a push".

### **3.7. Benefits for the sophomores**

Students were able to identify several personal gains after taking part in a mentoring program. Apart from the ones indicated by Hughes et al. (2010) revolving around personal development and enhancing character, forming relationships and networking, as well as appreciating own's life experiences and reevaluating priorities, sophomores mentioned:

- gaining an understanding of the challenges of mentoring students;
- clarifying career interests and exploring career alternatives, as indicated by Gottfredson's theory of circumscription and compromise (1981): "I try to engage in as many project as possible and try new roles each time, see what really ticks for me, what I enjoy most, what I'm interested in", or, "I have always enjoyed teaching, and I enrolled in the pedagogical module, in the ROSE project, in students' associations, in so many that I can't even remember them all. I do not know if I really want to pursue a teaching career, because my mother is a teacher, and I see it's hard work, but I want to keep my options open!";
- increased satisfaction associated with mentoring and prosocial behavior;
- networking and a sense of community;
- building a CV ("When I got my part-time job, they asked me about teamwork and I had so much to tell them about the SL experience!");
- developing skills, like leadership, civic skills, critical thinking, communication, time-management, teamwork, and self-discipline.

### **3.8. Advantages for the freshmen as perceived by sophomores**

We asked sophomores how they think freshmen would benefit from a mentoring program. Their own experience helped sophomores relate with the needs of the current first-year students, so the answers were of no surprise. Structured ongoing mentoring, in the shape of guidance, consultancy, solutions and alternatives, and practical tips and tricks were indicated first by the participants.

Cross-age peer-mentoring relationships could facilitate adequate networking. Sophomores pointed out the importance of building a strong relationship, characterized by closeness, fostering a sense of belonging and connectedness for freshmen, especially after the hard period of pandemic that they went through: "We could show them both the bright side, and the dark side". Another student mentioned confidence building: "We could help them build confidence. Ignite their motivation. Instill in them the idea that they can develop a good project, not just for the sake of passing the exam".

Consistent with Hughes et al. (2010) recommendations, matching mentors with mentees based on shared interests and similar SL project topics was signaled by sophomores. Sharing their experience and resources on resembling ideas would ease freshmen efforts, help them gain time and increase the quality of the projects.

Having in mind one of the most challenging aspects of their own projects, sophomores mentioned time-management and organizational skills as important gains for freshmen. Last, but not least, career related skills, gathered through online classes or MOOCs, workshops, team buildings, volunteering and internships, start-up incubators etc., could be transmitted from sophomores to freshmen. Every student enters college with a specific set of skills: social media management, IT&C, time-management, and data analysis etc. Professional resources, job opportunities, students' clubs and organizations, networking resources and events could be disseminated by sophomores and freshmen could gain valuable career insights.

### **3.9. Recommendations for the implementation of the mentoring program**

As previously mentioned, sophomores recommended matching mentors and mentees based on shared interests or on topics of SL projects. Informal hanging out format for relationship building was listed second and setting explicit goals for the mentoring program was the third recommendation. Weekly meetings are perceived as suitable for sophomores, who emphasize the need to focus on friendly, informal, board games night or coffee talks outside university. Faculty monitoring of program implementation is advised. Hybrid format is preferred. While some students mention physical presence as being more suitable for mentoring activities, due to the fact that it's easier to keep students engaged and involved in the activities, others indicate the online as their first choice. One to many formats was unanimously chosen by the participants and flexible choice location and time schedules were suggested by most sophomores.

## **4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

Sophomores can become valuable resources for freshmen when recruited in mentoring programs under the supervision of engaged faculty. Even though this effort is quite considerable in the case of SL project implementation, using sophomores experience can decrease the general workload for faculty and can also build significant skills in both mentors and mentees, can contribute to relationship building and can strengthen the sense of belonging for all students involved in the program, can encourage students to not only develop SL projects, but also to identify common research topics, starting from joint projects, can constitute an excellent opportunity for the transmission of values, attitudes and skills, information and other resources highly needed by freshmen at the beginning of their academic pathway.

There are some conditions under which implementing mentoring programs within SL projects can achieve high-quality results. Using sophomore's reflection as a tool for mentoring freshmen can be useful for faculty organizing SL projects embedded within curricula. Especially in the pandemic, we agree with Veyvoda & van Cleave (2020: 1549) who say that "as much of society has slowed down and turned its focus inward, reflection gives students an opportunity to explore what is truly important in their lives—what gives their lives meaning". But reflection needs to be introduced before, during and after the implementation of SL projects, as indicated by Eyler (2002). The importance of setting personal learning objectives needs to be enforced in the future. Learning goal orientation supports and enhances career adaptability (Parker, 2010). Also, due to the increase of dropout rates caused by the pandemic, SL projects could become once again an excellent way of increasing the retention rate of students (Kuh et al, 2005), and enhancing their positive perception of college experience (McNamara & Cover, 1999).

For freshmen students it is difficult to distinguish between service-learning methodology, volunteering, community-based learning, and other related concepts, between mentoring and tutoring, therefore having solid theoretical and practical pedagogical training is required for faculty. For Romania especially, SL methodology is not something new. There have been several previous initiatives (New

Horizon Foundation programs, joint projects like SLIHE, 2022), studies (Rusu & Davis, 2018; Ilic, Gregorova & Rusu, 2021), and regional conferences (The Second Service-Learning Conference in Central and Eastern Europe - Cluj-Napoca, 2019; Fourth European Conference on Service-Learning in Higher Education- Bucharest, 2021), supporting the third mission of Higher Education institutions, no SL centers have been founded and there are no formal frameworks for service-learning or incentives provided to faculty. As Rusu et al. (2014) argued, in order to have the institutionalization of SL completed within the Romanian academic institutions, SL programs should be inserted in the Quality Assurance Plans and official steps have to be done concerning faculty and institutional support. Until then, all these isolated initiatives of SL programs are considered bold, and pioneering, but even though extremely satisfying for both faculty and students, they present multiple challenges. SL has to be wired into the campus strategies and action plans to become viable in the long run (Culic & Pavelea, 2022b).

Speaking of pioneering work, we agree with Weiler (2013: 245-6) that "Mentoring within the context of service-learning courses is rare, and yet holds great potential", especially because of the fact that "the service-learning format allows for ideal levels of structure, supervision, and support such that high-quality mentoring is provided." Special attention should be cast upon the design and implementation of the mentoring program itself, as indicated by the result of Hughes et al. (2010). Building mentor-mentee relationships within organized group activities, adequately matching mentors and mentees, establishing clear goals for mentoring, and communicating goals to mentoring sites and staff tend to be of particular importance.

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# SCUBA DIVING FOR CHILDREN WITH LOWER INCOME STATUS

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## ABSTRACT

The project of the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports included children of lower income status and children from orphanages for the purpose of education and acquaintance with underwater diving activities, ecology of the sea and preservation of the seabed.

The project was realized in cooperation SCUBA DIVING FOR CHILDREN WITH LOWER INCOME STATUS

with orphanages in Croatia, and in addition to the proteges of orphanages, the beneficiaries of the program of orphanages who live in them on a daily basis are also included. The goal was to bring this exceptional sports and recreational activity closer to the most endangered groups of children, who due to various circumstances and difficulties in life and due to the costs of diving, could not afford it, and want to learn to dive and be part of the unique sense of underwater life. There are also children who express a desire to prepare for further education and training in diving skills.

**Keywords:** SCUBA diving, children, education, financial status

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The project is designed to involve children of lower financial status in diving through the organization of free diving courses. This includes residents of youth homes, children of lower financial status (Drašinac, 2007). During the project, 252 young people from all over Croatia were involved, 50 of whom attended the R1 course. The project was funded by the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, with the participation of diving clubs and centers that provided necessary diving equipment and organized lectures on diving safety and demonstrated rescue and resuscitation activities.

As many socially deprived children as possible should be provided with sports and educational activities will improve the quality of their lives, work and learning.

By participating in the program, children could be motivated and encouraged to learn and open new life perspectives. They will be introduced to the basics of diving activity and equipment used in autonomous diving in a fun and educational way with the all of adapting to the new environment they encounter. The final goal is to experience diving through pleasure and learn to dive in the safest way (PADI, 2005). Additional goals are to teach them about ecology, preservation of our sea and underwater world, and to include them in the activities of diving clubs in accordance with their wishes.

1. Education of young people and acquisition of basic knowledge about diving and the seabed of the Adriatic Sea

2. Fulfilling youthful desires and providing equal opportunities to grow up and enjoy diving and the beauties of the underwater world for children of lower financial status
3. Possibility of further diving training and subsequent selection of diving activity as a professional vocation

## 2. METHODS

Implemented of the project was in two phases:

- a) In the first phase, we tried to include as many young people as possible (252 of them), and during the four-hour program to introduce them to diving in theory and practice, which took place in the pool and sheltered water area.
- b) In the second phase, we included young people who showed interest, knowledge and skills during the first phase. The second phase of the project lasted a week and took place according to the R1 program (CMAS).

## 3. DISCUSSION

The following institutions participated in the project:

Orphanage "Maestral" from Split, "Zagreb", "Lekenik", Association "Izazov Dobrote"

Introduction to Scuba diving, Discovery lasting 4 teaching hours.

Theoretical classes (2 teaching hours) were conducted according to the program for the acquisition of knowledge and skills according to the recommendations of CMAS, and includes: introduction to diving and diving school and association, learning about the specifics of underwater, using basic diving equipment, and the principle of autonomous diving apparatus. Practical classes were conducted in a swimming pool or sheltered water area. Participants performed exercises from the scuba diving program. The goal is for all participants was to master breathing under water, and to get them interested in attending the R1 diving course.

One-star Scuba diving course (R1) in duration of 30 teaching hours:

Theoretical classes for the diving category ONE STAR DIVER (R1) is the basic curriculum for beginner divers and provides a total of 18 teaching hours.

Teaching topics are organized for performance together with practical classes.

At the end of each theoretical part, the participants are supposed to do work assignments in a workbook (15 minutes), and take a theoretical exam at the end of the entire course.

Practical classes are designed as a regular follow-up to theoretical classes according to the planned chapters. The implementation of practical classes is planned consecutively by chapters according to theoretical classes. This resulted in the teaching process containing 6 units (Drašinac, 2007).

The second phase of the project is carried out according to the R1 program (CMAS) verified by the Commission for Underwater Activities at the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports.

Theoretical and practical classes: Were included 6 theoretical lessons and 6 dives in accordance with the R1 (One Star Diver) program of HRS.

As part of the Discovery courses and the one-star diver (R1) course, exercises related do rescue, resuscitation and first aid. Were organized attendees also performed some actions on the Manikin; extraction from water, resuscitation (heart massage, artificial respiration).

These actions were performed in the program to make children aware of the importance of preparing for safe diving, ways to prevent accidents, and procedures and methods of rescue and first aid in the event of an accident (Gošović, 1990).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The project was implemented in Split, Zagreb, Rijeka, where the practical part was conducted in swimming pools and in institutions where children come from additionally in Bol, the island of Brač, the training for category R1 in the marine environment was conducted.

All material resources were funded by the Ministry's projects, which included equipment, transport, accommodation outside the place of residence, equipment, didactic material, necessary documentation (diplomas, certificates...) and promotional material for all participants. The project was covered by all media (daily newspapers), radio stations and reports in the HRT show "More", which is certainly important for the purpose of promoting diving. Special emphasis should be placed on the exceptional interest of children who have shown great interest in accepting and learning new knowledge and skills. This has been the largest project in the Republic of Croatia so far, which contributed to the popularization of diving, but opened the possibility of bringing it closer to children, who due to high costs of equipment and course prices, did not have access to this extremely attractive sport and opportunities (Drašinac, 2007).

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# CONTRIBUTION OF THE ASSOCIATION SUNCE IN THE INTRODUCTION OF SERVICE-LEARNING IN SPLIT

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## Abstract

Service-learning programs (hereinafter: SL) on environmental protection and sustainable development developed in cooperation with the Association for Nature, Environment and Sustainable Development Sunce and partner faculties in 2016 were among the first in Croatia. Although the Association Sunce has been actively implementing SL projects and activities for high school students since 2013, programs for students have been developed since 2016. In the implementation of the SL program, special attention was paid to the results in relation to student education, but also to achieving the goals of environmental protection and sustainable development in the local community. Additional attention is focused on challenges and possible solutions. Experiences and guidelines for the design and implementation of the program were mainly gained from international examples, mostly in cooperation with German partners. The activities of the Association Sunce included numerous workshops for students of different faculties of the University of Split on various topics (introductory, motivational and group reflections and thematic workshops), design and implementation of student projects, development of SL website and organization of an international conference on SL and education for the environment and sustainable development in Croatia.

**Keywords:** service-learning, sustainable development, environmental protection, local community.

## 1. SERVICE-LEARNING - CONNECTING LEARNING WITH SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

### 1.1. Service-learning and students practice as models of student education and connections with higher education institution

In addition to the need for greater influence and encouraging the active involvement of young people, together with volunteering programs, service-learning and the organization of students practice in cooperation with individual faculties has been proven as an excellent model. The basic idea of service-learning is to connect theoretical teaching content with practical work in non-profit organizations.

Service-learning is always linked to education and must be based on the curriculum and the idea of working for the common good. This is how it differs from other extracurricular volunteer activities, as well as from mandatory student's practice. Namely, in volunteer work the focus is on the common good, but there is a lack of connection with the curriculum. Student's practice is related to the curriculum, but it lacks the idea of the common good, to be specific it lacks focus of students on voluntary, non-profit engagement.

## 1.2. Service-learning in higher education institutions

The basic idea of the service-learning model is to connect theoretical teaching contents with practical work in non-profit organizations. Through the participation of a higher education institution in service-learning projects, students take responsibility for the implementation of the project outside their institution and engage in the local community.

The essence of service-learning is the connection of scientific teaching contents (learning) with useful work (service), i.e. learning and developing competencies through civic engagement. Therefore, in service-learning projects there is a close connection between curricular content and practical work in a partner organization. Engagement in a non-profit organization/institution helps students to better understand real opportunities and to easier understand and adopt theoretical content.

Service-learning projects in higher education institutions contain two components: 1) a regular topic scientifically deals with a certain topic (learning component) 2) students practically apply the theory in a non-profit area, eg in a non-profit organization (social benefit component). (University of Mannheim, 2022)

Since 2015, the Association Sunce has prepared and organized the implementation of several service-learning programs in cooperation with five faculties in Split: Faculty of Economics, Business and Tourism, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Split, Faculty of Chemistry and Technology, Faculty of Law, University Department of Marine Studies and with KLIPER - an institution for the education of personnel in the maritime sector. Within these programs, students focused on work on the topics of sustainable waste management, composting, sustainable tourism and public participation in nature protection.

Service-learning programs have been implemented, and are still being implemented, through several projects of the Association Sunce:

- 1) Students Learn Citizenship – Service-Learning for Nature Conservation and Environmental Protection
- 2) Responsible for Nature
- 3) Practical-Active-Together-Interdisciplinary! – Service-learning Programs for the environment and sustainable development
- 4) Preserving the Adriatic Sea Ecosystems by Active Participation of CitizenS – SEAS
- 5) Raising awareness of the role of composting.

In addition to the mentioned projects, in 2016 Association Sunce became a receiving organization for additional students practice for students of the Faculty of Economics, Business and Tourism in Split, and from the academic year 2017/2018 Sunce became a teaching base for the University Department of Marine Studies, the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Split and the Faculty of Law in Split. The aim of the teaching bases is to systematically provide opportunities to connect practice, science and research work in order to acquire specific practical knowledge, skills and competencies.

## 2. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SERVICE-LEARNING PROGRAM IN COOPERATION BETWEEN THE ASSOCIATION SUNCE AND THE FACULTIES OF THE UNIVERSITY OF SPLIT

### 2.1. Persuasive reasons for service-learning

Service-learning provides all stakeholders with a variety of benefits and positive effects. The most important reasons in favor of Service-learning are shown in the table (Sliwka, 2014):

**Table 1.:** Reasons for service-learning

Students	Higher Education Institutions	Environment / external partner
Positive effects on:	Strengthening:	Improving:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- civic engagement</li> <li>- personal development</li> <li>- leadership ability</li> <li>- project management</li> <li>- knowledge transfer</li> <li>- professional-theoretical learning</li> <li>- getting to know the profession.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- civil liability</li> <li>- knowledge exchange between higher education institutions and their environment</li> <li>- variety in college subjects</li> <li>- pictures of higher education institutions in society.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- qualities and quantities of social offers and services</li> <li>- scientific basis of the projects</li> <li>- monitoring and evaluation of projects in the social field.</li> </ul>

**Source:** Sliwka, 2014

Furthermore, service-learning as an innovative model of learning and teaching provides the university with the opportunity, in addition to the classic tasks of academic education and scientific research, to take on another important social role - the "third mission".

The social responsibility that the university shares with other public institutions is not an independent obligation, independent of education and research, but it is an integral part of the work of the university. It is the Bologna Process and the reform of studies that require thinking about forms of learning and teaching that in the context of part-time study (Mannheim, 2022).

Service-learning encourages students to do something useful for other people, the environment and society, and thus gain democratic experience. In addition, service-learning programs are closely linked to the curriculum of the subjects in which they are implemented. At the higher education level, this means that academic teaching is linked to civic engagement, that is, that the scientific content of university teaching is combined with engagement for the common good. Society has a real benefit from this, and university teaching gets a practical and experiential component. The connection between a non-profit organization and a higher education institution enables the transfer of knowledge, and the higher education institution is profiled and gains in social significance, and in the future may establish other types of cooperation. Service-learning enables students to connect theory and practice, look beyond the "edge of the book", experiential learning and the development of important skills. Finally, this model contributes to the professional competence and empowerment of students' civic engagement.

The structure of bachelor/undergraduate studies also speaks in favor of service-learning at higher education institutions. Namely, due to the shortening and modularity of study programs, students feel limited and directed, which reduces their readiness for civic engagement. To this should be added the neglect of training students for civic participation, for taking responsibility and for innovatively shaping society. The consequence of an exclusive focus on the profession during studies is a lack of insight

and ability to empathize with the social situations of students as future decision makers and responsible persons. Furthermore, the focus of study programs on theory and lack of practice affects the reduction of motivation, superficial acquisition of knowledge and neglect of the development of key competencies, which consequently results in insufficient professional skills. Given the major societal challenges, universities are expected not to retain knowledge in the “ivory tower” and are urged to take on a “third mission”, i.e. to transfer knowledge and connect with society (Badur, 2016)

## **2.2. Examples of the benefits of implementing a service-learning program**

The implementation of the service-learning program in cooperation with the Association Sunce and partner faculties has confirmed the numerous advantages of service-learning. Namely, due to various environmental problems, the importance of strengthening knowledge and skills in the fields of nature and environmental protection was recognized. Through the service-learning program, students became aware of the problems in their local community and noticed how their skills and competencies contribute to raising awareness of the local community about environmental problems. Also, the cooperation of higher education institutions and environmental non-profit organizations has led to greater inclusion of environmental education in the formal educational process of partner institutions. Association Sunce, which encouraged this cooperation, provided an interdisciplinary approach to solving environmental problems, as well as networking of students and teachers of the institutions involved. At the same time, the implemented programs enabled the expansion of the Association's influence, increased visibility and easier realization of certain goals, such as the introduction of separate waste collection in public higher education institutions.

