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14 Considerations for service learning in European higher education

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This chapter aims to offer reflections from the authors' participation in the Europe Engage project and their experiences of enacting service learning. It presents 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. The main challenges identified by the authors encompass a range of domains from broader socio-political approaches to the mission of higher education associated with broader societal trends, linguistic and cultural translation and adaptation, contextual and national considerations, institutional models to support a sustainable and well-documented practice and the development and maintenance of national and transnational networks in the field of service learning. All of these will be explored by way of challenges that interrelate and overlap. However, we are also cognisant that these challenges can easily be transformed into opportunities given the right conditions, and we argue that awareness of challenges can enable more successful strategies and practices for sustainability.

Socio-political considerations

The adoption of pedagogical practices and models for different socio-political contexts need scrutiny and reflection in terms of potential benefits and limitations. Service learning, along with other educational innovations that are imported from another cultural context, need to go through a complex process of transformation, hybridisation, partial rejection and creative deviation (McIlrath, 2018). The historical context raises challenges that are complex and require in-depth reflection on the purpose, philosophy and practice of a pedagogy, and in this case it is service learning that we are assessing. Take for example Lithuania, where service learning is considered as a transferring and a borrowing of an educational innovation that has been described as 'policy travelling', 'policy borrowing', 'educational transfer' and 'educational diffusion' (Vandzinskaitė, 2010). The practice of service learning in Lithuania was analysed as a hermeneutic and interpretative process recognised as a practice created in one cultural and historical context,

which was moved/imported to another, and that process required cultural interpretation and adaptation (Mažeikis, 2007, 2008; Vandzinskaitė, 2010).

In general, service learning practices in higher education institutions have been influenced by models developed by and influenced by a US context (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Furco, 2001; Seifer, 1998; Sigmon, 1994), based on ideas of pragmatism (Harkavy & Benson, 1998), utilitarianism and communitarianism (Codispoti, 2004), with particular respect to local communities, combination and negotiation of interests of individuals and communities (Bringle, Clayton, & Price, 2009). Again taking Lithuania as an example with unique post-communist cultural and historical attributes where the historic devaluation of communities took place within a totalitarian Soviet regime and a non-critical perception of utilitarian individualism during the post-soviet period (Mažeikis, 2007), the embedding of service learning has been a challenge. When analysing the implementation of service learning in a post-communist context, it is essential to take into account factors such as the historically informed lack of trust in interpersonal and inter-organisation relations, the weakness of civic society, civic participation and engagement, the exaggerated politicisation of the public sphere and the underestimation of the role of local neighbourhoods and communities (Vandzinskaitė, Mažeikienė, & Ruškus, 2010). A weak civic society, weaknesses within NGOs as sites for service learning, and lack of awareness on the importance of civic engagement in society and within higher education institutions have all created additional obstacles for the introduction of service learning in Lithuania.

While authors such as Robinson (2012) consider that service learning has not been thought of as political, others, like McIlrath (2018), see it as political and aligned with left and right politics depending on the context. In any case, socio-political factors have affected the process of adaptation of service learning to cultural contexts. Spain is another good example. As a former dictatorship that endured for four decades, it needed to develop a stronger democratic culture that would encourage citizens to participate actively in political and social life. The current complex social situation in Spain (e.g. high unemployment, increasing poverty, progressive aging) needs to offer real opportunities for participating in the identification of and engagement with social problems at local, national and global levels in order to encourage students to become both professionals and critical citizens (Naval, Garcia, Puig, & Santos, 2011). One of the goals of higher education within a democracy is to help students become engaged as active citizens (Robinson, 2012), and service learning can offer this educative opportunity. This might explain why service learning in Spain is strongly linked to democratic values and the projects often emphasise goals related to democratic practices (García Gómez, 2011).

Also, it would be worth briefly referring to another challenge that relates to European socio-political history and the tradition of civic engagement, the community and non-profit sector and the recent and ongoing financial

cuts and underfunding of the sector due to fiscal constraints and the global recession (Healy, Rowan, & McIlrath, 2014). This has led to organisations having less paid staff available for coordination tasks. Service learning, just as other third-party volunteering (Haski-Leventhal, Meijs, & Hustinx, 2010), is highly dependent on well-organised non-profits in which these organisations share the added work of 'learning'. Having less paid staff could also potentially result in less time, effort and energy that non-profits can devote to supporting students, coordinating service learning and establishing reciprocal partnerships with higher education institutions.

Linguistic and cultural translation and adaptation

In Europe, the term and the definition of service learning has been adopted from the United States and the English language (the lingua franca of academic research). The morphological conciseness of the English language offers advantages for carrying out tasks of lexicological synthesis, but the notions that are formulated with a remarkable economy of words in this language require the use of various terms in other languages, therefore forcing a complex interpretive task (Opazo, Aramburuzabala, & García-Peinado, 2014).

