SERVICE LEARNING FOR ENHANCING STUDENT CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract

The NEXUS project focuses on cultural diversity and migration within higher education institutions (HEIs), and enhancing student civic engagement by integrating Service Learning elements into second language courses, i.e. teaching the language of the receiving country.

Service Learning as an educational method and as an integral activity of community engagement is crucial for the NEXUS project because it explicitly promotes cooperation between the academic community and the civil sector, putting the students and community engagement at the core of the learning experience. It also contributes to the achievement of the third mission of the university, which directly facilitates the development of the social responsibility of students and other members of the academic community in solving specific societal problems.

A Service Learning idea developed through NEXUS is based on second language courses which contain elements of culture and society of the receiving country and therefore lend themselves to including civic education and civic engagement elements for empowering students in the syllabus.

Introduction

The NEXUS project is an ERASMUS+ project, running from 2019 to 2022, focused on empowering students (especially migrants) to exercise their rights, uphold human values, and contribute constructively to the society around them and the global community in general (promoting the nexus of migrants through active citizenship; n° ref.: 2019-1-ES01-KA203-065861; https://nexus4civics.eu).

In representative and participatory democracies, it is crucial that citizens are engaged in order to be an active part of society (Motti-Stefanidi et al., 2018). However, the 2013 Eurobarometer statistics show that young people in the EU are losing trust in EU-

institutions, are becoming less interested in voting because of the feeling that their votes will make no difference and that they are unaware of the democratic processes within the EU (EACEA, 2013). Other studies show that young people are somewhat more engaged in non-governmental organizations than in traditional political parties and that they are using more digital tools, such as social media, when they interact and engage (Motti-Stefanidi et al., 2018). Even if there are significant differences among countries, the trend is still clear that young people are becoming increasingly detached and that there is a need for enhanced engagement among young people in the EU. Newly arrived migrants are especially vulnerable to feeling detachment since they generally risk lacking social identity, sense of belonging and social engagement (Mansouri & Kirpitchenko, 2016)

Therefore, NEXUS aims at innovating the civic educational process resulting in increased participation of students in their communities.

This paper describes the service learning landscape in the context of enhancing civic engagement and the development of a service learning course scenario which will help convert students with migrant backgrounds from objects into the subjects of service learning.

The Contemporary Concept of Service Learning – The Civic Aspect

There are many definitions of service learning since the concept has evolved over time and since there are numerous ways in which it can be implemented in different contexts. A contemporary concept of service learning is reflected by the European Association for Service Learning in Higher Education (EASLHE), which defines service-learning as "an educational approach that enhances students' civic engagement, brings them closer to different social realities while allowing them to work in a real environment. It involves structured and graded student placements in organisations in response to the needs of the community and is different from volunteering because it is part of mandatory coursework" (EASLHE, 2021). This definition of service learning includes all the key elements of contemporary service learning.

The civic aspect of service learning has been explored from the 2000s on. According to Saltmarsh (2005), higher education should include "civic learning" and students should be equipped with "the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to participate as engaged, democratic citizens" (Saltmarsh, 2005) in order to successfully participate in the democratic processes.

According to Bringle et al. (2012) civic engagement refers to "teaching, research, and/or service that is both in and with the community [...] and includes service learning and participatory action research". Instead of student placements common in service learning,

partnerships with actors from the community are encouraged which include a "mutually-beneficial collaboration, in which all persons contribute knowledge, skills, and experience in determining the issues to be addressed, the questions to be asked, the problems to be resolved, the strategies to be used, the outcomes that are considered desirable, and the indicators of success" (Bringle et al., 2012). Such an approach ensures further development of higher education institution's civic engagement and public service.

Zlotowski stresses the importance of a "coordinated partnership between the campus and the community, with the instructor tailoring the service experience to the educational agenda and community representatives ensuring that the students' community service is consistent with their goals" (Zlotkowski, 1995). Zlotowski also believes that the following three points are crucial for successful implementation of service learning: "1. integrating service-learning programs into the central mission and goals of the schools and agencies where they are based; 2. establishing a balance of power between educational and community partners; 3. wedding reflection to experience." (Zlotowski, 1995).

This is in line with the goals of service learning defined by Bringle et al. (2004), which include "(a) benefit to community stakeholders (e.g., agency, clients, neighbourhood 4 residents) and (b) academic learning outcomes" (Bringle et al., 2004). They emphasise the importance of combining theory and practice in order to achieve the goals of socially responsive knowledge according to Altman: "(1) to educate students in the problems of society; (2) to let them experience and understand first-hand social issues in their community; and, most important, (3) give students the experiences and skills to act on social problems. (Altman, 1996, pp. 375-376)." (Bringle et al., 2004).