An important factor in directing part of the activities to the organization and implementation of such programs and their contribution is to strengthen the organizational and professional capacity of the Association. Namely, cooperation with faculties strengthens the knowledge and skills of the employees and volunteers involved. At the same time, it contributes to the education of students, new young generations, potential future volunteers, associates or even employees of the Association. The faculties involved experienced cooperation with local institutions but had no previous experience in implementing service-learning programs. Gaining knowledge and experience in the implementation of the service-learning program was one of the motives for the involvement of the faculties. However, the motivation of the faculties was primarily related to the possibility of practical involvement of students and encouraging students to active civic engagement in the field of nature and environmental protection (Carev, 2020).

The results of the implementation of some of the service-learning programs of the Association Sunce can be found in the practical guide for higher education institutions and nonprofits “Participate in Sustainable Development – Understand - Provide - Formulate; Service-Learning – Including Students in Nature and Environment Protection” and part in the Proceedings of the 1<sup>st</sup> Conference in Croatia on Service-Learning at Universities, *Environmental Education and Sustainable Development*.

## **2.3. Examples of challenges in the implementation of service-learning programs**

During the implementation of service-learning programs, various implementation challenges were identified for which we found solutions and applied during the implementation of service-learning program. Challenges arose, to a greater or lesser extent, in all phases of implementation: in the planning phase, at the beginning and during the implementation, and at the end of the service-learning program. Among these challenges were the ways of organizing and implementing service-learning program, coordinating the activities of the faculties and the Association Sunce, evaluating achievements, ECTS scoring programs, self-responsibility and student motivation as well as communication between partner organizations (Spetič, 2020).

The implementation of the service-learning program should consider the necessary capacities and constraints of the Association as a non-profit implementation organization, primarily the necessary human resources for coordination and mentoring of students and the necessary material resources for the implementation of service-learning program (such as student's project costs, accompanying workshops and etc.).

Some of the identified challenges require changes in the Croatian education system. In order to increase the level of motivation, self-responsibility and active engagement of students, new content-didactic concepts are needed that would encourage young people to develop awareness of their active role in society and increase the level of knowledge, skills and motivation for engagement in the local community (Medunić-Orlić, 2020).

## **2.4. Experiences of participants in the implementation of service-learning programs**

*Service-learning is a great way to include practical work in the curriculum. Students have the opportunity to participate in real life through service-learning.*

Assoc. Ph.D. Zvezdana Popović Perković, Department of Marine Studies, University of Split

*For me, the service-learning program meant a new approach, a new challenge in the implementation of the subject, an opportunity to meet teachers from other faculties and cooperation.*

prof. Ph.D. Nediljka Vukojević Medvidović, Faculty of Chemistry and Technology, University of Split

*Participating in the program gave me an insight into a different way of working with students compared to my usual way of working in college. I will apply the adopted methods in my subjects that I teach.*

prof. Ph.D. Ladislav Vrsalović, Faculty of Chemistry and Technology, University of Split

## **3. CONTRIBUTION OF THE ASSOCIATION SUNCE TO THE INTRODUCTION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF SERVICE-LEARNING IN SPLIT**

The activities of the Association Sunce for the implementation of service-learning programs through various projects included numerous workshops (introductory, motivational, group reflections and thematic workshops) for students of different faculties of the University of Split on various topics, design and implementation of student projects, and the organization of an international conference on service-learning and education for the environment and sustainable development in Croatia.

Below are the most significant results of project activities.

### **3.1. Project “Practical-Active-Together-Interdisciplinary! – Service-Learning Programs for the Environment and Sustainable Development”**

The project was implemented in the period from 2018 to 2020 and was funded under the Operational Program “Effective Human Resources” 2014–2020 European Social Fund and co-financed by the Office for Non-Governmental Organizations of the Government of the Republic of Croatia.

#### **3.1.1. Activities and materials:**

- development of the website of the Office for Service-learning for the Environment and Sustainable Development in Split (<https://ureddkuoor.wixsite.com/split>)

- preparation and implementation of the 1<sup>st</sup> Conference on Service-Learning at Universities aimed at exchanging existing knowledge and experience on the implementation of Service-learning as well as providing an opportunity for networking of providers of service-learning programs in Croatia
- preparation and distribution of the Proceedings of the 1<sup>st</sup> Conference in Croatia on Service- Learning at Universities, *Education for the Environment and Sustainable Development* in Split.

The collection presents examples of implementing service-learning in the field of education on sustainable development. Examples of good practice contribute to the further development and promotion of this form of learning while promoting the quality and diversity of learning in Croatian and European higher education institutions.

### **3.2. Project “Students Learn Citizenship – Service-Learning for Nature Conservation and Environmental Protection”**

The project was implemented in the period from 2015 to 2018 and was funded by the German foundation Deutschen Bundesstiftung Umwelt (DBU).

#### **3.2.1. Materials:**

- A practical handbook for higher education institutions and non-profit organizations “Participate in Sustainable Development – Understanding - Implementing - Creating Service-Learning - Engagement of Students in Nature and Environmental Protection.” The manual is intended for civil society organizations and teachers of higher education institutions who intend to implement service-learning programs and contains a brief introduction to the basic aspects of service-learning as well as examples of its application in higher education institutions.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

The multi-year implementation of the service-learning program has strengthened the cooperation between the Association Sunce and higher education institutions in Split. Greater integration of the topic of environmental protection and sustainable development in the curricula of the faculties has been achieved, the interest of students, but also higher education institutions for environmental protection has been deepened, and increased involvement in the local community has increased. Furthermore, a number of concrete student projects were carried out. These projects often complement each other and lead to increased public awareness, but also the introduction of concrete and applicable solutions to achieve environmental protection. In order to continue the trend of positive change, in the coming period it is necessary to find ways to ensure the sustainability of service-learning programs.

Cooperation and partnership between the Association Sunce and higher education institutions, in various projects related to environmental protection and encouraging the active involvement of young people, is one of the ways to contribute to the sustainability of the service-learning programs. Nevertheless, systematic cooperation should certainly be encouraged among other non-profit organizations and higher education institutions to create a stable network for the practical application of students’ knowledge and skills and nurture an academic environment that encourages the strengthening of active citizenship competencies.

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# IN THE HUB OF IT ALL: DEVELOPING A SERVICE LEARNING HUB IN THE COMMUNITY

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## ABSTRACT

At Western University in London, Canada, we are developing a service-learning (SL) Hub in our city’s downtown core. Our non-profit and community-based partners dedicate considerable time and energy to supporting SL activities. However, the coordination of SL activities takes place predominantly on campus, as does classroom reflection exercises and student presentations. In addition to perpetuating a unidirectional flow of labour from ‘the university’ to ‘the community,’ a university-centred approach to SL makes it difficult for our community partners to come to campus for classes, events, and meetings. While most Canadian institutions with SL-oriented ‘hubs’ locate them on their campuses, this Hub is the first of its kind to be launched in the community. In so doing, the Hub will play an important role in decreasing barriers; in fostering reciprocal and ethical partnerships that recognize and respect the labour of community partners; and in co-developing community-engaged scholarship and practices. This talk will 1) describe the Hub (including the interdisciplinary team of faculty and staff spearheading the project); 2) provide a synopsis of successes and challenges to date; and 3) include key recommendations about best practices for developing similar hubs in other locales.

**Keywords:** service learning, centralization versus decentralization, community hub

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In early 2021, Western University, a large, research-intensive Canadian university, announced that it had bought a vacant building in London, Ontario’s downtown core.<sup>8</sup> In late November, Western’s upper administration circulated a communiqué to the university’s deans and unit heads, seeking submissions for use of the 30,000 square foot (above ground) space. This call for proposals included little in the way of guidelines save for the administration’s “high-level objective” of wanting the facility “to engage/collaborate with the city, to provide programming, services, and educational opportunities for the London community, to provide opportunities for Western’s students to experience the city and the opportunities it provides in the form of work-integrated learning, and to highlight the result of our scholarship/research through public symposiums/lectures.” In response to the call, which was due in February 2022, a small interdisciplinary team of faculty and staff members crafted a submission to develop a Community Engaged Learning Hub with the goal of fostering deeper relationships with community partners and bringing student learning to life off-campus.

Western has chosen to use the term community engaged learning (CEL) to describe its service learning (SL) or community service learning (CSL) activities. These analogous terms refer to a praxis-oriented pedagogy that sees students engaging in projects developed collaboratively with community partners for mutually beneficial outcomes (Western University, 2019). For the purposes of this paper, I

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<sup>8</sup> Home to approximately 425,000 citizens, London is located roughly half-way between Toronto, Ontario and Detroit, Michigan.

will refer to this community-focused, hands-on pedagogy as SL to align with the term more commonly used in European higher education but will preserve the title of the CEL Hub.

As is the case in other Canadian and international locales, non-profit and community-based organizations dedicate considerable time and energy to supporting our university's SL activities. However, the development and coordination of SL takes place predominantly on campus, as do classroom reflection exercises and student presentations. In addition to perpetuating a unidirectional flow of labour from 'the university' to 'the community,' a university-centred approach to SL can make it difficult for community partners to come to campus for classes, events, and meetings. It also impacts the capacity of many community partners to collaborate with students, to engage in discussions about project goals, to participate in group reflections, and to collectively brainstorm solutions to society's 'wicked' problems (Aujla & Hamm, 2018; Kepkiewicz et al., 2018; Sgoutas-Emch & Guerrieri, 2020). Our intention is for Western's nascent CEL Hub to help diminish these barriers and to foster reciprocal, ethical partnerships that recognize the labour of community partners as co-educators. To this end, while most Canadian institutions with SL centres locate them on their respective campuses, this Hub will be launched *in* the community and guided by a Steering Committee composed of a wide range of stakeholders from within and beyond the university.

In the discussion that follows, I will first describe the CEL Hub, slated to open in Fall 2023, within the context of critical SL literature. Second, I will critically examine the role this type of Hub can play in striking a balance between centralization versus decentralization SL models. Third, I will offer some preliminary recommendations about wise practices for developing similar hubs in other locales.

## 2. BACKGROUND CONTEXT

### 2.1 The Nascent CEL Hub

In March 2022, our team's CEL Hub proposal was awarded 1,500 square feet for SL activities in the new downtown facility, as well as access to shared classrooms, event space, and a community café.<sup>9</sup> The team leading the project is composed of two faculty members from the Faculty of Information and Media Studies, one faculty member from the Schulich School of Medicine and Dentistry, and two senior staff members from the Careers and Experience department with expertise in experiential learning (EL). Our final proposal submission included official expressions of support from an additional 42 faculty members (representing all 11 faculties at our university), the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, 5 staff support units, the University Students' Council, and 10 community partners.

In brief, the overarching objective for the CEL Hub is to proactively address the commitment made in our university's 2021 Strategic Plan, *Towards Western at 150*, to: 1) ensure that every "student is able to graduate having had at least one intense opportunity for experiential learning"; 2) "focus on multiplying the avenues students have to pursue a broad array of experiential learning opportunities"; and 3) "make Western a more visible part of London's downtown and to strengthen our partnership with the City of London" (Western University, 2021, p. 13). As is the case in many other universities, faculty and staff members from across the disciplines at Western are independently engaged in a wide range of SL activities with myriad community partners. We intend for the Hub to help us break out of these silos and encourage cross-pollination by making what we do visible to ourselves, to our communities, and to our students. As a snapshot of the regional higher education terrain, the province of Ontario has a population of just under 15 million (Ontario Government, 2022a) and is home to 22 publicly-funded universities (Ontario Government, 2022b). According to primary research conducted for this paper (in

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<sup>9</sup> As the Hub is still in the planning stages, the definitive composition of the spaces remain in development and the extent of financial and human resources are under negotiation.

April 2022), 17 of these universities house some type of centralized SL office. Of these offices, 13 are located directly on their university campus, 3 are in a locale adjacent to the university (e.g., in a research park), and none are currently located in the community/city. The CEL Hub described here will therefore be the first of its kind in the province.

To ensure the spaces in the Hub are animated, in continual use by a wide range of stakeholders, and proactively advance community-university relationships, it will be guided by the Steering Committee noted above, with a commitment to equity, diversity, and Indigenous representation, and coordinated by a SL Community Facilitator. The Hub will include office space for the Facilitator as well as for a Community Partner in Residence. The latter will be selected by the Steering Committee to act as an ambassador for SL in our city by supporting local partners seeking to collaborate with Western, mentoring students interested in careers and volunteerism with the non-profit sector, and speaking in SL classes and relevant workshops. These remunerated positions are essential for the long-term success of the Hub because, too often, universities prioritize building physical infrastructures over building communities (Newfield, 2018). We simply cannot expect to 'build it and they will come.'

Unfortunately, the pandemic has negatively impacted large swathes of the non-profit sector throughout Canada. Organizations have borne the brunt of dwindling resources (e.g., diminished donor support and fundraising opportunities); increased needs in their local communities; staff/volunteer turnover, burnout, and health-related absences; and, in the case of Ontario, a housing crisis (Dubb, 2021; Lasby, 2021). Thus, SL-specific meeting spaces in the Hub will be earmarked for community organizations that have had to relinquish some or all of their physical locations. Additionally, the Hub will be home to a Community-University Interactive Partnership Directory to better connect individuals and groups involved in SL both on- and off-campus, as well as an accessible computer terminal for community partners to retrieve materials from our university's libraries (a request we frequently receive as scholarly materials are often unavailable behind a paywall).

## **2.2 SL at Western**

To illustrate the scope of SL at Western, in 2020 - during the height of the pandemic - 36.1% of graduating undergraduate students engaged in some type of curricular SL experience. In excess of 2,700 undergraduate and graduate students participate in SL annually, and SL activities take place in every faculty at our university at both the undergraduate and graduate level. In direct response to the Strategic Plan noted above, combined with swelling student interest and provincial government exigencies, there is strong reason to believe that we will see continued growth in SL across the disciplines. Indeed, the Ontario provincial government continues to pressure publicly funded universities to expand their EL offerings, indicating that funding will be tied to demonstrations of EL success. However, these governmental expectations revolve almost exclusively around employment metrics geared towards students' success in the labour market post-graduation (Levac, 2020; McGowan, 2021; Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities, 2020; Smeltzer et al., 2022). As a result, most institutions of higher education, including Western, have placed EL at the forefront of their strategic plans (Sperduti & Smeltzer, 2022; Western University, 2021).

Further, we know that many of our community partners have struggled to remain solvent as a result of the pandemic. Many of these organizations have contacted us to inquire how Western can help support their work, though others have declined to accept SL students at this point in time for many reasons, most commonly out of concern that they do not have the human resources to provide appropriate mentorship. Another reason why we expect SL to expand post-pandemic is because students, many of whom themselves have struggled financially, emotionally, and physically because of COVID-19, want to be of service to their fellow citizens who have weathered the pandemic storm (Spengemann,

2021). We thus expect that by 2023, over half of Western’s students will have participated in some type of intense SL experience and that the CEL Hub will play a critical role in supporting this expansion. Importantly though, as SL expands in both size and scope, we must proactively consider how, by whom, and to what ends it is coordinated, facilitated, and evaluated. In the next section, I will consider some of the benefits and drawbacks to how SL might be institutionalized within the university.

### 3. INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF SL: CENTRALIZATION AND/OR DECENTRALIZATION?

#### 3.1. Centralization of SL

As we know, SL is remarkably labour-intensive to facilitate. First, SL must be developed and executed in conjunction with community partners as collaborators and co-educators. These trust-based relationships take time to develop and nurture. Second, SL placements must be thoughtfully intertwined with relevant curriculum; theory informs practice, and ‘real life’ experiences provide students with greater understanding of what they learn in the classroom. Third, students must engage in meaningful activities during their SL experience and be provided with continuous mentorship and support from their university throughout the process. Fourth, in-depth and authentic reflection should, by all accounts, serve as the bedrock of SL endeavours. One-on-one and class-based reflection practices provide students with tools and dedicated space to help them interrogate their relationship with systemic forms of inequities and can play a critical role in fostering students’ personal agency. Workloads also include additional logistical components (e.g., risk management), student evaluation, and safeguarding students’ mental health and well-being. Importantly, much of this labour is hidden care work, which has notable gender and racialized implications (Levac, 2020; Martin et al., 2017).

Thus, one of the strongest arguments to be made for the centralization of SL is that it not only raises greater awareness of the importance of SL, but also the time, energy, and expertise needed to facilitate it in an ethical manner. Leveraging this visibility for additional resources from upper administrations can help ensure that SL is, indeed, appropriately supported (Briggs, 2018; Heras-Colàs et al., 2017). Alongside a commitment to providing the human resources essential to enabling ethical forms of SL, university administrations must also make publicly visible their *political* support (e.g., via strategic plans and mission statements, on institutional websites, through donor communiqués). The content of this public material is critically important – it must include assurance that the university is dedicated to fostering principled forms of SL and that it recognizes the labour required to develop meaningful partnerships (Aujla & Hamm, 2018; Kepkiewicz et al., 2018; Sgoutas-Emch & Guerrieri, 2020).

Another key benefit of centralizing SL is that it provides a one stop shop for community partners, faculty, staff, and students to access information about potential and existing collaborators. In my role as a faculty member coordinating fourth-year SL placements for our Media and the Public Interest program, I often hear from community partners that they are regularly contacted by other faculty and staff members from a range of on-campus units about student placements. With the large number of university-affiliated personnel looking to coordinate SL with local organizations, it is often easier for community partners to have one point of contact in the form of an SL office to coordinate the process (Elias-Cartwright, 2021, p. 128). This is also important to mitigate against potential siloing and territorialism of SL across campuses, which can deter cooperation and collegiality. A 2016 Strategic Renewal document produced by the University of Guelph, a Canadian institution with a strong SL record, includes several quotes from on-campus EL stakeholders highlighting the drawbacks of such internal competition. As a salient case in point, one participant expressed concern that the university has, “a decentralized culture that makes it very difficult for administrators to make bold moves. We’re

very entrenched in holding on to our pieces of the pie and it's very difficult to see that strategically..." (University of Guelph, 2016, p. 85). Another participant commented that the university's "decentralized culture promotes uniqueness among our many departments and units. However, this reality also has the tendency to promote siloing throughout our community, which can result in duplication of effort; mixed messaging; and miscommunication" (University of Guelph, 2016, p. 85).

In a similar vein, members of our university community at Western are often not aware of the wide range of SL possibilities within our city and surrounding area, and a centralized database/directory/office can play a valuable role in connecting groups and individuals. Moreover, departments, schools, programs, and faculties might not have the in-house expertise, personnel, or finances needed to manage the content and/or logistics of SL activities. Some academic units may also be faced with a lack of administrative political will and/or have faculty members who are opposed to SL for a range of reasons. These include, but are not limited to, concerns that any form of EL, including SL, can serve to undermine the scholarly mission of the academy; is not accessible to many students for a range of intersectional reasons; encourages students to view themselves as neoliberal subjects; and can replace entry-level employment positions, which is especially problematic for the non-profit sector. These concerns are well-founded given that for regional/provincial/state- and federal-level governments, EL revolves primarily – and sometimes almost exclusively - around post-graduation employment rates (Smeltzer & Sperduti, 2022). However, by centralizing SL, not only are there greater opportunities for it to be properly resourced by upper administrations, but more attention can be paid to ensuring that supports are in place to proactively support faculty and staff members in their roles, and in communicating (internally and externally) the potential benefits of SL endeavours.