This linguistic challenge focuses on the expression 'service learning', which can have a difficult translation. In Portugal, the core ideas associated to the concepts and practices of service learning fit better under 'community-based learning' ('*aprendizagem de base comunitária*'), as it provides a better understanding of the focus and purpose and establishes a connection with student involvement and interaction with the community, which is a valuable practice towards the strengthening of the notions of civic engagement, collaboration, partnership and the relevance of citizenship in modern times.

In Ireland, the term service learning is also problematic and many higher education institutions have adopted 'community-based learning' as the preferred term. The word service within an Irish context has both punitive as well as Catholic overtones and histories. It is punitive in the sense that judges in court dispense community service to those that have committed crimes in society that do not merit a prison term. The term service has a profoundly Catholic orientation in societies that have Catholic legacies and states. This is the reason why in Italy the translation is often avoided and the English term service learning is commonly used.

A notion of 'service' in Lithuania does not have relevant or positive historical and cultural connotations. 'Service' is regarded either as a service in a Catholic and Christian sense, which doesn't always look relevant to this type of learning in Lithuania, or perceived in the light of Soviet ideology. On the one hand, the soviet ideology promoted 'service' to the Communist party and in the Soviet Army and is associated with officially organised *subotniki* (voluntary work on Saturdays). On the other hand, soviet ideology critically and negatively envisaged service in terms of class relations between master and servant. All these negative perceptions of service in Lithuania grounded

translation of service learning into 'cooperative studies' (*'koopervuotos studijos'*), which stressed reciprocal and mutual relations between local communities and universities (Balčiūnienė, 2007; Mažeikis, 2004).

The conceptualisation of service learning in European universities is established in a context of epistemological diversity. The multiple definitions of service learning that researchers, teachers and students have can negatively affect the experiences and research. For that reason, it seemed urgent to have a dialogue between the various European academic institutions with the purpose of constructing a standard definition of the term service learning that respects local contexts (Opazo, Aramburuzabala, & Cerrillo, 2016). The Europe Engage project faced this challenge and partners agreed on a collective definition, as seen on Chapter 4 (McIlrath et al., 2016, p 4).

Contextual and national considerations

Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, European universities have acquired autonomy from external powers and academic freedom for students and faculty. Following the model of von Humboldt, higher education institutions aspire to be independent, while governments limit their power in order to ensure their autonomy, freedom of teaching and research and criticism based on reasoning. Therefore, universities are prompted to develop their priorities. While research and key new national and institutional priorities such as employability are stressed, other issues such as civic engagement and social responsibility are overshadowed. In that sense, there is a concern that service learning remains on the periphery, which explains the relatively low existence of civic engagement and service learning within the curriculum activities.

Other activities, like internships or volunteering, are often supported. Internships, because they focus on the acquisition of professional competences, and the process has to be monitored by a practitioner of the same profession, whereas service learning also focuses on the acquisition of transversal competences and not just on specific professional skills. Volunteering is frequent in European universities. More and more institutions have central units of volunteering, so these practices are usually institutionalised. It seems as if universities consider that with volunteering they have already fulfilled their social responsibility and there is little space for other practices such as service learning, even though it links civic engagement with the curriculum.

As indicated by many authors in this book, many higher education institutions embrace to varying degrees civic engagement and social responsibility within their mission statements and institutional plans. These range from general notions of contributing to society through knowledge and research to more precise commitments to local and regional communities. One of the main challenges that universities face, particularly in the area of humanities, is the pressure focused on economic sustainability, consolidating research practices to capture funding to be able to operate. This vision has

the advantage of integrating the university in the social and economic fabric, yet this option should not remit to a second plan in the mission of universities, which is the training of future generations in the various domains of science. Martha Nussbaum (2010) pointed that in democratic societies, where the arts and humanities are losing space, we need to be alert that responsible citizenship requires a critical spirit with the ability to integrate historical data and compare notions of social justice, as well as the capacity to imagine the needs of others. Service learning, as an innovative pedagogic practice, provides the opportunity to make mission statements a reality through a methodology that offers opportunities to detect and act upon social problems and the real needs of others. There is an urgent need in most European higher education institutions to increase opportunities for students to apply newly acquired knowledge and skills actively and progress in their learning while developing civic competences.

Logistical considerations

Coordinating infrastructure

The absence of dedicated coordinating units or teams of people designated to support service learning is a significant barrier towards the mainstreaming and institutionalisation of the pedagogy (McIlrath et al., 2016). Creating a centralised office or unit that supports and coordinates service learning activities at the organisational level is usually a consequence of the importance placed on the pedagogy by the institution and hope to mainstream the approach. From our experiences, most European higher education institutions where service learning is adopted follow a bottom-up process of development that is typically born of individual initiatives established by committed academics who believe that the university has to be committed to society. This usually results in a landscape of individual projects and fragmentation as in many of these cases the courses operate under the radar with little institutional support (McIlrath et al., 2016). This situation is starting to change, as the number of universities that create stable structures to support service learning is increasing in countries where service learning has had a fairly long history, such as Germany, Spain and Ireland. However, special care should be taken in order to prevent service learning from becoming just one more academic practice (Opazo et al., 2016).