Service Learning Diagram

According to the Fresno State University, service learning can be presented by the diagram below, which shows the position of service learning at the overlap of academic learning, practical experience and civic engagement, student practice, student volunteering and civic education.
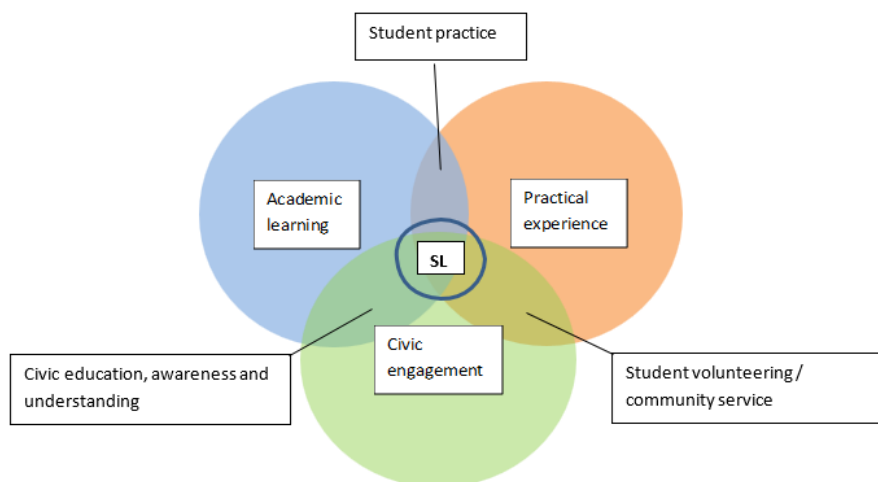
Figure 1. Service Learning Diagram
(source: http://www.fresnostate.edu/csm/arc/service-learning.html)

Principles of service learning

According to Bringle and Hatcher, (1999) "well-designed reflection activities should (a) intentionally link the service experience to course-based learning objectives, (b) be structured, (c) occur regularly, (d) allow feedback and assessment, and (e) include the clarification of values", whereas Begić et al. (2019) emphasise that for a service learning programme to be successful, three principles should observed:

- Reality: student engagement should be based on real, identified and previously researched problems, challenges and needs of a community.
- Reciprocity: all the parties involved should benefit from the exchange of knowledge – the students, the teachers/higher education institution and the community.
- Reflection: a revision of the connection between engagement and educational content must be ensured

Students become equal stakeholders in the learning and teaching process and are focused on proactive and critical thinking. Simultaneously, they become involved in social, community and business processes because they are collaborating with organizations outside the education system which can ultimately provide them with various contacts or their first employment. This is in line with the principles of the Bologna process because it responds to the problem of acquiring theoretical knowledge without practical experience that corresponds to specific social problems (EACEA, 2020) and correspond to the first two stages of Kolb's four stage learning cycle, i.e. concrete experience and reflective observation (Kolb, 2014) .

Service Learning Stakeholders

There are three key stakeholders in a service learning programme: the students, the higher education institution (represented by the teacher) and the external partner. Their roles

need to be carefully assigned and managed. The higher education institution should define the learning outcomes, prepare the syllabus, monitor the quality of the process, implement assessment procedures and encourage critical thinking. The external partners should participate in the planning process and monitor, mentor and evaluate the students' progress, and give feedback. The students should actively participate in the defined activities, communicate regularly with other team members, the teacher and the external partner and participate in the reflection activities after their placement has completed.

According to Begić et al. (2019), the benefits are clear for all the stakeholders. The students gain a better understanding of theoretical knowledge in a realistic context by dealing with authentic societal problems. They also develop critical thinking and creativity. The higher education institution develops innovative teaching methods, raises awareness of the impact and the application of academic knowledge in the community and creates a positive image, while the external partners gain a possibility to solve problems in the community through the exchange of (academic) knowledge and a possibility to receive and give new knowledge, information and perspectives.

Using Service Learning to Enhance Civic Engagement

Service learning fits well into the third mission of higher education institutions. The third mission can be described as the development of activities that will link a higher education institution to its surrounding environment. According to Farnell (2020), there is a long tradition of universities' interaction with their communities, and "the benefits of higher education are not limited to students and graduates but extend across society" (Farnell, 2020). By becoming increasingly involved and connecting their activities to both the problems and needs of their communities, higher education institutions can become significant stakeholders in contributing to economic, cultural and societal growth. While the umbrella term *community engagement* is used to "refer to engagement with a broad range of external stakeholders on a broad range of issues" (Farnell, 2020), 'civic engagement' implies "a focus on promoting active citizenship and democratic values" (Farnell, 2020), and this is the aspect that the NEXUS project is focused on.