### **3.2 Decentralization of SL**

In addition to in-depth reflection being a cornerstone of SL endeavours, this community-focused pedagogy must entwine practice with relevant, disciplinary-specific theory (Brunet et al., 2020; Heras-Colàs et al., 2017). However, critical interrogations of the connection between theory and practice necessitate the involvement of an instructor with knowledge of pertinent scholarship to guide, support, and evaluate students throughout their in situ placements (Smeltzer et al., 2021, p. 467). Although staff members working in centralized offices usually possess relevant SL expertise and experience, as well as a commitment to ethical practices (which is certainly true at my university), they may not be versed in disciplinary nuances or in department/school/program-level issues that can impact how SL is operationalized on the ground. These issues go beyond theoretical relevance and speak to internal, cultural environments that necessitate an intimate understanding of the local terrain. The point here is that, as we know, one size does not fit all for how SL is imbricated in the academy (Buzzelli & Asafo-Adjei, 2022; Ribeiro et al., 2021), and a decentralized model of SL can allow for multilayered idiosyncrasies.

Although this is not always the case at, or even within, different institutions, a decentralized model may also empower academic units responsible for hiring, performance evaluation, and teaching responsibilities to more formally recognize the workload accompanying SL undertakings. With the agency to hire and reward individuals who engage in SL, its labour-intensive nature can be both recognized and remunerated. As well, class sizes, which are usually coordinated at a faculty or department level, can be capped at manageable levels. A reasonable faculty-to-student ratio affords instructors the time and energy needed to develop projects with community partners, to facilitate in-depth reflection exercises, and to tend to students' mental health and well-being (Smeltzer & Sperduti, 2022). A decentralized model can also help to mitigate against overburdening precarious faculty and staff members, many of whom may have been negatively impacted by the pandemic (Chattopadhyay & Pandit, 2021). Indeed, the answer to the demanding workload of SL is not to assign 'cheaper' labour to fulfill responsibilities or to require individuals without employment protection to perform demanding duties without

the support needed to safeguard their welfare (Smeltzer et al., 2021, p. 479). Of course, all of this is *very* context-specific. In my faculty, for instance, our Dean's Office sees first-hand not only the importance of SL pursuits but also the accompanying workload. It is thus easier for me to advocate for smaller class sizes than may be the case for colleagues working in different milieus. Moreover, as a tenured faculty member, I am in the position to help protect the labour of my SL colleagues who are pre-tenure, on contract, or otherwise precariously employed.

I am also in a privileged position inasmuch as I have chosen to maintain direct control over the SL community relationships I have nurtured over the course of many years. While I recognize the value of a centralized database of university-community partnerships, I am not keen to add my own information to the catalogue depending on how it is shared with and used by others. This perhaps sounds rather territorial and flies in the face of some of the concerns mentioned above, but community collaborations are built on a foundation of trust and the individuals with whom I work want to know that I am *personally* committed to SL as a mutually beneficial, reciprocal process. Additionally, they want to know that they can reach out to me at any point before, during, or after a placement to discuss anything.

Further, I worry that if SL is too centralized, faculty members who question the 'value' of SL may completely disengage with conversations about it, let alone participate in it, because it has been subsumed by 'upper administration.' Lastly, I express concern about how institutions might strategically use SL for instrumental purposes. I do not want any form of EL, *especially* SL, to be transactional; its purpose is not to benefit the "kind face" of a university's public relations campaign (Raddon & Harrison, 2015). Nor should SL be used to fulfil utilitarian, neoliberal metrics, which can "subvert the critical consciousness of university pedagogy and curriculum" (Buzzelli, & Asafo-Adjei, 2022, n.p.), or to reinforce existing power hierarchies within and beyond one's campus (Sgoutas-Emch & Guerrieri, 2020). Rather, as described in the next section, SL must be developed, operationalized, and evaluated within the broader ethos of universities serving the public interest.

#### **4. BALANCING BOTH WITH AN EYE TO BROADER SOCIETAL IMPORT**

I believe that the principal goal of SL is, as the European Association of Service-Learning in Higher Education (2020) posits, to "reorientate higher education towards building a more equitable and sustainable society" (p. 5). This philosophy is reflected in the burgeoning Paradigm Project being developed by the Bringing Theory to Practice team based out of Elon University: "We envision an academy that is equal to the challenges faced by our society, our democracy, and our planet, and that educates people with the skills, creativity, curiosity, empathy, and daring to meet them" (Scobey, 2022, p. 1). In other words, SL can provide students with an opportunity to engage in deep, meaningful, and collaborative learning by critically combining theory and practice. It can also play an important role in fostering students as engaged citizens with the skills and agency to help make a positive difference in their respective communities and to foment a more just society (Cattaneo et al. 2021; Connell, 2019; Grain & Lund, 2018; Heras-Colàs et al., 2017; Resch, 2018; Sgoutas-Emch & Guerrieri, 2020). By focusing on what is in the best interest of society writ large, attention can thus be centered on developing and sustaining SL programming geared explicitly towards "societal change and not only on skill-set practice" (Ribeiro et al., 2021, p. 7; see also Castleden et al., 2013; Grain & Lund, 2018; Sperduti & Smeltzer, 2022). At its core, this commitment to action/reflection embodies Paulo Freire's conception of conscientization; critical consciousness and learning that requires action through a collaborative commitment to addressing community needs (Freire, 2021).

From my vantage point, it is therefore not a matter of SL being centralized or decentralized. Rather, universities need to find the right balance between the two so as to capitalize on the benefits of both with the recognition that institutionalization is not equivalent to centralization. This perspective aligns

with Sharon Rubin’s (2014) description of the fourth of four dominant administrative models for how EL can be institutionalized in universities. Essentially, Rubin argues that a balanced approach is becoming increasingly popular because it, “involves centralized coordination and support combined with departmental control of credited programs and courses” (p. 166). A participant in the University of Guelph study (referenced above) concurs: “In terms of community engagement of students in both teaching and service, I think that is one of our strengths and things that we’re really recognized for... how we support our staff and faculty to create those connections... it’s easier to do that when it’s decentralized but it would be helpful to have a way to support it in a centralized way. To have a vision that starts in the centre and is able to be implemented in different ways...” (22). It also corresponds with results derived from Elias-Cartwright’s (2021) Ontario-based doctoral research: “The example of EL Hubs speaks to institutional approaches of creating centralized supports that work with decentralized structures. This provides university administrators with a means to drive coordination and effectiveness, without changing the structure and culture of institutions” (p. 130).

A balanced approach allows for the workload to be divvied up to best make use of the expertise, experience, and capacities of different individuals and units on one’s campus. Once again, this is very context-specific in terms of where the centralized components are located (e.g., under a student affairs or an academic affairs portfolio) and what individuals envision for the future of their SL activities. In my case, for example, I do not seek assistance for integrating relevant theory or for managing my community partner relationships. However, I welcome advice about risk management and resources to help me best approach issues of equity, diversity, inclusion, and decolonization (especially as a Caucasian, cis-gender, heterosexual, settler). Although I have some training in these areas, I know that I am not aware of many other approaches and would likely benefit from being introduced to different methods.

My blind spots were made clear to me in my role serving on our university’s inaugural EL taskforce and on its subcommittee to establish EL titles, definitions, and descriptions, as well as in my role as a Teaching Fellow (with a focus on EL) for our Centre for Teaching and Learning. Although I have facilitated SL for many years in my faculty, I was not aware of a wide range of reflection exercises, risk assessment mechanisms, or alternative evaluation processes. I have started to address these personal gaps more intentionally through our university’s Community Engaged Learning Community of Practice, which was developed several years ago to gather together the growing number of faculty and staff engaged in SL. This community meets quarterly to share resources, participate in workshops, listen to guest speakers, and to chat across disciplinary lines. Some of these colleagues similarly seek specific centralized resources, others want more general guidance, and still others do not require any assistance and are members of the group for the comradery and/or want to share wise practices with their peers. Importantly, providing the *option* of central support is, I believe, especially vital for individuals new to SL, new to the university, and/or new to their position.

## **5. POTENTIAL ADVANTAGES AND CHALLENGES OF A COMMUNITY-BASED HUB AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WISE PRACTICES**

As I have argued in this paper, a community-based hub can help cultivate and sustain reciprocal conversations aimed at responding to the needs of the community rather than focusing predominantly on those of the university. Additionally, although it is certainly not always the case, community partners are (quite understandably) often unaware of what SL entails and how it differs from other types of curricular and co-curricular experiential education. The array of terminology (e.g., co-op, practicum, internship) and associated descriptions of SL can compound this confusion (Smeltzer et al., 2021), as can the multitude of academic and staff units on a campus engaged in SL. Our CEL Hub can hopefully respond to these challenges by opening up more productive lines of communication, which is especially

important given the regular turnover of personnel in many of London's 1,200+ non-profit and community-based organizations.

These kinds of hubs are, of course, context specific. What might work in my Canadian city of under half a million citizens and for a large, public university may not be appropriate in other environments for a range of socio-political, cultural, and economic reasons. However, some key elements are transferable to other locales. Unquestionably, the process needs to be deeply consultative right from the beginning – with all stakeholders, including community partners; undergraduate and graduate students; university staff, faculty, and administrators; and local government representatives as appropriate. Not surprisingly, time and resources are essential to ensure that a hub does not become a ‘build it and let it sit’ building. In Canada, the rapid expansion of EL/SL in higher education over the past several years has not always been matched with the time necessary to thoughtfully integrate it into respective institutions. Concomitantly, as SL programs grow in size and scope, they need to be rolled out with sustainability in mind and with appropriate methods of evaluation (Livingstone, 2011). Although the Steering Committee will engage in annual evaluations of our CEL Hub, I worry that their report will still need to pass muster with a university administration that provides the bulk of financial support. Monetary aid cannot be tied solely to the university's expectancies, or the Hub runs the risk of revivifying an inequitable relationship with local communities.

Simply put, for our embryonic CEL Hub to be successful, it must strike the right balance between centralization and decentralization. On the one hand, to ensure its viability the Hub needs significant im/material resources from our administration for its development, establishment, and long-term maintenance. On the other hand, I worry that the Hub could run the risk of legitimizing the over-centralization of SL activities. I believe our CEL Hub will be successful in large part because I trust the intentions and capabilities of our university's central SL staff and their desire to consult widely and to share responsibilities with interested parties both on- and off-campus. They also know that SL does not magically transpire with the guidance of a few staff members working in an on-campus office. Rather, it takes time, patience, and widespread buy-in.

## 5.1 Time

Time in academia is a strange beast. Sometimes, things feel painfully slow (e.g., the final weeks of a long semester, waiting for a chapter to be published), while other things present as remarkably fast (e.g., syllabi due dates, grade submission deadlines). The call for proposals to utilize our university's newly acquired building was fast and furious, and announced during a particularly difficult point in the pandemic (made more challenging given that every member of the submission team has school-aged children at home). It also seemed rather surreal to write a proposal for what we all expected to be ‘normal times’ post-pandemic, knowing that SL would shift and expand in the aftermath of COVID-19. Nevertheless, we appreciated the opportunity to pitch a bold idea to our administration which, to their credit, wanted use of the facility to be determined by a broader community of stakeholders.

In the months ahead, plans will quickly be put into place, tenants will start moving into the building, the Steering Committee will be struck, and new SL job positions filled. Yet, SL itself takes *time* and cannot be rushed to fulfil quotas or appease metrics. Instead, I consider SL as a cherished family recipe; to make it work, all of the flavours must carefully come together to produce something to be shared by others sitting as equals at the communal table.

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# TANGIBLE AND INTANGIBLE SIGNIFICANT OTHER(S) IN THE PROCESS OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

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## ABSTRACT

Paper presents the current rich and multifaceted experience of cooperation between the academic community and the NGO sector in Rijeka in implementing SL pedagogy method at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Rijeka. Paper discusses specific features coming from course “Gender, sexuality, identities - from oppression to equality” synergising the academic and activist approach. A new curriculum co-created in true partnership between relevant actors is unique in comparison to other Croatian universities, with the specific role of CSOs in educating students as future active and gender-aware participants in their professional fields. Conceptualising and accommodating the variety of (key) gender theory approaches with active involvement of students in the co-creation of tasks brought to deeper awareness of students about numerous social problems related to course topics. Course in-depth qualitative evaluation brings out mentoring support as a crucial dimension in contributing to students’ empowerment with a clear sense of their own growing social responsibility. Transfer of knowledge is seen through students’ active enrolment in their microsphere with fellow friends and family members, for example awakened strong sense of breaking prejudices among them.

**Keywords:** Service Learning method, Transformative learning, Mentoring support of CSOs

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As a pedagogical method that integrates community service with the academic community, this paper is focused on presenting experience in implementing SL method at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Rijeka (Croatia), synergising the academic and activist approach. In creating and delivering the course “Gender, Sexuality, Identities - from Oppression to Equality”, a new curriculum is co-created in partnership with academic community and three civil society organizations (in further text: CSOs<sup>10</sup>). The literature explains “service-learning” in various ways so while some educators described it as a new term that reveals an innovative and pedagogical approach for more effective teaching, others see it as a well-established experiential education program (Furco, 1996). SL method in this case is taken as a reciprocal and well-balanced relationship in which students got involved in productive activities while experiencing cognitive and behavioural transformation in terms of their attitudes and beliefs.

Collaboration presented in this paper evolves from EU-funded project “Humane Education – Responsible Society” which started in 2018 mutually conducted by Lesbian Organisation Rijeka -LORI, Human Rights and Civic Participation Association „PaRiter“, SOS Rijeka – Centre for Nonviolence and Human Rights and Centre for Women’s Studies of Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Rijeka. With the premise that higher education institutions need to prepare students for the labour

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<sup>10</sup> Lesbian Organisation Rijeka -LORI, Human Rights and Civic Participation Association „PaRiter“, SOS Rijeka – Centre for Non-violence and Human Rights

market, this project aimed to develop specific knowledge and skills of students at University in Rijeka to work in the field of gender equality and related human rights. Among project partners, there were researchers, university professors and professionals from CSOs gathered around a common goal - educating students as future active and gender-aware participants in their professional fields. Partners in this project broadened the understanding of SL as both a method and partnership through which students are encouraged to be proactive members of their community by contributing to a range of relevant community service activities (Ćulum et al., 2021). Connection between partners provides a dynamic opportunity to strengthen student learning in a powerful context where students gain first-hand experience (Naidoo and Devnarain, 2009), as within this new course, on social and cultural issues. Further, it was a way of connecting students with the local community in solving social problems linked with homophobia, gender-based violence, discrimination, etc.

In addition to course implementation, all partners were engaged in one-year pre-filed preparation and were included through the whole process of planning and delivering SL course. The SL course delivered under the HOOD project took place during the academic year 2019–2020, and afterward, after project was finished, the course continued in academic year 2020–2021 and 2021–2022.

After the first year of implementation course in-depth qualitative evaluation brought out mentoring support as a crucial dimension in contributing to students' empowerment and motivation for future active participation in filed related to course topic.

To contribute to a better understanding of the specific aspects of conducting course based on service learning method from CSOs perspective, in this paper we discuss:

#### CSOs role in delivering SL course

Development of course curriculum based on SL method in true partnership between 3 CSOs and Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Rijeka;

Students SL experience and transformative learning in terms of personal and professional growth after participating on the course 'Gender, sexuality, identities - from oppression to equality in academic year 2019-2020.

## 2. CSO(s) Role in Delivering SL Course

There are several types of collaboration based on the degree to which each party is involved in the collaborative process (Ross et al., 2003). Beside *low* one<sup>11</sup> and *medium* one<sup>12</sup>, regarding course “Gender, Sexuality, Identities - from Oppression to Equality”, identified type of collaboration on this basis can be described as *high*. It means both the academic and the third-sector partner were significantly engaged in partnership (Ross et al., 2003). In joint working between academics and CSO(s) some authors emphasize the advantages of working collaboratively to ensure the best use of resources to achieve positive change. Some of the practices show that to make collaboration successful it should occur throughout whole process - from identification or mapping a problem through to completion of final activities or reports (Schoen et al., 2017). Our SL course started as part of two years project that included multi-year project planning with secured financial funds and very bonding cross-sectoral cooperation. All project partners collaborated on several smaller-scale programs and activities before project started which build trust among higher education institutions and partners in community. Also, for creating this course it is important to emphasize highly motivated team members in pioneering SL method in

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11 It means that academic leads whole process and the third-sector partner endorses and provides legitimacy for the evidence (Ross et al. 2003).

12 It means that academic starts and designs the project and the third-sector partner is included by providing ideas and information and tactical advice (Ross et al. 2003).

regard to gender equality and related human rights topics. As SL was first introduced in Croatia in 2006 through to different Croatian universities, schools and CSOs, and later in 2008-2009 to some faculties at the University of Rijeka (Preradović et al., 2013), it was still a relatively unknown teaching method in 2018 so partners firstly need to overcome SL method challenges.

*Pre-field* preparation was crucial and considered extremely important in delivering a new curriculum. In more than a year of preparation, partners established a working-advisory group that included university professors and different experts from local CSOs in domain of human rights. This multidisciplinary group helped in establishing a course description accommodating the variety of (key) gender theory approaches. This part of the process also included education and capacity building of employees of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Rijeka and CSOs for implementation of SL method and compliance with administrative procedures of University. After institutional support was given for implementing new course with SL method, partners turned to delivering process.

In providing this pedagogy method benefits for partners were mutual. Faculty gain benefits in terms of new curriculum being designed in more real-context frame nurturing also university civil mission (University of Rijeka – Strategy 2014-2020). The CSOs had an opportunity to collaborate with students and include them in existing activities gaining new ideas or insight on some problem-solving. Furthermore, engaging students in CSOs also means organisations' capacity building. Our experience shows that students are more active in field of human rights after finishing this course and some of them decided to volunteer or even participate in seminars in partner organisations to build up their skills even more.

## **2.1. Gender, Sexuality, Identities - from Oppression to Equality**

In the winter semester of the academic year 2019-2020 at the Faculty of Humanities and social Sciences the course “Gender, Sexuality and Identities - from Oppression to Equality”<sup>13</sup> was launched for first time.

The one-semester course enabled students to get acquainted with human rights topics, LGBTIQ topics, gender equality, gender-based violence, and feminist and gender theory, using SL method. The course combines lectures at the Department of Cultural Studies of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Rijeka with a series of lectures and workshops that take place in the partner organisations LORI, PaRiter and SOS Rijeka. During the 2019–2020 the maximum enrolment quota of 12 students has been met, (11 students passed course), in academic year 2020–2021 during COVID-19 there were 8 students enrolled and 9 in 2021-2022. Students joined from different faculty units of University of Rijeka which was also a novelty and a challenge to address because of their different knowledge background.

As service-learning programs are distinguished from other approaches (Furco, 2011), in this case, experiential learning process was guaranteed throughout mentoring programmes in 3 CSOs linked with theory on faculty. Mentoring programmes provided a platform where students could engage in more intensive and deeper connection with the local community, motivating them to take action. Course assignments and activities were designed to provide a deeper insight into societal problems, such as gender-based violence and/or homophobia, with an interactive approach.