Funding

Funding is a key factor related to the use and the impact of service learning in higher education, as it provides the necessary infrastructure for its success and sustainability (Holland, 1997). However, too often there are no funds allocated or teachers and students assume the costs associated with the project.

Europe Engage partners acknowledged a deficit of funding, cuts in university budget and the economic recession as having a negative bearing on the adoption of service learning as an approach. Engaged higher education institutions and other organisations have to support service learning economically if they are committed to it.

Reward and recognition

The Europe Engage project also indicated that a lack of internal and external rewards and recognition are significant barriers towards the embedding of service learning within higher education institutions. Thus, academic promotion mechanisms and internal and external accreditation systems as well as any academic rewards should acknowledge a civic and social commitment.

Academics with prior service learning experience, who are often motivated by intrinsic personal values, and incoming new faculty or junior members of higher education that are more inclined to use innovative approaches, perceive the lack of recognition and rewards as major barriers. Thus reward and recognition is vital to encourage faculty to adopt service learning. According to Bringle and Hatcher (1996), the importance of this issue should not be underestimated, as faculty are primarily responsible for the direction and design of curriculum and are therefore gatekeepers for the adoption and promotion of innovative pedagogies such as service learning. The same principle applies to the students, who should get recognition for their service learning activity with ECTS¹ (European Credit Transfer System) credits. In this way, the discourse that service learning is an integral part of the curriculum and not an annexe, a cherry on the cake, is transferred.

Time

Results of the survey conducted in the 12 partner institutions of the Europe Engage project indicate time as a major barrier towards the implementation of service learning. All acknowledged the need for time and energy to establish partnerships and coordinate logistics related to service learning. Release time from other duties was one possible solution offered towards the implementation of service learning. Service learning projects in European institutions are mostly carried out by the teacher's own initiative, which creates a number of problems. Sometimes the teacher ignores a large amount of work that can be attached to a service learning project. This is especially relevant when the methodology is used as part of a 'regular' subject in any degree because service learning tasks have to be done together with the rest of duties (Opazo et al., 2016); but it can also be a challenge in courses specifically devoted to service learning. In both cases, it seems necessary to have assistance with the access to the community entities, as well as the planning, monitoring and evaluation of the project.

The difficulty of providing personalised attention to the students is a factor to be considered in order to improve the implementation of service learning in higher education. In this regard, the use of ICTs and virtualisation of communications might be helpful as it can facilitate the delivery of learning materials to students, assessment, student tracking, collaboration and communication (Opazo et al., 2016; Opazo, Aramburuzabala, Ramírez, & Lorite, 2017).

Knowledge and expertise

Lack of knowledge and expertise in service learning can also be a barrier. As an innovative teaching and learning methodology, it requires training for staff on issues such as what service learning is and what is not, the theoretical and practical basis, quality standards, reflection, connecting course goals and assessment. Not only because it is still entirely unknown by teaching professionals, but also because assistance is required in order for teachers to get apart from traditional methodologies that often promote passive learning from students. Training can strengthen student and faculty participation in their communities.

Training is also expected to change the individualistic focus of teaching and learning, as service learning implies learning processes that are carried out in the framework of a joint project by all the agents involved: teachers, students and social entities (Martínez, Martínez, Alonso, & Gezuraga, 2013). The complexity of the social reality in which service learning is framed, favours interdisciplinary designs in the teaching and learning processes, which lead teachers to change their conception of the subject that is taught and their teaching responsibility and to collaborate with colleagues of other subjects or disciplines involved in the service learning project. The use of service learning often promotes the development of teaching networks and research lines even for teachers from areas other than education and related fields.

Research

Quantity and quality of research on service learning projects are improving; however, more studies are necessary in the European higher education space in order to detect the benefits and the obstacles for students, community partners and university staff, in the short, medium and long term. Research on the impact of service learning activities for students, community partners and the universities is also needed.

Developing data is key to determining the impact of service learning in European higher education institutions. Universities need to know the real effects that service learning has on the students, teachers, institutions and the community. While respecting their singularity, universities need to develop elements that are shared by different institutions regarding

protocols, assessment tools and databases of good practices (Opazo et al., 2016).

Collegiate and participatory research should be promoted in order to maintain coherence with the nature of the subject of studies; that is, with the nature of service learning.