The objectives of the course are fourfold and they were elaborated among 3 CSOs and the academic community:

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<sup>13</sup> It is elective, communitis with 3 ECTS credits. Course is offered to MA students of University of Rijeka (graduate years of University of Rijeka or students enrolled in 4th or 5th year of integrated university programmes). Course is part of MA study program of Cultural Studies in Rijeka.

First one is to introduce students to field of gender studies;

Second one is to allow them to emerge questions in the field and apply acquired theoretical knowledge through practical engagement in civil society organisations. It is expected, in this way, to enhance the knowledge and skills of students required for active civic participation in areas related to the content of the course;

Third one is to strengthen the capacities of civil society organisations to act on a broadly defined gender equality sphere by engaging students;

Fourth, course serves as a platform for interaction between the University of Rijeka and the local community.

The methodology of the course enabled students to work on additional skills while making radio shows, organising exhibition, holding lectures for high school students, advocating for combating homo/transphobia in schools, making storytelling videos or organising quiz for youth in local community. With a combination of practice, course includes an interdisciplinary scientific field of gender studies and students are acquainted with the basic terminology of the field (understanding terms such as gender, sex, gender role, sexual orientation, human rights; their scientific foundation, genesis and critical reflection on the terminology; problem knots that the gender theory deals with from different theoretical points of view (problem of discrimination based on gender orientation and / or gender, gender-based violence, feminist theories, critical theory; a specific teaching method (service learning) in which the synergy of the theoretical and practical part of the course is necessary.<sup>14</sup>

A significant part of this course are also tasks of a reflective nature that 'encourages' students to go into deeper analysis of social phenomena presented at course. Reflection serves as a great tool in attaining meaning from one's service experience and methods of documenting one's progress. So after each lecture or exercise finished students would also fulfil their diary answering on several reflective questions.

For most of the students engaged in this course it was a first-time-ever SL experience<sup>15</sup> but for some of them, as they stated in final evaluation report, also a life changing experience.

## 2.2. Mentoring Support of CSOs

The students had the opportunity to participate in different mentoring programmes designed for them by three CSOs LORI, PaRiter and SOS Rijeka, which relate to the theoretical part of the course.

In the academic year 2019-2020, LORI provided 2 mentoring programmes, both in the field of combating homo/bi/transphobia in the education system. Students could choose if they wanted to participate in the educational activities (by holding lectures for high school students on LGBTIQ topics), or in advocacy activities (by preparing an advocacy strategy on homophobia in schools and presenting it to the Ombudsman for Children in Rijeka. Two mentoring programs in PaRiter dealt with the topic of gender-based violence and comprehensive sexual education, and the final activity was the production of two radio shows. Through these programs, students were introduced to gender stereotypes and socio-cultural patriarchal norms. Two radio shows were recorded and broadcast on local radio as part of the regular show Radioactive. Through mentoring program in SOS Rijeka they worked on deconstructing myths about gender-based violence, which resulted by organizing an exhibition for students and the public "Comments with Comments".

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<sup>14</sup> Course description available at: [https://www.ffri.uniri.hr/files/studijскиprogrami/2019-2020/KULT-program\\_dipl-2019\\_2020\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.ffri.uniri.hr/files/studijскиprogrami/2019-2020/KULT-program_dipl-2019_2020_ENG.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Research on similar experiences see also at Klemenčič, M., Bergan, S., Primožič, R. (2015). *Student Engagement in Europe: Society, Higher Education and Student Governance*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Higher Education Series

In the next academic years, after project ended, partners continued to collaborate. Mentoring programmes were re-designed jointly by all 3 CSOs, adopting it to online lecture model and/or other needed conditions. Students had one final assignment such as to create educational videos related to the course topics (2020-2021) and organize a quiz for youth in local community (2021- 2022). The preparations for new tasks included several meetings of mentors from 3CSOs, and adaptation of programme and it required expertise in delivering content to prepare students for final tasks. With great communication between CSOs and academic staff, all deadlines and schedules regarding intutional frames were fulfilled.

### **3. EVALUATION ON SL COURSE SATISFACTION**

To improve the existing practice for the next academic years, a course evaluation was conducted in 2020 with the first generation of students and all 11 students participated. The evaluation of 1st generation was conducted in 2 phases (focus group and questionnaire) and it was an overview of the most important aspects of the course in the context of course structure, learning methods, quality of mentoring programs, etc. The results showed an exceptional contribution to students' personal growth and to the development of their professional interests.

#### **3.1. Students' Experiences of SL Course and Transformative Learning**

In general, the course contributed to students' deeper awareness of many societal problems related to gender inequality, the social position of women, the presence of homo/bi /transphobia in society, etc., and the course evaluation showed acquired knowledge that students transferred to their friends and family members. Regarding the methodology of the course, the evaluation showed that interactive methods of teaching (icebreakers, exercises, guest lecturers in CSOs (victims of hate crime), etc.) were stimulating for students and they allowed them to get out of the safe zone, pushed them a bit from familiar ground. Reflexive diary allowed them to reflect on experienced emotions and thoughts, but also this task helped them to perceive social situations from a different angel while working on personal stereotypes and prejudices. Also, what students emphasized as important part of a successful SL experience, is the participation of different lecturers who contributed to a better understanding of the complexity of course topics. Furthermore, the evaluation showed the exceptional importance of mentoring support in CSOs, where all students highlighted the strong mark that the mentors left on them. It is, as they say, one of the crucial points in shaping their desire to be more active or even to direct their professional career in this field. The students agreed that course significantly contributed to gaining new knowledge and a range of different skills, especially they stand out the use of terminology which, it seems according to their comments, became some kind of 'holy book'.

Although they openly pointed out their ignorance of terminology related to course (LGBTIQ, gender, etc.) before course enrolment, they were very proud of how they overcome it with mentors' support in CSOs. In some cases, it meant they would also encourage their friends and family members to use proper terminology while talking on LGBTIQ topics or gender-based violence. This kind of student empowerment is the best indicator of how SL method works with topics related to gender studies.

From the student perspective mentors in CSOs played a significant role in achieving learning outcomes but also well-prepared exercises and tasks which got them to dive deeper into topics. Sometimes tasks made them more aware, depressed, angry, empowered, or provoked, which is a true emotional rollercoaster, but also helped them realize a range of novelties.

Some of the students shared their specific experiences that for them were extremely significant, transformative and in some cases emancipatory. For example, students who were part of PaRiter mentoring

programme experienced a true revelation. Before participating in this course they were deeply convinced that women are not exposed to discrimination (for example violation of their labor rights), but after analysis, research and lectures they gain a completely different reality. This reality is also something that involves their social role and assigned gender role so a reflexive diary in that sense helped a lot to summarize all knowledge and emotions. Students who were involved in mentoring programmes in LORI emphasized a brand new way of thinking about LGBTI human rights, the challenges and difficulties of LGBTIQ persons in everyday life activities. One of the students also re-experienced a situation in which her friend came out<sup>16</sup> to her but only now she understands the depth of the process and the importance of providing support. Mentoring programmes empowered them and made them more confident but also prepared them to hold lectures and transfer gained knowledge. Mentoring programme in SOS Rijeka is also of major importance in terms of students' transformative experiences. Before taking this course, students had some brief information about the concept of gender-based violence. Engagement in this mentoring programme immersed them fully into the topic, especially after hearing living experiences of women who were (and/or still are) victims of gender-based violence. Their personal change is visible in some of their statements saying they felt like new, different and better people.

The transformative potential of this course is best seen in the behavioural dimension of students, changing their attitudes, breaking prejudice and being active in the field once this course ended. New insights awakened in them a strong sense of working in the field of human rights and gained skills equipped them for delivering content to the community.

### **3.2. Space for Improvement**

Delivering an SL course while educating on gender equality related topics is a beneficial and enjoyable experience, but several crucial points can be taken into account for course improvement:

The first recommendation is related to the length of the course. Students expressed interest in more lectures and more direct engagement in CSOs, so an extension of the course in the summer semester can be considered.

The second recommendation builds on the challenges that course had related to the teaching schedule, task dynamics and absence opportunities. A recommendation is to be more flexible or include students in creating lecture schedules.

The third recommendation also builds on the experience of students who missed having one joint final meeting during which they could exchange their experiences. In this sense, one common task in which all students could participate together can be a solution.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

Building upon students' satisfaction and mostly on CSOs' perspectives in this paper we wanted to illustrate how SL can be a complete and fulfilling experience for all sides included in the learning process.

For successful SL experience, this case shows the importance of balanced collaboration between academic community and CSO(s) as well as the amount of invested time for detailed preparation. Trust among partners and following deadlines is crucial for a strong true partnership between partners as well as regular meetings and open communication.

Course 'Gender, Sexuality, Identities - from Oppression to Equality' seems to be a 'winning combination' that achieved learning outcomes and equally successfully reflected (all) SL principles. The

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<sup>16</sup> Refers to the process of telling others how you identify in terms of sexual orientation and/or gender identity

evaluation also showed that the SL method is an excellent method for covering topics such as gender-based violence, gender equality, LGBTI human rights, etc. Although the participation in this course was, as some students put it "challenging and demanding", it was also very influential with a great 'emancipatory' ending.

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# PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN DIFFERENT SOCIAL ENTITIES TO PROMOTE HEALTHY LIFE-STYLES IN CHILDREN THROUGH SPECIFIC SERVICE LEARNING

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## ABSTRACT

The activity "Specific Service Learning (SL)" allows the training of people who study one of the five degrees taught at the Faculty of Pharmacy in a multidisciplinary approach. SDG 3 (Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages) and SDG 4 (Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning) has been hardly worked in SL carried out because most of the services are related to educational-participatory workshops on topics related to health and healthy lifestyles. The objective of this work is to describe the process to implement in our center a strong partnership between different social entities to carry out SL and reinforce SDG 17(Global Partnership). The project was carried out coordinated by the Valencia Football Club Foundation, the University of Valencia and different scholar centers with specific characteristics (children at social risk exclusion and/or with functional diversity). Meetings and preliminary sessions between the different entities were previously planned and conducted by university students in order to designed properly workshops, games, videos and experiments for the scholars. All the activities combined social and ethical aspects and linked directly to SDG. The results of the services, assessed by questionnaires, were positively valued by all participants (children, teachers and organizations). The partnership between the three institutions was crucial for the quality of the project. Establish alliances with entities to carry out SL offers to the university students the opportunity to assess not only their knowledge but also their way of transmitting and adapting them

**Keywords:** SDG17, Healthy life-styles, Social Risk Exclusion Children, Functional Diversity, Children

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Service Learning Project in the Degree in Pharmacy (University of València)

Service-Learning (SL) is a proactive, cooperative, participatory and inherently transformative teaching methodology. Through this type of educational activity, the reinforcement of positive aspects for the student body is encouraged in three main areas (Bandy. 2011; Puig et al., 2006; Uruñuela, 2018):

- *Academic curriculum.* It allows reinforcing theoretical knowledge obtained in classical training and applying it to practice. Through this technique, the student can consolidate the acquired knowledge, as well as make it relevant to a given sociocultural context.
- *Training in values.* It allows the placement of the future professional in a societal context, educating in values such as social responsibility or solidarity.

- *Community involvement.* Since the intervention is focused on an explicit need of society and encourages intervention of a professional nature to try to find its solution.

In the Faculty of Pharmacy of the University of Valencia, and framed within the Innocentre Program (Educational Innovation Project Center), the activity called “ Specific SL” is carried out. This activity began in the 2016-2017 academic year and allows a team of the center’s faculty to work on a voluntary and coordinated basis in the training of people studying the five degrees taught at the center (Degree in Pharmacy, Degree in Human Nutrition and Dietetics, Degree in Food Science and Technology, Degree in Gastronomic Sciences and Double Degree in Pharmacy and Human Nutrition) in SL methodology, carrying out projects in certain groups of society (neighborhood associations, NGOs, educational centers, groups at risk of social exclusion )

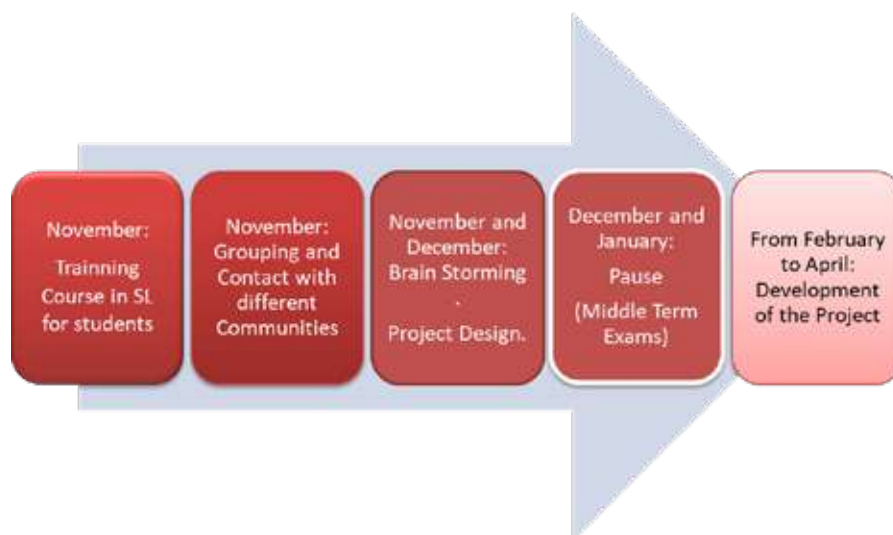
attending to their needs and oriented to expand the capabilities of these people. At the same time that the students (and the teachers involved) learn, the group receiving the service expands their knowledge that will allow them access to necessary resources and that will encourage participatory organization and the democratic use of power as active members of society. It must be also mentioned that the Faculty of Pharmacy is one of the center designed to implement Sustainable Developing Goals (SDGs) and 2030 Agenda at the University of València. Therefore, all the Specific SL are planned and designed to reinforce different SDGs (mainly SDG3, SDG 4 and SDG 17) in a multidisciplinary approach

The promotion and motivation to participate in the execution of the specific SL in the Faculty of Pharmacy is carried out through a video (Figure 1) that is advertised through e-mails, social networks and in person in class by faculty participating in this activity. This publicity takes place in September and October and ends with a face-to-face session where the coordinators of the activity inform about the program, the execution schedule (Figure 2) and the reflection process.

Some students, who participated in previous editions, explain their experience to encourage peers. Students participating in the activity will receive three elective credits.



**Figure 1:** Video to promote Specific SL Project in the Degree in Pharmacy at the University of València (<https://youtu.be/fisXzLTiJ40>)



**Figure 2:** Specific SL Execution Schedule for one academic year

Most of the services requested by the communities is the delivery of educational-participatory workshops on topics related to health and healthy lifestyles (healthy diet, food hygiene, use of pharmaceutical forms...). These services are carried out in person by means of the execution of workshops and/or talks distributed in two or three sessions of 90-120 minutes of duration in the headquarters of the associations, schools, etc.

## 1.2. Establishing alliances with social organizations as Service Learning bedrock (SDG 17)

On the other hand, Service Learning requires intense collaboration between social organizations and universities in order to face together the needs from the context, to define the services that can be useful and to do research that uses the potencialities from both. This fact is strongly associated with the SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). The approach of the SL, entities working together collaboratively with a common goal, could tackle and overcome large and complex social, environmental and economic problems.

The “Fundació València Club de Futbol” is a local social organization that was established in 1996 with the intention of providing a more social and solidary approach to the already existing Valencian soccer team. The initial objective of this institution was based on taking advantage of the club’s influence to collaborate with disadvantaged environments in the city of Valencia, stimulating social awareness and giving visibility to groups of people and collectives that needed specific and urgent attention. Simultaneously, they managed to continue building a “Valencianista” feeling of belonging, pride and rootedness to the team. During 2015, the “Fundació València CF” updates its missions and centralizes them in three ideas: 1. “Promote the spirit and values of Valencianism in our land and put in value the historical heritage of the Club.”

1. “To support the less privileged as the best way to return the support that every day gives us the Valencian society”.
3. “Encourage the feeling of attachment and rootedness to Valencia.”

The Foundation wants to invest in academic training that not only includes the strict sports field but also sports law, medicine, technology, education... That is why it is committed to the organization of masters, congresses, and conferences, both online and in person, directed and organized by its Training Center. To carry out these courses, they collaborate with institutions or universities. It is through “Escoles COR Blanquinegre” (Figure 3) that, since October 2015, around 3,000 children and young people from Valencia and towns in the province have been helped. During the last years, it has managed to collaborate with 50 schools spread throughout the Valencian Community. This program

is mainly offered to teachers of certain schools with a specific profile of students at risk of social exclusion. Within this project, soccer training sessions are organized for different age groups in which the participants are motivated by a final school tournament for which they have to commit themselves and make an effort every day. In short, it is a training tool that contributes to community, student, family and personal progress.



**Figure 3:** Children enroll in the Program Escoles COR Blancinegre of the Valencia CF Foundation playing soccer in Mestalla Stadium

### 1.3. Promoting healthy habits during the childhood

Developing healthy habits and customs in childhood that value them as basic aspects of quality of life and that reject behavioral patterns that prevent the acquisition of physical and mental well-being will help to achieve the objective of “living longer, living better” by preventing pathological processes at their root, such as cardiovascular disease (CVD), atherosclerosis and arterial hypertension, excessive caloric intake with obesity, high cholesterol levels, sedentary lifestyles, smoking and drinking alcohol.

Several risk factors can be modified by incorporating into the education of children not only health aspects, but also social, cultural and economic aspects, to achieve a “healthy lifestyle” including the promotion of healthy habits such as the type of heart-healthy diet and nutritional habits, the pattern of personal conduct and behavior (hours of television, video games), habits (tobacco, alcohol), lifestyles (physical activity, sedentary lifestyle), the social structure, and biological variables, and eco-environmental factors.

## 2. OBJECTIVE

The objective of this work is to describe the planning, design and implementation of educational activities, based on ApS, and in collaboration with a social foundation of a soccer club in the city of Valencia to promote healthy lifestyle habits in primary school students at risk of social exclusion and/or with functional diversity.

1. Description of the partnerships established and the characteristics of the communities where the services will be carried out.
2. Description of the services (promoting life-styles workshops) to be provided to the scholar centers according to their needs and peculiar characteristics.
3. Description of the material and activities to be carried out that were initially proposed
4. Outcome of the activities and evaluation of the workshop by the different stakeholders

### 3. DEVELOPMENT OF THE INNOVATION

#### 3.1 Description of the partnerships established and the characteristics of the communities where Specific SL (workshops) were carried out.

The establishment of the partnerships between scholar centers, social entity (Valencia CF Foundation) and University of València started in the academic year 2019-2020. We will describe the process and results during these last three academic years (2019-2020,2020-2021 and 2021-2022). It is important to mention that during the period of lockdown between March and May 2020 due to the COVID-19 all the face to face activities were cancelled. Although this inconvenience, students of the university of València worked on the Specific SL project design and doing educational material for workshops (Almaiah et al.,2020; Watermeyer et al.2020).

Figure 4 shows the three stakeholders that were initially proposed to carry out a correct promotion of healthy lifestyle habits among children at risk of social exclusion



**Figure 4:** Stakeholders collaborating in the Specific SL. From up to down: Social Entity (Valencia CF Foundation), University (Faculty of Pharmacy, University of València), School Centers of València. On the right hand side: Target Community (Children at Risk of Social Exclusion)

Most of the students at these three centers are from Spain but with a great variety of geographical origin within the country or ethnicity (in two of the three centers mostly of gypsy ethnicity), but others are foreigners or children of migrants (mostly from Latin American countries but also Africa or East European Countries). All the pupils belong to families with very low economic resources, with a high percentage of job instability and low academic levels, so that some families are itinerant. The scarce participation of families in the school, as well as the scarce economic and cultural resources, causes that the students present great diversity and difficulty in their learning process. Moreover, one of the scholar centers attends children with these characteristics and also hearing impairment (different grades of audio disabilities are attending in a special grade)

#### 3.2. Description of the service to be provided.

The initial meetings between the three stakeholders were held in different places (schools, university and local social organization). The subject matter related to the promotion of healthy habits in childhood to be dealt with in the workshops was agreed upon by the school teachers, the SL tutors at the University, the students who were going to develop the SL and the social organization. For this

purpose, the characteristics of the students and their participation in the sports activities of the Escoles COR Blancinegre were taken into account. After holding several meetings, the following topics were chosen:

1. *Healthy breakfasts, lunches and snacks.* For this workshop it was taken into account that, generally, those homes with a low socioeconomic reality, usually have children and adolescents with a high consumption of unhealthy foods and absences of meals throughout the day, especially breakfast.
2. *Sleep and screens.* A good rest allows the body to carry out all the physiological processes necessary for the development of a human being, especially in childhood. There are many factors that modify the sleep cycle and that it is necessary to make known: the ingestion of abundant food before going to sleep, the ingestion of drinks with caffeine, the use of electronic devices. The alteration of this sleep can derive in disorders that in the long term could alter the health of a person (hypertension, diabetes, obesity...).
3. *Hygiene habits.* Through this workshop, body, dental and hand hygiene were encouraged.
4. *Toxic habits.* This workshop dealt with two of the most common unhealthy habits among adolescents: smoking and gambling. It was considered convenient to deal with these issues because, although they have not yet fully entered adolescence, the environment that commonly surrounds the students with whom we work, usually anticipates these issues. Moreover, an increase in gambling addiction has been observed in adolescents due to the influence and appearance of sports betting companies in advertising.

All the activities combined social and ethical aspects and linked directly to SDG

### 3.2. Description of the material and activities to be carried out

The workshop would be distributed in three or four sessions (depending on each center) of one hour each, to be held between January and May. Three experts in sign languages helped us at the school center where students with functional diversity were attended. The sessions would begin with a brief presentation of theoretical concepts using power-point presentations and/or videos made by the university students (Figure 5) along with a series of dynamic activities (true-false games about myths, false beliefs, etc.) (Figure 6), followed by a participatory activity and ending with a team game (Figure 7). The activities would be evaluated through a survey that would be distributed in the last 15 minutes of the last session. The surveys collect information on knowledge learned (for school students) and degree of satisfaction (for teachers and the social entity).



**Figure 5:** Video photogram used as a presentation in the workshop “Healthy breakfasts, lunches and snacks”



Figure 6: Dynamic activity in a scholar center during the workshop titled “Toxic Habits”



Figure 7: Team Game in a scholar center as a final activity of the three workshops carried out

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. Results of the Specific SL carried out for the Educational Centers

As a result of the SL workshops given during the last three academic years, different types of materials have been generated that can be used in the future by university students or by teachers and/or educators of the schools. These materials are power point presentations, videos and leaflets on healthy lifestyle habits. The degree of satisfaction on the part of the students and teachers of the three schools was evaluated with questionnaires adapted for each group (Figure8).

ANEXO 9: Evaluación para el alumnado.

**Evaluación alumnado**

Aquí tienes la evaluación de los talleres sobre “hábitos saludables”. A continuación verás una serie de preguntas que te pedimos que contestes con total sinceridad. Gracias a tus respuestas, nos ayudará a mejorar el proyecto y colaborar con el aprendizaje de futuros participantes. Muchas gracias y... ¡Amure Valencia!

Para el balón que representas la nota con la darías a cada uno de los apartados mencionados.

1.- Temas tratados

Por nota Mejor nota

2.- Organización de los talleres (presentación, juego parte práctica)

Por nota Mejor nota

3.- Explicaciones

Por nota Mejor nota

4.- Materiales proporcionados y utilizados

Por nota Mejor nota

5.- Nota general.

Por nota Mejor nota

Valora tu grado de concordancia con las siguientes afirmaciones marcando con una x en un número del 1 al 5: (1) completamente en desacuerdo (5) completamente de acuerdo	1	2	3	4	5
La comunicación con los participantes del proyecto fue buena					
El estudiante tenía todo bien organizado					
Los temas que se tratan en los talleres eran de relevancia para sus alumnos					
Este proyecto puede tener un aspecto positivo en el alumnado					
En general valoro la experiencia positivamente					
Sería positivo repetir esta experiencia otros cursos					

**Figure 8:** On the left hand side, a questionnaire to evaluate workshops for the scholars. On the right hand side, a questionnaire to evaluate satisfaction with the workshops for teachers and educators of the scholar centers

High degree of satisfaction both for the teaching staff (5 out of 5) and for the students (scores in all the items valued between 8 and 10 out of 10) has been obtained during the last three years. It should be pointed out that the final activity has been always defined as the one “most liked” by the students.

#### 4.2. Results of the SL for the students of the Universitat de València

The students who carried out the SL during these three years were “greatly satisfied” after the Specific SL, mainly due to several factors:

1. - Learning in concepts about health promotion that they did not know.
2. -Learning of audiovisual techniques (video recording, elaboration of presentations for a specific audience, synthesis of concepts adequately...).
3. - Collaboration and cooperation with civil society.
4. - Feel the usefulness for the target group of the SL

In addition, it should be noted that five of the Specific SL carried out have been presented as Final Degree Projects by the participating students and all of them have obtained the highest grade.

#### 4.3. Results of the SL for the social entity

As it is really difficult to measure or monitoring SDG 17 due to the inexistence of indicators about the quality of partnerships established and implemented, nor about their achievements (Stibbe et al., 2019), we can only mention a qualitative evaluation. The Valencia Football Club Foundation has evaluated this partnership as “The content of the workshops has been excellent, very didactic and related to the spirit that our organization wants to transmit to the schoolchildren. We think that this collaboration has been very profitable and beneficial during these three years and we plan to continue with it.”

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

The created learning objects served to increase not also the knowledge of the children but also of the degree student and acquire skills in digital technology (Zuo et al., 2020). The hybrid format of these workshops in a face-to-face and virtual way has allowed to promote the practice of healthy habits in a population with little knowledge about health. In addition, the audiovisual material that has been generated in this project will be used by other centers that will participate in the next years. The results of the services, assessed by questionnaires, were very positively valued by all participants (children, teachers and organizations). The partnership between the three institutions was crucial for the quality of the project. To establish alliances with entities to carry out SL offers to the university students the opportunity to assess not only their knowledge but also their way of transmitting and adapting them. Moreover, the SL allows to the University to acquire the social role that sometimes it is diluted into so much theoretical knowledge.

On another hand, it is equally true that partnership is subject to change and this change needs to be managed. This means working from a solid base of planning and procedures but going forward with sufficient flexibility to manage the evolution of the collaboration and to be able both to adjust and adapt to ensure to deliver expected value and to exploit new opportunities for value creation as they arise.

Due to this successful experience, the Faculty of Pharmacy has established new partnerships with other social entities for next academic year. It is possible that this new model combining SL and promoting social collaborations will be also implemented by other centers at the University of València

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# EXPERIENCES AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM COMMUNITY ENGAGED EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN AT CODE CLUB PMF

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## ABSTRACT

Code Club PMF is a programming school for children aged 7 to 13, founded as an informal initiative at the Faculty of Science, University in Split, as a part of a large international Code Club community. Since spring 2018, more than 70 in-class workshops were held, and several activities were continued in the online environment during the pandemic. The children learned the basics of programming through various activities such as game development and microcontroller programming in visual programming languages. The club is run by volunteers, a university instructor and an IT professional, along with a number of students from the Faculty of Science who share great enthusiasm and passion for teaching. Almost all activities were conducted without additional financial support and were completely free of charge for the participants. In addition to the regular activities, Code Club PMF was involved in many science popularization events, such as Bebras Challenge, Science Festival, Evening of Mathematics, and a humanitarian event to support the victims of the 2020 earthquake in Croatia. In this paper, we introduce the initiative and describe the examples of best practices. The insights and lessons learned from the Code Club PMF experience can serve as useful guidelines for other community engaged learning initiatives.

**Keywords:** Code Club PMF, programming workshops, computational thinking, Bebras challenge, volunteering, community engaged learning

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the long history of the Faculty of Science in Split, founded in 1945, in addition to the traditional task of preparing students for the teaching professions, there was often a desire to participate in socially useful educational activities. In recent years, the need for additional education for children and young people in STEM areas has been particularly pronounced.

Following the increasing individual initiatives of teachers at Faculty of Science, in the spring of 2018 a larger group of activities was launched as Code Club PMF, joining the worldwide network of volunteer programming clubs for children. Under the guidance of a university instructor and a professional from IT industry, and with the help of several students, weekly workshops for children aged 7 to 13 were held in the classrooms of the Department of Computer Science at Faculty of Science. All workshops were free of charge. To date, more than 20 students from the Faculty of Science, mainly studying Computer Science and Technics, have volunteered in the club.

The workshops were held in series, for ten weeks per semester and during the summer vacations, and included initial programming through child-friendly activities, such as creating games and

animations in visual programming languages and developing applications on microcontrollers. As children's interest in learning programming grew, and more and more students were involved in the Code Club PMF activities, in some periods, workshops were held for about fifty students in three classrooms at a time.

In addition, a new Code Club has been established in Marina, near Trogir, where children who are far from the big cities can learn programming using the most modern methods.

In addition to their regular activities, Code Club PMF volunteers regularly participate in other science popularization events, such as Bebras - International Challenge on Informatics and Computational Thinking, the Science Festival, the Evening of Mathematics, and the Summer Science Factory.

Several remote activities were carried out during the 2020 and 2021 pandemic period. Particularly noteworthy is the humanitarian action in winter 2021, when monetary donations were collected for families affected by the consequences of the recent earthquake in central Croatia.

This paper describes the activities of the Code Club PMF, focusing on curricula and ways to implement the activities described. Section 2 presents the context of computer science education at the time of the Code Club's founding and the authors' motivation for this work. Section 3 presents the courses and workshops conducted at the Code Club PMF. It is organized by activity, and within longer activities, each event is presented in chronological order. It provides an overview of the activities conducted, the teaching methods involved, and the lessons learned from the experience. Section 4 explains the contribution of Code Club PMF in the broader community and the benefits of student volunteering. Section 5 concludes the paper and previews the future work.

## 2. BACKGROUND

In Spring 2018, when Code Club PMF was launched, computer science education was poorly represented in primary education in the Republic of Croatia. Informatics was only an elective subject for students from 5th to 8th grade (11-15 years old) and there were very few schools that offered Informatics or Robotics as an additional subject from the 1st grade (7 years old).

For several years, the curricula for computer science for elementary and high schools were being prepared to be introduced as part of The Complete Curricular Reform (Croatian: Cjelovita kurikularna reforma), which was later implemented under the name School for Life (Croatian: Škola za život). Under the reform, in September 2018, Informatics was introduced as a compulsory subject from 5th to 8th grade and elective subject from 1st to 4th grade, with significant changes of the curricula for all grades (Course Curriculum – Informatics, 2018).

The process of introducing the reform took a long time, there was a change in government and politics, and at some stages it did not have much public support. Nevertheless, a survey of parents of primary school children conducted in March 2018 showed that parents largely support the introduction of computer science as a compulsory subject in 5th and 6th grades (Čurin & Oreški, 2019).

At the time we were thinking about starting additional education in programming for children, the results of this study had not yet been published. The authors' personal motivation came mainly from their intuition and their own knowledge of what children and parents in the local community needed. However, the strong interest of parents in enrolling their children in Code Club, along with the results of this study, confirm that this initiative was more than welcome.

### 3. METHOD

#### 3.1. The Code Club initiative

Code Club is a global network of free volunteer programming clubs for children (Code Club, 2022). It is founded in 2012 in the UK with the idea that programming education should be available to all children around the world. This initiative started as a community of volunteers, educators, programmers, software developers and other professionals who give their time to run Code Club sessions, passing on their programming skills and mentoring the young students. Currently there are 13 000 Code Clubs in 160 countries with 180 000 children. Children usually aged 9 to 13 develop coding skills through free after-school clubs. They create their own computer games, animations and websites, learning how to use technology creatively.

At the end of 2015, the Code Club was merged with Raspberry Pi Foundation, a registered UK charity (Raspberry Pi Foundation, n.d.). It becomes a growing worldwide movement that works to put digital making into the hands of children all over the world. Nowadays there are local teams in the UK, Ireland, the USA, and India. Code Club partners are present in Australia, Brazil, Canada, Croatia, France, Iraq, New Zealand, South Korea, and Ukraine. While the mission is to put a Code Club in every community in the world, safety and support are very important. Code Club leaders are following safeguarding best practice in order to provide creative, fun and safe places for children to learn.

In Croatia, there is a Code Club Croatia as a national coordinator that supports volunteers in establishing and leading new clubs (Code Club Croatia, 2022). Code Club PMF was established in April 2018 as part of this national network and offers courses for slightly younger children, more specifically for children aged 7 to 13, as shown in Figure 1. We believe in learning by making and allow each child to express themselves creatively by developing their own projects that are appropriate for their age and abilities. Code Club PMF activities are continuously published on a social network page (Code Club PMF, 2018).

At the very beginning, Code Club PMF had two professionals and 13 students. Since then, another IT professional and several students joined the club and to date more than 20 students passed through the club. The workshops were held on Saturdays in computer labs at Faculty of Science. Most of the time, students helped the kids to solve problems or debug their projects, but some students also got involved as workshop leaders and some of them are still active in the workshops today.



**Figure 1.** A typical Saturday morning at Code Club PMF

### 3.2. Scratch courses

The basic programming course in Scratch was held as the first activity in a series of workshops by Code Club PMF. Scratch is a publicly available and free visual programming environment (Scratch, n.d.). Its basic features are (i) the possibility of block programming, which frees students from the need to learn the syntax of the programming language, and (ii) the focus on creating animations and games using a variety of embedded characters with the possibility of easily creating new characters.

The workshops were led by volunteers, university teacher and an IT professional, usually along with 3-5 students. They were using the Code Club resources, i.e., instructions that guide students through the process of programming using block code. Figure 2 shows an example of instruction for creating an animation. The figure shows the visual environment for creating the animation, as well as the instructions for students related to coding and running the project. Both the environment and the instructions are available to students in Croatian.

Workshops are designed so that workshop leaders guide students through the project design process, explaining elementary steps such as character creation, coding, and running the project. Occasionally, complex tasks are involved as challenges that motivate advanced learners to try their hand at solving more complex problems during the same project. Since the workshop participants were students of very different ages (7-13) and prior knowledge, this approach proved to work very well. Advanced participants often helped beginners with programming and had plenty of time to solve their own challenges.



Promijeni brojeve u naredbama, tako da one izgledaju kao na slici iznad.

- Klikom na blokove s naredbama pokrenut ćeš program. Ako je ispravan, svemirski brod govori, okreće se i kreće prema sredini pozornice.



**Figure 2.** Code for a rocket heading towards Earth, with instructions for coding and running the program in Croatian

In this first course, participants learned how to create objects and define their attributes and methods. They became familiar with the concept of variables and basic algorithmic structures such as sequence, loop and branch. In total, 35 students have completed this course in spring 2018.

After mastering the basic concepts of computational thinking, students who completed the first Scratch course were given the opportunity to take an advanced programming course. The course followed the same pattern: students of different ages were placed in the same groups and the tasks were adapted to their abilities. In this course, more advanced concepts such as complex conditional statements and lists were introduced. Figure 3 shows the interface of a game whose programming is taught to learn more complex interactions between characters and the use of lists.



**Figure 3.** The game through which students adopt the concept of a list

This advanced Scratch course was held through a series of workshops during the winter semester 2018/19 and was completed by around 30 students. In parallel, there was another initial Scratch course at the same time for new participants. The leader of the series was another IT professional who recently joined the Code Club PMF and 15 students participated.

Selected Scratch workshops from these two courses are presented as stand-alone workshops in April 2019 at the Science Festival in Split (Science Festival, 2019)

### 3.3. Micro:bit courses

The motivation for starting micro:bit workshops was to introduce children to the world of programming and expand it with the basics of electronics. The aim of these workshops follows the philosophy of Micro:bit Educational Foundation (Microbit, n.d.) , which is to prove that programming is not something abstract and complicated with the help of a series of practical, fun and “real-life like” tasks children create themselves with the help of a teacher. The expected outcome was for the children to express their ideas, creativity and knowledge, and to identify concepts they may have encountered so far, learn some new ones and have fun while doing so.

The BBC micro:bit is a pocket-sized computer that introduces children to how software and hardware work together. It has an LED light display, buttons, sensors and many input/output features that, when programmed, allow interaction between computer, physical micro:bit console, children and the world.

The first micro: bit workshop was held at the 2018 Science Festival in Split and it consisted of making and coding a popular game “Fastest finger first” shown on Figure 4.



**Figure 4.** The first micro:bit workshop held on Science Festival in 2018: “Fastest finger first”

During the 2018/19 spring semester, a series of micro:bit workshops were held in Code Club PMF for participants of all ages. The workshops were designed to cover all the features of the micro:bit, from the basic “Hello World” program, where kids were introduced to the development environment and learned how to download and transfer the program to the physical micro:bit device, to displaying strings and images on the LED matrix, programming buttons and combining them with the built-in light sensor, touch sensor, accelerometer, compass, and finally Bluetooth and wireless communication.

Each of the tasks of each workshop was accompanied by a background story of the teacher about the functionality currently being taught with an emphasis on its application in everyday life and the tasks were designed to be popular and fun. For example, a motion sensor together with the concept of random numbers was explained through making a dice which children later used when playing Ludo game. Communication between micro:bits is used in making Morse code chat, i.e., sending and receiving characters on multiple controllers.

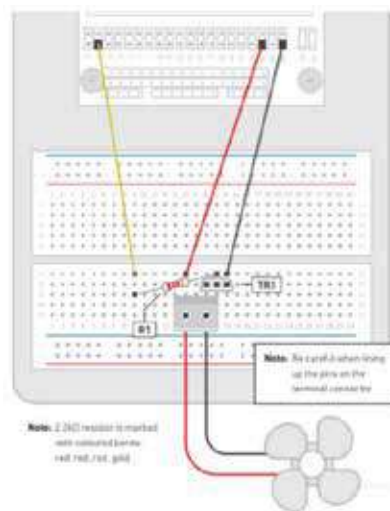
In the summer of 2019, a series of workshops were held in which the previous micro:bit workshops were expanded with a Kitronik Inventor’s Kit (Kitronik, 2022). The aim of the workshop was to introduce the children with the various electronic elements that the set contains and fit them into the previous micro:bit “story” with the same approach, i.e., emphasizing the application of a particular element in daily life. The children learned about elements such as piezzo buzzer, LED, RGB diode, phototransistor, potentiometer, capacitor, motor and others.

Each of the workshops consisted of a part where children make a circuit (Figure 5) according to the given scheme explained in detail by the teacher (Figure 6), then programming micro:bit in MakeCode

editor (Figure 7). Figure 8 shows the last part of each workshop which is testing the final program and circuit.