Assessment tools for the evaluation of projects

Service learning is being embedded little by little in European universities through innovative experiences in all areas of knowledge. However, as its implementation grows, it is important that the evaluation of its processes and results grows. Thus, it is convenient to analyse and reflect on criteria and indicators using hetero-evaluation, self-evaluation and co-evaluation, participatory and self-managed evaluation, continuous evaluation, resources to evaluate and the evaluation of transversal competences and institutionalisation processes. Moreover, the actors involved must be both object and subject of the evaluation.

Sustainability of the service learning programmes

Service learning continues to grow in Europe, despite a lack of funds and national, local and institutional policies for supporting it. Many projects are developed without sponsorship, but the sustainability of projects and programmes is still an unresolved matter.

A lack of institutionalisation often jeopardises the continuity of service learning programmes in European higher education. Sustainability is limited because service learning courses and projects are mostly based on personal initiatives.

Service learning development in European universities is highly sporadic and inconsistent. For example, in Lithuania, it has been financed by the European Union through short-term three-year projects, but there is no long-lasting purposeful national policy for supporting this type of practice. This is also the case of the Europe Engage project, which took three years to prepare (2011–2014), was funded by the European Union for three years (2014–2017), but has not got continuation in the scope of the European Commission.

As Mažeikienė, McIlrath and McMenemy indicate in Chapters 6 and 8 of this book, short-term funding can be good to catalyse but funding in the longer term is necessary for the sustainability of service learning programmes.

Sustainability of service learning programmes represents a considerable challenge in European universities. It is necessary to consolidate this pedagogical method by making it sustainable through ‘training, commitment and awareness of the individual responsibility that one assumes, and the institutional recognition’ (Alonso, Arandia, Martínez, & Gezuraga, 2013, p. 214).

Quality standards

Adhering to quality principles of effective practice is essential in service learning. Without it, significant impacts on participants in the areas of academic performance, civic engagement, personal and social competencies, moral values and vocational and professionals skills would not be possible (Billig & Brodersen, 2007).

The Europe Engage project defined its quality standards based on the integration of several tools and theoretical journal articles. These standards and indicators are related to: meeting actual real needs, partnership, reciprocity, defined goals, link to curriculum, civic learning, learning in real-world settings, students' active participation, facilitating systematic student reflection, ensuring support and coaching for students, offering adequate time frames, including evaluation and documentation, values transdisciplinarity and sustainability (Stark et al., 2016).

Tools such as this are expected to contribute to improving the quality of the service learning practice and its impact on the broader goals: educational improvement, civic engagement, community development and social change.

Involve students, university staff and community partners

Different strategies are needed in order to face the challenge of motivating and involving all actors participating in service learning projects in Europe; that is students, university staff and community partners. Some of them are related to motivating students, deciding on the type of participation (volunteer/mandatory), training and recognition systems for teachers and dialogue between the university and social entities and groups. The complexity of the service learning projects also has to do with the fact that not only do all actors have to be involved, but they have to take part actively in the project's various phases (Bringle & Clayton, 2012), under the paradigm of 'reciprocity' instead of traditional power relations. Adequate planning by the teaching staff is a challenge, as in Europe the institutional culture regarding collaboration between the university and society is limited.

Mandatory versus optional

The decision to have service learning as mandatory or optional activity is also a challenge, as seen in Chapter 8. Analysing the pros and cons of that decision is important.

Whatever the decision, students and social entities should be clear about it from the beginning, as it is expected that it will generate volunteer experiences that can be the basis of educating competent and committed professionals and citizens.

Identification of practices that are close to service learning

One of the first steps in the process of institutionalisation of service learning is identifying internal practices that are close to it (volunteering, community service, participatory research, international cooperation, problem-based learning, etc.). Observing similarities and differences among them will help to clarify the concept of service learning in each particular institution.

The methodology differs substantially from other experiences because it integrates the community partner as an equal. This entails a change in values, beliefs and practices that forces us to consider a number of elements.

Most of them have in common that they introduce experiential knowledge as a pedagogical approach. This is a challenge already by itself in some European countries where traditional methodologies that prioritise theory and students' passivity are commonly used. However, it is important to clarify what service learning is and what is not. Whatever the decision, students must know it.

Conclusion

Service learning is an effective tool for developing civic commitment. This methodology does not only involve innovation in didactic methodologies or development of professional skills. Universities are not only responsible for themselves and the development of professional skills of their students, but they also have a responsibility towards society and reaching the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015). For that, we need to face the challenges mentioned above while respecting the processes of localisation (Boland & McIlrath, 2012). Future practice in Europe must take into account the importance of adapting principles and practices to local contexts and cultures.

Note

- 1 The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) is a student-centred system based on the workload required to achieve the learning outcomes of an academic programme. It aims to facilitate the ease of mobility of students across the European Union through a mutually recognisable and transferable credit system across higher education.

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