**Figure 5.** Making a circuit



**Figure 6.** Circuit scheme of the workshop where children learn about motors



**Figure 7.** Coding part of the workshop where children learned about motors



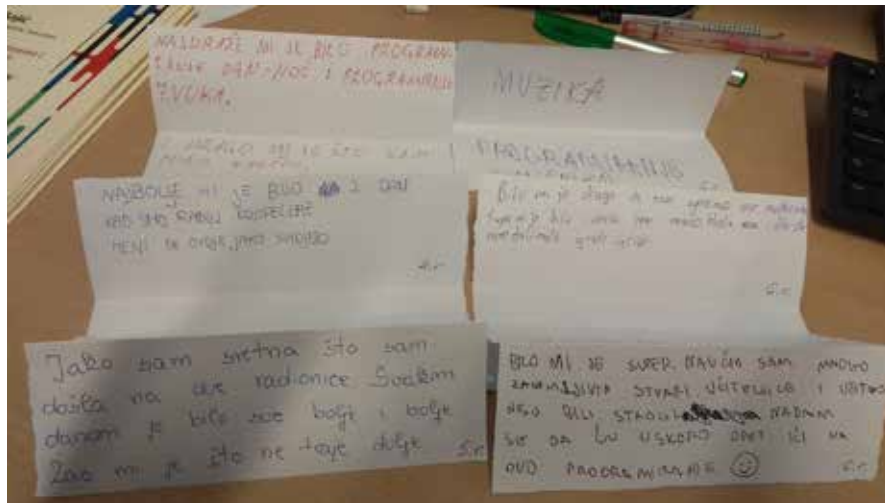
**Figure 8.** The result of the workshop where children learned about motors

In the summer of 2020, a course on microbit, entitled “A bit of knowlegde on Micro:bit” (Croatian: “Bit:no je znati micro:bit”) was held at the Summer Science Factory (Summer Science Factory, 2020). The Summer Science Factory is a scientific-educational project aimed at children of all ages who want to spend their summer vacation creatively, interacting with other children and young scientists (Summer Science Factory, 2022). The goals of the Summer Science Factory are consistent with the Code Club mission of creating positive attitudes toward science, encouraging the choice of a scientific career, and developing critical thinking through experimentation, learning, socializing, and play. From the mentors’ perspective, the Summer Science Factory provides an opportunity to develop their skills as project and team leaders, connect with other mentors, share their research and teaching experiences, and build a network of young educators of tomorrow. The two groups of 3rd and 4th grade children went through the entire microbit and kitronic program in three full-day workshops.

Microbit was also one of the topics presented at the Science Festival 2021, in a form of video tutorial entitled “The battle for science” (Croatian: “Bit:ka za znanost”). The Code Club members prepared the tutorial for programming three examples that illustrate some of the functionalities of microbit - light sensor, motion sensor and radio group (Bit:ka za znanost, 2021).

In conclusion, microbit workshops expanded programming with the creation of circuits, which gave children the opportunity to develop and widen programming and other skills as well. It was interesting to see how children adopt various concepts by making circuits which they then bring to life by programming.

After completing the course, the teachers asked children to write their impressions of the workshops they attended. All three types of microbit workshops: microbit using only simulator, microbit without additional components and microbit with kitronic set have achieved great success and satisfaction among children. Some of the responses are shown on Figure 9.



**Figure 9.** Children impressions at the end of series of microbit workshops in the summer of 2019

*“I am very glad that I participated in these workshops. Each day was even better than the day before. I am sad that the workshops are over.” (5th grade student)*

*“My favourite part was making “Stand up/Sit down” game and programming sound.*

*I’m happy that I have learn a lot.” (3rd grade student)*

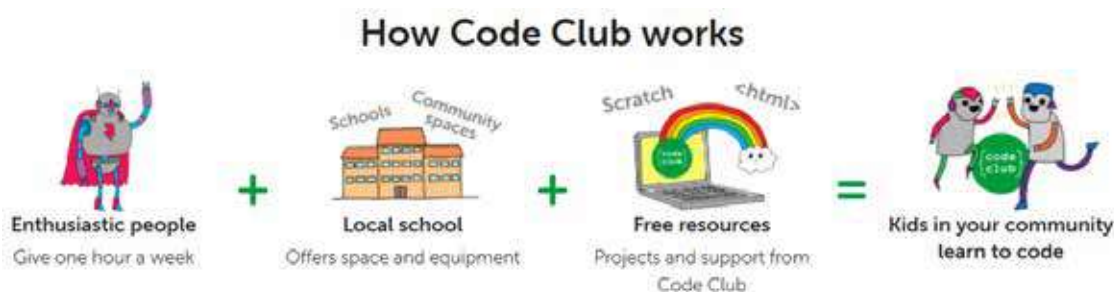
*“It was great, and I learned many interesting things. The teachers were not strict, and I hope to attend another workshop like this soon.” (6th grade student)*

In addition to adopting the concepts of programming and electronics, children were encouraged to work carefully and patiently, especially when making circuits, and following the philosophy of Code Club, to be creative developing and expressing their own ideas.

The teachers found that the children highly recognized concepts from daily life, and the children’s motivation grew to learn and design their own programmable circuits, which is a must-have ability in the modern, smart and sustainable world.

### 3.4. Code Club Marina

Code Club’s philosophy is to reach as many children as possible. That’s why Code Clubs clone themselves wherever there is a need for children education, as shown in Figure 10.



**Figure 10.** How Code Club Works (Code Club, 2022)

Since the word was spreading, a new Code Club was launched in Marina, a small town near Trogir and 40 kilometres away from Split. This Code Club had a great support of the local government who recognized and appreciated the value of having a Code Club in this community. Figure 11 shows a fully

equipped classroom in Marina and Figure 12 shows BBC micro:bit with Kitronik Inventor's Kit and Accessories – Kitronik Ltd (Kitronik, 2022) supplied by the local government.



**Figure 11.** Code Club in Marina near Trogir



**Figure 12.** Kitronik kit (Kitronik, 2022) BBC micro:bit with Kitronik Inventor's Kit and Accessories – Kitronik Ltd

Code Club Marina was held for two years 2018-2019 until a pandemic COVID -19 stopped it. During that time, more than 30 children went through the club. The curriculum was the same as in the original Code Club PMF, the Scratch series, followed by the Microbit series and the Kitronik series. This work was recognized in the community and the article about the awarding of diplomas at Code Club Marina was published in the local newspaper and on the website (Code Club Marina, 2019).

After finishing two years of Code Club sessions, we received feedback from the local school that kids which attended Code Club have clearly better skills in informatics curriculum at their school, which is something that makes us very proud.

### 3.5. Meowbit course

Meowbit (Meowbit, 2022) is a card-sized graphical retro game computer which allows coding with Makecode arcade and Python. In other words, it can use combined game programming shown on Figure 13 with hardware devices shown on Figure 14.

The Meowbit workshop series took place during the 2019/20 window semester. With the help of the workshop leader, the children followed the instructions and developed games, which they then ran on a simulator or on a physical Meowbit device.

In these workshops, the teacher has more of a supportive role than a teaching role and the child has a higher level of independence. This approach proved to be very successful for students in higher grades. On the other hand, younger students needed more guidance from the teacher, mainly related to the translation of the tutorials, which were all in English. Children who managed to follow the instructions on their own and with a little help by the teacher would finish coding very quickly, so they were given additional challenges that expand their games. Concepts such as variables, counters, loops, methods, sprites and others are used to create each game. The goal was for the participants to master the basic concepts in a simple and fun way.



Figure 13. Programming using Makecode arcade



Figure 14. Meowbit as a hardware device

During workshops all children were encouraged to enrich default games from tutorials with their own ideas, using elements they needed, thus expressing their creativity in addition to adopting basic programming concepts.

Although these games are generally simpler than the games they usually play, the children appreciate them more because they made them themselves, which is one of the main guidelines of Code Club. Additionally, it has been observed that children recognize the elements they have learned in these workshops in commercial games which results with higher motivation to learn more complex concepts to enrich their games even more and create new, original ones.

Some of the participants attended previous Scratch and Micro:bit workshops, so it was interesting to see how many concepts adopted earlier they now managed to apply in the new environment and how they respond to it. Meowbit along with the makecode environment is as well accepted with the children as Scratch. Similar to the Micro:bit workshops, children often mentioned the possibility of playing games on a physical device as an advantage of Meowbit.

After the devastating earthquake in central Croatia at the end of 2020, it became increasingly urgent to raise funds for humanitarian aid. Therefore, we organised an event in cooperation with Rotaract Split Novi (Rotaract, 2021) to support the victims in the town of Glina. In the conditions of the pandemic in February 2020, it was only possible to organise online workshops. The workshops were held in the form of real-time interactive workshops via video conferencing, as shown in Figure 15. Under the guidance of the workshop leader, students created simple games for the Meowbit console. In order to achieve the highest possible level of interactivity under these conditions, instead of online programming tutorials, students used specially prepared materials in Croatian created by members of the Code Club PMF.



**Figure 15.** A workshop on humanitarian event “Program sreće koji Glinu pokreće”

Figure 16 shows an example of how a step in the creation of a game is explained. In total, about 6000 kn (780 eur) was collected during the two workshops, which was donated to a family in Glina (Humanitarian, 2021).



**Figure 16.** An example of instruction for drawing a player who will catch pizza in “Chase the pizza” project

### 3.6. STEMI hexapod workshops

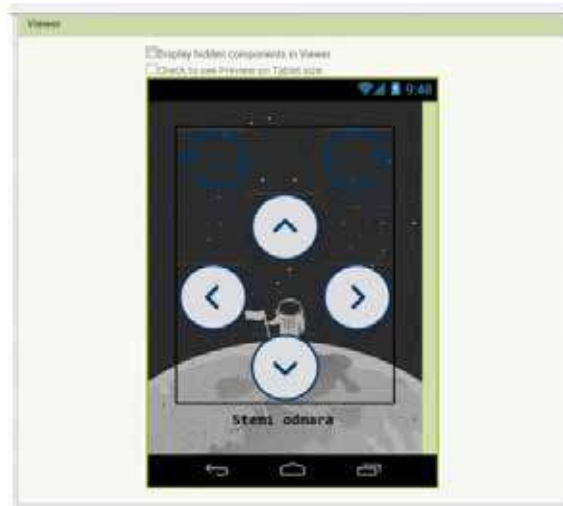
STEMI Hexapod is a product of the Croatian company STEMI, developed with the aim of promoting and popularizing STEM activities in schools (STEMI, 2022).

By assembling this robot “piece by piece”, children learn the basics of mechanical engineering and by developing a mobile application to control the robot, they acquire knowledge in programming and electronics. In this way, students experience the entire engineering process and acquire excellent basic skills in the increasingly popular discipline of robotics. Code Club PMF received a donation of two hexapods from STEMI company as an incentive to start the club. Assembling of the hexapod is shown in Figure 17.



**Figure 17.** Assembling the new arrived STEMI hexapod at Code Club PMF

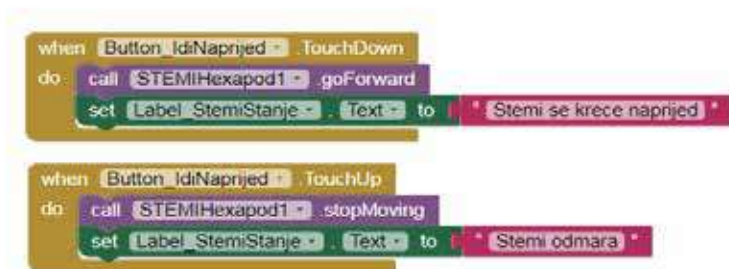
STEMI hexapod was presented in several workshops for Code Club PMF members in 2018. The workshops targeted older elementary and secondary school students, as the “MIT App Inventor” environment requires a higher level of skills. Students learned to create a mobile application to control the Hexapod. All resources were prepared by the Code Club members. The materials included clear instructions that guided through the process of creating a program using a block programming language. The user interface of a controller created by the students is shown in Figure 18.



**Figure 18.** Appearance of the controller ready for programming

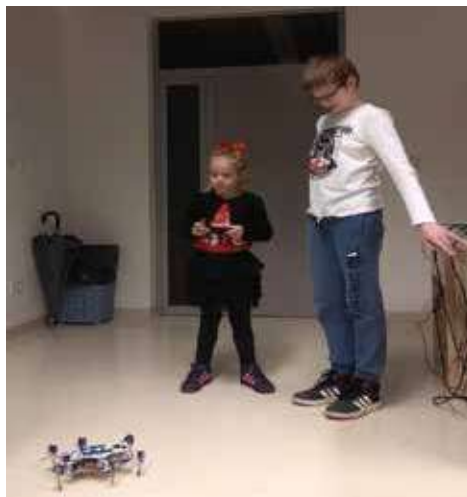
The workshop was designed so that the teachers explained and presented the basic concepts and steps to the students. After the presentation, the students continued to work independently and followed the instructions. Figure 19 shows a code that moves the robot forward by pressing the button and stops the movement by releasing the button.

Hej Stemi ! Kreni prema naprijed !



**Figure 19.** Part of the code for moving the robot forward and for stopping the movement

Finally, students installed the app on their smartphones using a QR code. This was followed by a demonstration and playing with two robots as shown in Figure 20.



**Figure 20.** Students controlling robots via mobile application they have developed at the workshop

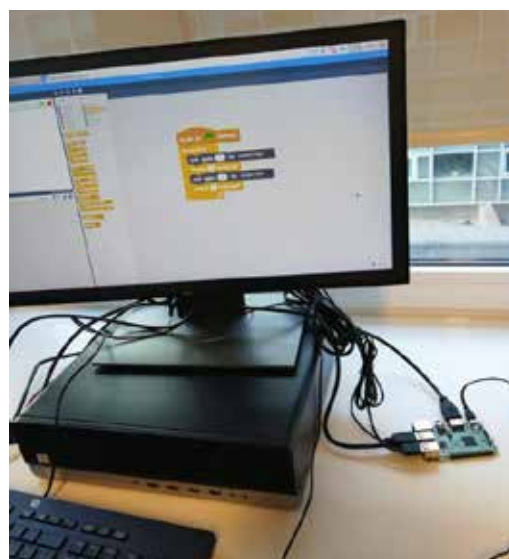
As part of the 2019 Science Festival, several STEMI workshops were held for 62 primary school students from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina who visited Split and the Faculty of Science (Figure 21).



**Figure 21.** The students from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina after the STEMI workshop

### 3.7. Raspberry Pi workshops

Raspberry Pi is a credit card-sized computer developed in the United Kingdom by the Raspberry Pi Foundation to promote computer science education in schools (Raspberry Pi, n.d.). This computer is an excellent choice for beginners in computer science, as it contains almost all the components of a classic computer, and the price is far more affordable. It has additional GPIO (general purpose input-output) pins that allow interaction with various electronic components. The Raspberry Pi connected to the computer is shown in Figure 22.



**Figure 22.** Connected Raspberry Pi microcomputer along with the software solution in Scratch

The workshops at 2019 Science festival were held for elementary school age. The students make their own cardboard robot in which they install the LED diode, as the one showed in Figure 23. Then they connect the electronic components to the Raspberry Pi and write code in Scratch to “programme” the robot, i.e., to control the blinking of the LED. The workshop ends with an exhibition of the students’ projects, who showed exceptional creative skills in designing the robot, but also in improving the software of their own robots.



Figure 23. One of the creative solutions of the “Robot Berry” project

### 3.8. Arduino workshops

Arduino is the name for an open computing platform that enables the creation of interesting creative solutions in the field of electronics and mechanical engineering (Arduino, 2022). Arduino is an invention by the Italian company SmartProjects 2005 with the goal of creating a small and inexpensive platform that provides a simple and physically tangible connection between computers and the real outside world. The Arduino board is equipped with analog and digital inputs through which it communicates with various electronic components, sensors, motors, etc., as shown in Figure 24. Because of its simplicity, the Arduino is often used in computer science classes and in teaching the Internet of Things in schools and among the young population. The Arduino software and program syntax are simple for beginners, yet complex enough to perform even the most difficult projects.

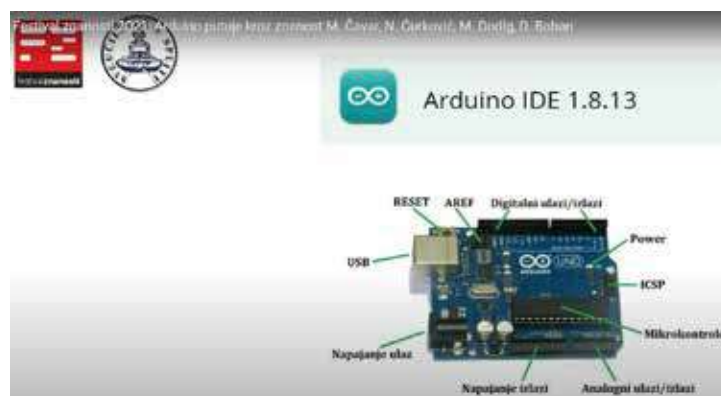
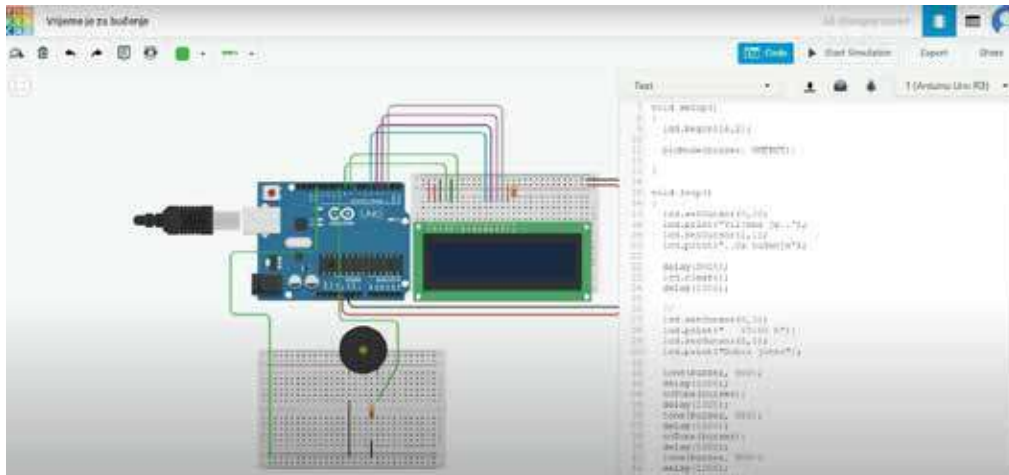


Figure 24. Appearance of the Arduino microcontroller and its components

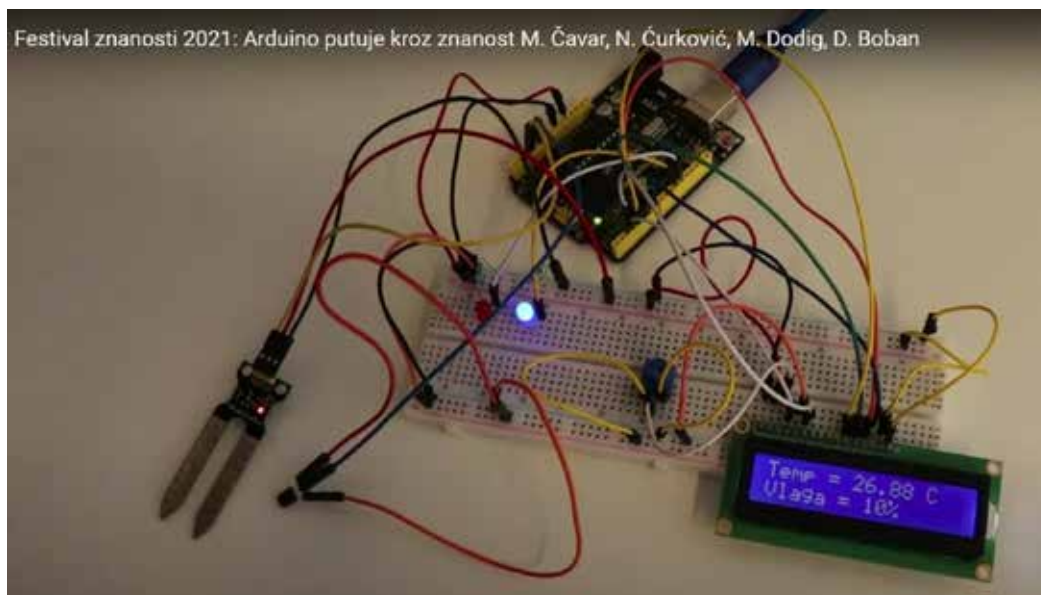
For the challenging pandemic 2021 Science Festival, the team of student members of the Code Club PMF has prepared two online workshops in video form of pre-recorded videos.

The goal of the first project was to build an alarm clock with Arduino board, an additional LED display and speakers. The workshop leaders guide students through the entire process from explaining the idea to realizing, connecting, programming, and loading the project onto a microcontroller in Tinkercad virtual environment. Figure 25 shows the final solution of the project with code in Tinkercad. The entire workshop is available as a video (in Croatian) (Arduino na putu, 2021).



**Figure 25.** “Time to Wake Up” project in Tinkercad

The idea of the second project was to develop a system for optimal watering of plants in a greenhouse. The project requires a humidity sensor, a LED display, an Arduino microcontroller, a temperature sensor, and two LEDs. This project was implemented on a physical Arduino board. The result can be seen in Figure 26 and the workshop video (in Croatian) is available at (Bit:ka za znanost, 2021).



**Figure 26.** «Irrigation System» project on a physical Arduino board

### 3.9. Bebras Challenge

Bebras - International Challenge on Informatics and Computational Thinking (Bebras for short) is an international initiative that promotes computational thinking among teachers and students of all ages (Bebras, n.d.). To this end, Bebras members organize easily accessible and highly motivating online competitions in many countries all over the world. Such a Bebras challenge is to demonstrate computer science and computational thinking to a wide audience and to test participants' skills in this area. It is completed online in all schools and often engages students who have little or no prior formal education in computer science.

While solving Bebras tasks, students are developing problem solving skills and computational concepts including the ability to break down complex tasks into simpler components, algorithm design, pattern recognition, generalisation and abstraction. Figures 27 and 28 show examples of tasks for students aged 6-8.



Figure 27. A task for students aged 6-8: Ice Cream (Bebras examples, 2022)

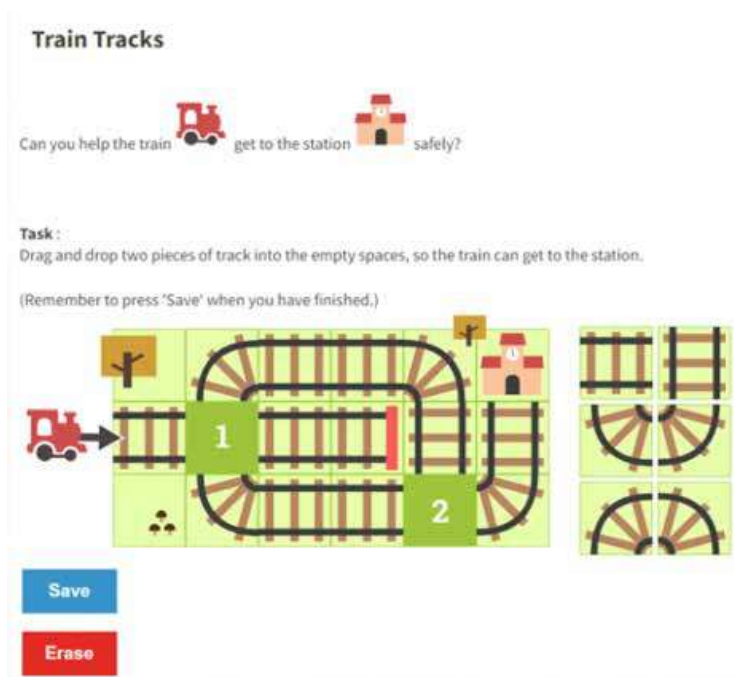


Figure 28. A task for students aged 6-8: Train Tracks (Bebras examples, 2022)

Bebras was founded in Lithuania in 2004. It initially spread throughout Europe, but now has members all over the world. In November 2021, Bebras competitions were organized in 37 countries and had more than 3 million participants. In addition to organizing competitions, Bebras members provide competition-related educational materials to schools, engage in teacher training, and promote computer science education in general. In addition, Bebras competitions are the subject of educational research. Typically, national Bebras activities are supported by governments, universities, research institutes, or computer societies.

Since 2016, the Bebras challenge is also held in Croatia, where it is called Dabar, and Croatian teachers participate in the preparation of tasks for the international Bebras community. Starting from 5624 participants in the first year, the challenge has grown to 679 schools with a total of 42,553 students participating in the last Croatian Bebras challenge in November 2021 (Dabar, n.d.). The organizer of the competition for Croatia is the association “Partners in Learning” with support of the Croatian Computer Science Association, Algebra University College and CARNET, and under the auspices of the Ministry of Science and Education.

In Croatia, students are divided into 5 categories according to their age:

- MikroDabar (1st and 2nd grade)
- MiliDabar (3rd and 4th grade)
- KiloDabar (5th and 6th grade)
- MegaDabar (7th and 8th grade)
- GigaDabar (1st to 4th grade high school)

Starting in 2021, there is also a competition for university students in Croatia, aiming to promote computational thinking among non-informatics students.

The Croatian Bebras is prepared by a group of about 30 volunteers who give their time to make the implementation of the competition in schools very simple. The competition takes place in schools, on computers or tablets. Students have 40 minutes to complete the test. Immediately after completing the test, they receive feedback on how many points they have achieved.

Unlike other similar competitions for students, Bebras is not only about excellence, but also about bringing computer science to as many students as possible. Therefore, there is only one level of competition for all students and only the names of the top 10% of students are published on the school's website. In this way, the competition does not discourage the less successful students. Instead, we boost their self-confidence and encourage the desire to take up the challenge next year.

Bebras builds excellently on the curricular reform of Informatics in Croatia, which encourages the development of computational thinking from the first grade of primary school through solving appropriate problem and logical tasks, developing strategies for analysing and solving problems, and programming, thus gradually introduces students to the world of digital technology.

Since its inception, Code Club PMF supports this initiative and participates in implementation of competition for students from the city of Split and the wider area. Training students and conducting the competition, as well as analysing the solutions to the tasks, are an integral part of the curriculum at Code Club PMF each year in November. Moreover, additional workshops are organized outside the competition period to introduce Bebras to as many students as possible. These workshops are regularly integrated with other science popularization events in Split such as Science Festival and Evening of Mathematics. For example, Bebras was involved in a joint activity of all faculty departments, entitled PrirodosLovac, but several independent workshops were held as well. In 2018 more than 250 students

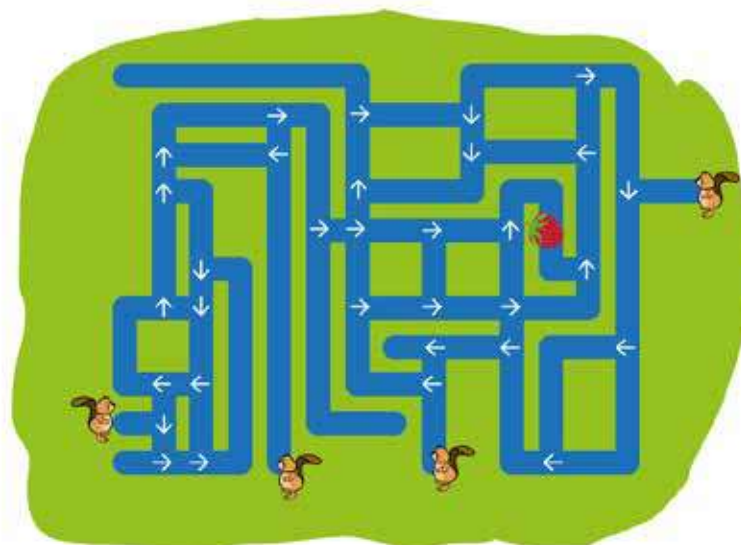
participated in the PrirodosLovac and another event was also organized in 2019. (PrirodosLovac, 2019). Part of the atmosphere in Prirodoslovac 2019 can be seen in Figure 29 and the title task is shown in Figure 30. Independently of the Croatian Bebras, special Bebras workshops were held during the 2019 Science Festival for 62 primary school students from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In December 2021, student members of the Code Club PMF created a Bebras video presentation at the Evening of Mathematics.

In addition to managing the competition and promoting Bebras in other popularisation platforms, several Code Club members actively participate in preparing tasks for competitions and are long-time members of the Bebras Croatia organizing committee.



**Figure 29.** Primary school children solving the Bebras tasks at PrirodosLovac 2019

Četiri đabra počnu plivati na različitim mjestima označenima na slici.  
Plivaju prema naprijed i uvijek prate strelice.



**Figure 30.** The task “Catch the strawberry” (“Lov na jagodu”) at PrirodosLovac 2019

## 4. RESULTS

All Code Club PMF leaders, including the most dedicated students of Faculty of Science, agree that conducting workshops for children is an invaluable experience. In this chapter, we explain the contributions Code Club makes to children and the broader community, as well as to educators themselves.

### 4.1. Contribution to children

The most obvious contributions are for children and the community. Code Club PMF follows the main goal of Code Club in general, which is to bring education on programming to all children, regardless of their financial means, distance from major cities, or prior knowledge or ability in a school subject. Children from small towns near Split such as Trogir, Omiš and surroundings participated in the workshops at the Faculty of Science, and we also held courses in Marina near Trogir. Code Club PMF builds on the goal of teaching programming and expands it by including education in other STEM areas, such as science and electronics in programming physical systems. At the same time, we encourage creativity, patience, and critical thinking.

In addition to learning outcomes, children in Code Club make more social connections, learn with their peers, share interests and knowledge, and develop empathy and a desire to work together. They also develop communication and presentation skills, as they often had to present their projects to their teachers and classmates.

The number of boys and girls who participated in our workshops is about the same, which gives hope that perhaps more girls will choose careers in STEM fields, thus breaking the gender stereotypes and increasing the number of women in scientific and IT careers.

### 4.2. Contribution to student volunteers

Most of the student volunteers at Code Club PMF Split study Computer Science and Technics on Faculty of Science. After graduating they get the title Master of Education in Computer Science and Technics. Nevertheless, the first experience a students can gain in real school is in methodological courses in the 4th year of college. Exactly that was the main motive of most students who joined Code Club in its very beginnings, when they were in their 2nd and 3rd year of study. Some of the students participated in 2019 Science Festival are shown in Figure 31.



**Figure 31.** Students at the opening ceremony of 2019 Science Festival

Through the code club, which simulated the classes students would otherwise have encountered in two to three years at the earliest, students have gained valuable experience. In addition to the experience, that is, the feeling of standing in something that can roughly be called a classroom, students

developed their educational and mentoring skills on several levels. Creating, preparing workshops, planning the time required for each part of syllabus, organizing and conducting week-to-week workshops helped students gain teaching experience. Along with it, maintaining a working atmosphere with sometimes over 20 children in the classroom, adapting materials and mostly an individualized approach to each child or small group of children resulted in the development of students' pedagogical skills. During each workshop students gained insight into how children think, their current level of knowledge and how capable children are. Furthermore, assessing children's abilities and therefore designing new exercises and workshops, introducing new technologies, continuous research and learning, organizing workshops and dealing with unexpected situations are great acquired values that students who participated in the Code Club bring with them in their professional and personal life.

Most of the Code Club student volunteers now, four years later, have successfully passed methodical courses and practices without problems, discomfort or even anxiety that can happen during practice exams in school. The students did their practices almost routinely, which was significantly contributed by the experience from the Code Club.

Code Club also brought many contacts to students, from parents of children to professors and various IT experts who recognized the efforts and work of volunteers and often publicly supported them and invited them to their workshops, for example the Internet of Things workshop, the workshop on face recognition shown on Figure 32., meet-ups and conferences where students have the opportunity to meet the cutting-edge technologies in computer science.



**Figure 32.** The workshop on face and object recognition using artificial intelligence on Jetson Nano, held by an expert from Croatian Robotics Association for Code Club student volunteers

Students developed very useful speaking and presentation skills week after week by designing and conducting classroom workshops and participating in physical and online events. To date, about 80% of Code Club volunteers have graduated, but all Code Club students are employed either as student interns or as full-time employees in primary and secondary schools or in IT industry. About half of the students have been hired by IT companies as quality assurance interns and developers, and some are currently working as junior software engineers and systems engineers. IT companies consider students who have participated in Code Club activities as valuable future employees, because they were willing to give their time to the community. In addition, both the students and their employers agree that the soft skills they developed through volunteering contribute to a great extent to their current professions.

### 4.3. Contribution to the community

The local community recognised the value of the Code Club PMF thus our leaders have frequently been asked to speak in media.

We gave several interviews to local television Mreža TV which continually follows various community engaged efforts in Split and surroundings. In two interviews, in 2018 and 2019, our club leader was talking about the significance of teaching computer science and computational thinking from the early age (video available at (Otvoreni Studio, 2018), in Croatian).

Students had the opportunity to talk about all their experiences regarding the Code Club, their student life, opinions about the local and global IT scene and the modern world in general, again in television show “Otvoreni studio” at Mreža TV (video available at (Otvoreni Studio, 2019)), but also in radio show “Kroz Bolonju i prašumu” by Radio Kampus. The students were highlighted as hardworking, community sensitive individuals who enrich the IT community of Split through the field of education.

The article about the awarding of diplomas at Code Club Marina was published in the local newspaper and on the municipality website (Code Club Marina, 2019).

## 5. CONCLUSION

Through its numerous activities over the past 4 years, the Code Club PMF has made an important contribution to the popularization of the Faculty of Science and its studies. This was confirmed by the three annual faculty awards for student volunteers in 2019 and 2022. Students enjoy participating in Code Club activities, and the benefits of their volunteer work are also recognized in the local community and in their personal career development.

As a next step, we will explore the possibilities of institutionalizing these activities and introducing service learning into the curriculum of Computer Science and similar study programmes at Faculty of Science.

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# “I FEEL LIKE ANOTHER I HAS GROWN”: BIOGRAPHICAL LEGACY OF THE COMMUNITY-ENGAGED LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

Anchored in a qualitative approach, yet informed by the constructivist theoretical perspective, this paper addresses a research issue related to the transformative potential and biographical legacy and impact of community-engaged learning model (service-learning) on twelve students who participated in the *Gender, Sexuality, Identities - From Oppression to Equality* course. This course is the first such in Croatian universities that, integrating the community-engaged learning model, covered the thematic areas of human rights, gender equality, gender-based violence and gender theory. For students who participated in this research, all of it represents the first such educational experience - so far they have not been exposed to the mentioned contents, they have not participated in a course of such specific didactic and methodological features, they have never collaborated with civil society organisations, they have never written reflective diaries, nor were they previously engaged in tasks similar to those that awaited them in this course. This paper therefore intends to contribute to the current academic debate on the positive outcomes of community-engaged learning for students in the context of its transformative potential viewed from the perspective of contributing to changes in student biographies. In addition, the paper seeks to answer the (research) question of whether the narratives of students who participated in such a course for the first time are narratives of disappointment or empowerment, continuity or change, and whether they have developed a tendency to modify (their) habitus? The main identified dimensions of the students' experienced change are classified through new knowledge or competencies, educational and professional paths, intentions of further (civic) engagement and personal development. Drawing on Turner's concept of “liminality” (1969), Bourdieu's habitus (1977, 1984) and Mezirow's Theory of transformative learning (1981), students' participation in the course with full integration of community-engaged learning model is interpreted in this paper as a liminal phenomenon of the otherwise traditional (higher education) teaching and learning field, which led to the modification of students' habitus, while indicating their empowerment and propensity for further socially responsible and active contribution within their communities.

**Keywords:** community-engaged learning, service-learning, transformative teaching & learning, liminal experience, habitus modification

## 1. INTRODUCTION

On the basis of a qualitative research approach and within the framework of participatory research, this paper presents research findings regarding an educational intervention carried out in the form of a (new) elective course at a higher education institution. It stands out by its complete integration of the community-engaged learning model, which still represents an innovation in the national higher education space. Community-engaged model of teaching and learning (also known as service-learning) has been systematically researched for decades so there is a plethora of studies that point to its

transformative potential in different contexts of (academic, personal and professional) growth and development of students, and its positive developmental impact on student biographies. A higher education teaching process that integrates a community-engaged learning model is organised in such a way, according to Ćulum and Ledić (2010), that it encourages purposeful and active participation of students in activities carefully designed in collaboration with representatives of organisations and institutions in the local community. In addition to encouraging the adoption of course content-related learning outcomes, the model also affects the development (of a wider range) of knowledge and skills of students, contributing to their deeper understanding of the needs and problems of the community and to more active civic engagement in the community. Numerous authors, as Furco (2011) points out, describe this model as a balanced approach to experiential student education that has the potential of contributing to active citizenship education. Through a review of a series of research Brown (2011) concludes that unlike the traditional approach, community-engaged learning is far more successful in encouraging civic responsibility and active citizenship of the younger generations. There is a broad consensus in the literature today that the experience of participating in a teaching process that integrates community-engaged learning is associated with later civic participation (Billig, 2000; Hart et al., 2007).

Drawing on previous research, this paper seeks to address the research question related to the biographical impact of community-engaged learning models on students taking the course *Gender, Sexuality, Identities - from Oppression to Equality*, for whom participation in this course was the first such experience in their educational paths. The course and complementary mentoring programmes were co-created and implemented in partnership between Faculty's Centre for Women's Studies and civil society organizations from the local community - Lesbian Organization Rijeka "LORI", Human Rights and Civic Participation Association "PaRiter", and SOS Rijeka - Centre for Nonviolence and Human Rights.<sup>17</sup> This paper intends to contribute to the current academic debate on the positive outcomes of community-engaged learning for students in the context of its transformative potential viewed from the perspective of contributing to changes in student biographies. In addition, the paper seeks to answer the research question of whether the narratives of students are narratives of disappointment or empowerment, continuity or change, and whether they have developed a tendency to modify (their) habitus? Relying on Turner's concept of "liminality" (1969), Bourdieu's theoretical concept of "habitus" (1977, 1984) and Mezirow's theory of transformative learning (1981), student participation in the course with full integration of community-engaged learning models is interpreted as a liminal phenomenon of the otherwise traditional (higher education) teaching field, which has led to the modification of the habitus of students and indicates their empowerment and propensity for further socially responsible and active participation in the community.

## **2. THEORETICAL DESIGN: LIMINALITY, HABITUS AND THE TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THEORY**

Turner (1969) describes liminality as a phase that has few or no characteristics of the previous or the next phase and in which an individual or group has ambiguous characteristics. It is the state of 'in-between', the state of interspace in which one passes from one experience to another. In this liminal 'space and time', individuals are deprived of their usual identity while on the verge of personal (or social) transformation. This liminal situation for Turner is characterised by freedom, egalitarianism, informal togetherness and creativity. Liminality can be observed in individuals, groups, or society as a whole. As this paper is oriented to the level of individuals, i.e. students attending the course, liminality is observed and interpreted in it precisely from this point of view. An innovative course that fully integrates the community-engaged learning model is viewed as a liminal phase, i.e. as that (educational,

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<sup>17</sup> Authors have the consent of all the above collaborators to publish their data.

innovative, creative, interdisciplinary) interspace into which students have moved from previous experiences of attending (dominantly) traditional teaching in a chosen disciplinary field.

Bourdieu (1989) describes habitus as a set of symbolically structured, historically inherited, enduring, and transferable dispositions adopted during socialisation that guide individual action, perception, and interpretation of the world, and that turns the individual, through customary norms, to institutional rules. For him, habitus is the mental structure through which the social world is observed, i.e. the unconscious and internalised ‘map’ of the path to action with coded beliefs, social class and action strategies, which becomes a *modus operandi* for action, which the individual continuously regulates and (re) defines. Nevertheless, the ‘life’ of students is shaped in predominantly traditional educational fields and therefore has a tendency of (continuous) empowerment of traditional patterns, rather than change (Ćulum and Doolan, 2015). However, Fanuko (2008) recalls that habitus is not *fatum* - it is permanent, but not eternal. This is an open system of dispositions that is constantly subject to the influence of (new) experiences, thus reproducing its structure, as well as modifying it. Accordingly, habitus change is possible.

Mezirow’s transformative learning theory (1981) seems to be a “fertile” platform for observing such inclinations. Mezirow (1981) understands learning as the process of using a previous interpretation to construct a new or revised interpretation of one’s experience in order to direct future action. Mezirow (2009) describes transformative learning as transforming problematic frameworks of reference to make them more inclusive, less discriminatory, more reflective, more open, and more emotionally capable of change. In an institutional educational context, usually three situations that follow one another, says Mezirow (2009), can lead to transformative learning - experience, critical thinking, and reflection on lived experience accompanied by a substantiated discussion.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The focus of this paper is the experiences of twelve students attending a course based on the full integration of the community-engaged learning model, and the meanings they give it in the context of transformative potential (of the new) learning experience and, consequently, its biographical legacy framed as modifications of their own *habitus*. Although heterogeneous in their disciplinary areas, the students participating in this research are connected by two realities - (I) participation in this course was the first such (teaching, educational, didactic-methodological) experience for all of them, and (II) they have not yet been exposed to the content brought before them by the course.

The process of collecting data through a focus group, structured interviews and creative qualitative research procedures (example of writing a ‘farewell letter’ to their mentors in collaborating organisations) took place during February and March 2020. The focus group represented a central data collection process, and its protocol was focused on issues related to various aspects of students’ experience (motivation, satisfaction with content and didactic-methodological determinants, acquired knowledge, (value) position in relation to new knowledge, cognitive and emotional experience, attitudes, reflection on oneself before and after the course, future plans, challenges, etc.). Structured interviews and qualitative creative research techniques were the complementary methods used, and the technique of writing ‘farewell letters’ enabled researchers insights into deeper spheres of students’ experience. Mason (2006, according to Richards and Morse, 2013) states that creatively combining different methods can make it easier for researchers to think “beyond boundaries and frameworks” and generate new ways of researching and understanding one’s reality. The issue of research ethics was answered from the aspect of the approach to participants, (written and audio) informed consent and accountability towards the participants. All collected data were transcribed, and the Dedoose software for qualitative data processing was used for their analysis. Coded data were subjected to a thematic analysis - a method adequate for

the analysis of qualitative data and in particular the interpretation of their meanings (Schreier, 2012), and/or an analytical process focused on the inductive identification of recognizable patterns (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984).

#### 4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION: THE NEW "I" AS AN EXPECTED CHANGE OF COURSE PARTICIPATION

The analysis unequivocally speaks in favour of a series of cognitive, emotional and value changes that students associate precisely with the experience of attending the course. The importance they attach to this experience is predominantly related to a number of different assignments they worked on, especially those of a reflective nature. Along with the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, those tasks enabled them to think critically about the current social problems related to the course topics, as well as themselves, their (dis)positions and the roles they have (or could/should have) in the context of addressing these same challenges and social problems in the community.

The students very openly shared impressions of their specific experiences as extremely significant, transformative, and in some cases emancipatory. For example, female students who were part of the PaRiter mentoring programme gained completely new insights into women's rights, especially labour and reproductive rights. Before taking this course, they were, in their own words, deeply convinced that in the modern social context women really enjoy great (labour) rights, but the research and analysis they studied while performing the tasks convinced them of a completely different reality, which they emphasise "*really stunned*" them. This course helped them to become more aware of this very moment of reality, which, as they ardently point out, made them especially angry because it shows them the denial and disrespect of their personal goals. Their (new) conscious attitudes is best illustrated by the following statement:

"The course helped me to become aware of the reality, which means that tomorrow they will look at me on the market as a woman, and then as a potential pregnant woman and mother, while men are not seen that way, regardless of the fact that they have the right to go on parental leave - I was not aware of that at all, and that is simply a fact - regardless of whether you want a child or not, the market is simply programmed to see you as a woman as a future pregnant woman and mother, regardless of the fact that your wishes and plans may not head at all in that direction."

Students involved in the LORI mentoring programme pay special attention to the new, deeper and different personal frame of reference for considering the rights, challenges and difficulties of people in the LGBTIQ community. One student puts in this context a re-experienced situation in which she witnessed the 'coming out' moment of her gay friend. The course allowed to observe and analyse the challenges and difficulties of LGBTIQ people in a multifaceted framework, which resulted in the transformation of one (intimate) moment from the category of funny to the category of significant and true gratitude, as best evidenced by her words:

*"My friend's first coming out was precisely to me ... at the time I didn't even realize what big a deal this was for him because I knew he was gay anyway, I even found it a bit silly that he told me that, of course I knew... but this course helped me understand how important this really was for him, to say it out loud to someone he trusted... Only now do I really understand what he had to go through."*

Students engaged in the SOS mentoring programme also denote this course with the significance of being transformative and emancipatory. They did not know (much) about the topic of gender-based violence before the course or, at least, as they say, "*we did not understand or experience it as a neighbourhood phenomenon.*" Their engagement in the course immersed them deeply in the topic, but also in the vivid and painful experiences of women who were (and/or still are) victims of violence, and with

whom they had the opportunity to talk. The strength of the personal change they experienced is best illustrated by their statements that they have become different, better and richer people:

“We learned a lot about gender-based violence. I was very intrigued by the topic and I want to continue to deal with it somehow... I’m very glad we had this experience because I feel like a much better and richer person.”

The achieved transformative potential of this course is best reflected in the students’ behavioural dimension and selected personal “battles”, that they decided to wage with people - among their friends and/or in their family environment. The new insights gained in the course, but especially the personal experience of these insights, awakened in them a strong feeling that they themselves should work to eliminate stereotypes and prejudices of people from their environment. In that sense, the students spoke openly about their “*hard core anti-gay roommates*,” “*fathers who have backward attitudes*,” “*grandmothers who just don’t understand at all*.” Their personal efforts and endeavours, as they say, have borne fruit, so, for example, the mentioned roommates “*hang out with my gay friends today*.” Another student cites an example from the family environment and describes how, in addition to (persistently) passing on the acquired knowledge and current research findings, she presented a set of arguments to her family members that influenced their understanding of the context and consequently their change of attitudes towards LGBTIQ couples of the community.

Post-course reflections on the new ‘I’ are also placed by students in the context of their further educational and career paths. Namely, there is a consensus among the students that they are “*very taken*” with all the topics. Not only do they therefore want to continue to deal with them and further educate themselves, but they also want to continue to work with their mentors. It is interesting to note that in the context of the desire for future activities on these topics, students seem to be most held and pushed by the anger that this course aroused in them, i.e. the insights into the realities of the topics they dealt with.

*“The course made me angry, it made me very angry; I mean, the topics we dealt with made me angry; in fact people who don’t act the way they should; I was angered by the younger generations who are turning out even more stupid and more backward than us... and in general the attitudes about gender roles that are only passed on to new generations of children and young people. That’s why I think we have to do something more with this, I don’t yet know what, but we have to do something because the situation is very worrisome.”*

The anger expressed through this quote is not hidden by the students at all and they are considering how it can further direct them and lead them towards shaping their own meaningful future professional activity. Some of them are thus considering expanding on the activities that were developed in this course and raising them to a new level. Some of them are thinking about how they could integrate these topics into their chosen profession, especially valuing the newly acquired knowledge and diverse skills - “*this course enabled me my first experience of preparing a radio show and I think it’s great to take something like this with you into life*.” Some see their role in educating future youth generations, given that “*children and young people today are poorly educated about these topics, which is why we think it’s really necessary to work on this and that these are ways we can influence future generations and society*.” For some, this course, and especially the experience of reflection, stimulated thinking about their own future and the desired further professional orientation. Regardless of the mentioned (contextual) differences, it is certain that the course, in their own words “*got them very worked up*” and that everyone is seriously thinking about how to lead these new ‘I’s to the new professional challenges:

*“This course helped me a lot, my knowledge on these topics was nothing; in addition to giving me such a corpus of new knowledge, it helped me to apply that same newly acquired knowledge further in my life and understand that I am an individual who now has that knowledge and that I should act accordingly... maybe to transfer that knowledge to someone else... and to change things for the better...”*

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The biographical impact of community-engaged learning model on students is analysed in order to contribute to understanding its transformative potential in the context of modifying the habitus of the students. As a transgressive 'interspace', in an otherwise traditional higher education teaching field (at least in the national setting), the course students attended ends up being surprisingly fruitful for a spectrum of personal change covering new knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, personal development, or simply put, 'new students', ready for socially responsible and active engagement in the community. Students' 'post-teaching' habitus was clearly transformed in such a designed course which represented a liminal educational-activist experience - "I feel completely different after this course". Relying on Crossley's argument (2003) that activism implies a constant attempt to change our usual ways of existing in the world and its interpretation, it can be concluded that this 'new' student habitus, to which they testify in unison, is characterised by a propensity for activism and a strong need for personal contribution to (positive) social changes. In this context, the biographical impact of this (higher education) teaching experience reveals narratives of students' empowerment and personal change.

How much of a biographical impact this experience has left on the students who have taken this course is best illustrated by one of students' statements - *I feel like another I has grown.*"

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# LISTENING TO VOICES: PERSPECTIVES OF EMPLOYERS AND UNIVERSITY STUDENTS UNDERGOING WORK- BASED LEARNING

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents concise case studies of work-based learning experiences by undergraduate students reading for a degree in Public Policy at the University of Malta. Structured interviews were conducted with employers and undergraduate students to provide an overview of their respective work-based experiences. The invaluable feedback which emerged from the structured interviews on the nature of these experiences was analysed. This served as a valuable tool to calibrate and refine the nature of these practices. Work-based learning bridges the gap between academic theory and exposure to real-life situations where students' knowledge is filtered and applied to relevant workplace environments. Such experiences also help students improve their soft skills and acquire new tools, that are sought after by the employers. Furthermore, feedback emanating from employers' perspectives can also serve to temper the University course curriculum so as to ensure that it is relevant to the requirements of modern-day society.

**Keywords:** work-based learning, University students, employers, experience, Malta

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Work-based learning (WBL) seeks to bridge the gap between academia and the world of work. Student placements consist of work conducted in an organisation which is relevant to the degree they are reading for. Such experiences are viewed as improving students' employability after graduation. Today, employers give social skills and attitudes, importance (Cunningham and Villaseñor, 2014). Student placements give employers the opportunity to observe potential employees before hiring and can contribute to creating a skilled workforce.

The aim of this study is to 'listen' to students' and employers' voices on their perspectives of work-based learning. The research focused on students reading for a bachelor's in commerce with a specialisation in Public Policy. This is a three-year undergraduate degree programme offered at the University of Malta. Structured interviews were held with Public Policy students and their placement providers to elicit their perspectives on Public Policy placements. The supervised placement experiences complemented the findings and themes that emerged.

## 2. LITERATURE

“Universities have traditionally been responsible for delivering education and training to students, but with the massification of higher education and the increasing demand for work-based learning, employers are potentially taking on some of the role of teaching students. In higher education, employers demand that graduates be more ‘work ready’” (Atkinson, 2016, p.9)

'Learning by doing' reinforces understanding by contextualising knowledge and promoting the 'application' and 'reflection' stages of Kolb's cycle of learning (Kolb, 1984). It is acknowledged that learning also occurs outside the classroom. Students need to actively engage to learn. This requires skills to reflect on what they have learned from the experience, knowledge, and build upon this learning. Work experience allows students to reflect on and put into practice what they have learned from formal study. The Department of Public Policy at the University of Malta facilitates this experience embedded in the curriculum.

Placements are a requirement of the Public Policy undergraduate course at the University of Malta. The students approach an organisation of their choice, planning and agreeing to the logistics. Some of the placement objectives included policy and comparative analyses, research work on specific policies and processes and consultation exercises.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire, in-depth interviews and placement reports were used to obtain data from students and their employers, respectively. The feedback obtained from the assessment reports, questionnaire and interviews led to the triangulation of data. The questionnaire was devised and sent to ten Public Policy students who consented to participate in this research. All data was stored, and password protected to ensure confidentiality. The responses were processed according to the University of Malta's ethical guidelines. The ten employers who engaged these undergraduate students, were interviewed. An interview guide was devised consisting of questions related to the placement experience. The research took place between April and May 2022. These placements were held in Banks, EU related institutions, the public sector, Ministries, and private companies. Employers sent in reports on the students' performance at the place of work. The reports were analysed to triangulate the interview and questionnaire data. A thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was conducted, and eight themes emerged.

*Limitations:* The sample included a cohort of ten undergraduate students and ten employers. They conducted their placements in one academic year. This means that the responses are indicative and set constraints of generalisability (McKenzie et., 1997). In-depth interviews do not allow for generalisations. They are time intensive. Another limitation of this research is that it is specific to Public Policy students in Malta.

### 4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Eight themes emerged from the findings. These included the objectives and deliverables of the placement, the experience and its relevance, improvements, employers' approach towards the students, the University course, learning outcomes, skills, and tools. There were ten Public Policy students who completed the questionnaire. Organisations where the students conducted their placements included the Ministry for Finance and Employment, Ministry for Agriculture, Fisheries and Animal Rights, Malta Financial Services Authority, Environment Resources Authority, Gozo Regional Development Authority, Commission on Gender-Based Violence & Domestic Violence, Central Bank of Malta, Malta's Permanent Representation to the EU, Deloitte, Ernst and Young. Students' placements took place between December 2021 and April 2022. These occurred during the students' academic year.

*Students' voices:* Students were asked questions on the placement objectives and experiences. They were also asked how this exercise can be improved and whether there was any missing content in the undergraduate course. The objectives of these placements consisted of analysing national and EU policies, statistical data, and trends, transcribing interviews, and attending high level meetings to mention a few. Students had to communicate with clients and employees and work as a team. The students had

to update standards of practice, draw up reports and delivering presentations. Eighty percent of the respondents felt that their placement experience was fruitful. Twenty percent felt that the work “was too technical in nature ...” (S5). Ninety percent of the respondents also stated that the placement gave them the opportunity to apply theory to life situations. They were able to put academic skills into practice. It was suggested that placements should be offered earlier in the course, are longer than fifty hours to assimilate the work and deepen the ‘job’ experience. The University coordinator, student, placement provider should hold an initial meeting to establish the placements’ objectives. Ninety percent of the respondents stated that they were greeted and treated as any other employee. On the other hand, 10% of the respondents stated that the placement providers were not prepared for them. The respondents suggested that students should be exposed to how to manage big data and problem-solving case studies. Experts should be invited to share their work experiences. One respondent stated that relevant work and interacting with work colleagues were beneficial. Others claimed that they learnt how to meet deadlines and work under pressure. Sixty percent of the respondents claimed time management was important. It was also stated that students need to adapt to the organisation’s culture and management’s approach.

*Employers’ voices:* Interviews were held with the respective employers. The interview guide consisted of ten questions and focused on seven themes namely placement experience, length of placements, students’ performance, skills and tools, recommendations, and University engagement.

The interviewees stated that placements are beneficial to their organisation. The students were well-equipped to manage assigned tasks. It was recommended that they should have background knowledge of the placement organisation. Seventy percent of the employers claimed that the placements should be lengthened to help students familiarise themselves with the work processes. Other important skills included writing, communication, and analytical skills. One employer gave importance to students who formed part of student associations on campus claiming that eventually they advance quicker within their organisation. Employers agreed that guest speakers should be invited to share their experiences with students. This would also help them know who the key players are in institutions. Employers were asked if they participated in the Public Policy curriculum. Many state that they were never asked for feedback and are not sure how to engage and approach the University of Malta. It was suggested that there should be a channel to communicate with employers to also clarify placement objectives and manage expectations.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The perspectives of students and employers are similar in many aspects. Employers agree that offering student placements gives them valuable skills while still at university. They are expected to be flexible, adaptable, and multi-task, where applicable. Such an experience demands effective time management skills and problem-solving techniques. Students interact with staff, build confidence and taking initiative. Employers and students alike, agreed that the unpaid placement should be longer than fifty hours. Employers wish to collaborate with the University of Malta by offering placements as these students may be a future talent pipeline. Students bring different perspectives that can assist employers in keeping up with the changing market. Despite the benefits of placements, there are constraints. Placement providers may not have the time to guide students. There may be differing expectations of employers and students about the placement outcomes.

It is acknowledged that the placement scheme is as important as the formal undergraduate course. It gives students the opportunity to develop specialist and generic skills sets at the workplace. This benefits both the employers and students.

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CIP - Katalogizacija u publikaciji  
SVEUČILIŠNA KNJIŽNICA  
U SPLITU

UDK 378.147(062)

INTERNATIONAL scientific-professional  
conference on Service-Learning Community -  
engaged University (1 ; 2022 ; Split)  
Community - engaged University : book  
of papers / 1st International scientific-  
professional conference on Service-  
Learning, Split, Croatia, 20th of May 2022  
; editor Ivana Jadrić, Ivana Bilić. -  
Split : University of Split, The European  
University of the Seas (SEA-EU) Alliance,  
2022.

Bibliografija. - Abstracts.

ISBN 978-953-7220-72-3

1. Jadrić, Ivana 2. Bilić, Ivana,  
ekonomistica 1974-  
I. Učenje -- Visokoškolska nastava II.  
Visokoškolsko obrazovanje -- Split III.  
Visokoškolsko obrazovanje -- Razvojne  
perspektive

190502013

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ISBN 978-953-7220-72-3

Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union





Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union