Students on their part require quality and purposeful study programmes in line with both the labour market trends and current social trends. At the same time, the teaching process requires the introduction of new, innovative and inclusive methods of working, teaching and learning, those that involve the integration of local, regional and global problems in the curriculum. In a broader perspective, it is necessary to ensure a strong connection, i.e. cooperation, collaboration and knowledge exchange between higher education institutions and local communities, as well as a joint response to challenges.

However, even if community engagement is becoming more visible in various forms of visionary strategic documents it is still at an early, peripheral phase in many European higher education institutions, and the central challenge is in placing it at the heart of higher education institutions' DNA. Service Learning, which essentially is community-based learning, can be a possible way for higher education institutions to work better with the local communities to meet their societal needs and harness the power of higher education institutions' diverse knowledge bases to drive a sustainable and inclusive Europe. Higher education institutions' capacity for community engagement can be reinforced by embedding Service Learning into the curriculum and syllabus design so it can be assessed within the course structure. In doing so, students will both gain awareness of different types of societal needs and get first-hand experience of engaging in the community and addressing these needs. This will also help higher education institutions to reach their full potential as valuable actors in their local communities, not only for students and staff but also for those needing change to those not directly involved in teaching or research.

Defining and Reaching the Target Group

The purpose of NEXUS is to primarily reach newly arrived migrant students and promote their civic engagement. However, since migrant students are not a homogeneous group within higher education institutions, but rather they are dispersed through various study programmes at different levels and follow different study paths it was concluded that the receiving country's language courses which higher education institutions offer for newly arrived foreign students are courses with a high probability of migrant students' participation. In order to reach this group within higher education institutions, Service Learning modules connected to second language learning courses offered at higher education institutions are recommended because by addressing these types of courses it is possible to specifically reach students who are new to the receiving country and who will benefit from taking part in a Service Learning module. Regardless of how long these students are planning to remain in the receiving country, the Service Learning experience will build a sense of how the receiving community is organised and how civic engagement contributes to solving societal challenges.

A Service Learning Course Idea

Even though there are numerous examples of good practice regarding Service Learning projects which involve migrants and/or persons with a migration-related background, most of them involve them as objects, i.e. as the end users - the ones who are receiving the students' help and/or benefiting from the students' service learning activities. The NEXUS project aims to make the students with a migration-related background/newly arrived students the subjects in Service Learning projects, i.e. aims to include them in Service

Learning projects as active participants – the ones who implement community service activities in order to achieve the learning outcomes of the courses and at the same time become actively involved in the community and hence increase their level of civic engagement.

A Service Learning idea developed through NEXUS is based on second language courses, as they usually contain elements of culture and society of the country/countries where the languages are spoken so such courses will lend themselves to Service Learning initiatives. Higher education institutions throughout the EU offer second language courses from beginners' level to a high level of proficiency in the target language, levels A1–C2 in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The NEXUS project gathered 62 examples of similar courses from Spain, Sweden, Slovenia, Belgium, Italy and Croatia through desk research. Roughly 40% of these course contain explicit contents of culture and/or society.

Target groups for the courses vary, but to a high extent, the courses are aimed at foreign students already enrolled at the higher education institution in question, such as exchange students and international students, so called free movers. Apart from a language proficiency of different levels and language skills, many of the courses have an explicit learning outcome of knowledge of the national culture and/or society. The purpose of including this element in the course may be a method and means to get a wider understanding of the target language, or an outspoken aim to enhance the students' awareness of cultural and societal mechanisms in their new society. An example of the latter is Malmö University's course package aimed at international students, Swedish Language, Culture and Society I–IV (Centre for Teaching and Learning: Education). These courses teach and assess culture and society in English to ensure content on an academic level. This would not be possible in the target language. When connecting these learning outcomes to service learning pedagogy students will gain first-hand experience of working with societal challenges and higher education institutions will increase their presence as stakeholders in the community. We find that it is vital to connect Service Learning to the learning outcomes surrounding culture and society because this will guarantee that the service learning experience remains focused on and directed towards experiencing and working for the development of community engagement.

Choosing the appropriate external partners, i.e. organisations from the community which will provide the students with the opportunity to interact with the community through community service activities is crucial. The external partners are responsible for the first step of implementing a service learning course – defining the problems and social needs in the community. The second step, structuring and organising the community service activities the students will participate in, is done jointly by the higher education institution

(the teacher in charge of the course) and the external partners. After the students complete their placement, the external partner organisations give their feedback, which is necessary for the third step of the service learning course—reflection.

For the purpose of this project idea – creating an SL course with the aim to enhance newly arrived students' civic engagement in the local society – the project has chosen to work with courses designed with the explicit learning outcome of an understanding/knowledge/proficiency of the local culture and society, like the one described above. It is also suggested that the choice of external partners includes local organisations engaged in promoting human and civil rights and dealing with other current societal issues of the receiving country, since such an environment will enable students to gain a better understanding of the society and culture and the pressing issues.

Challenges Arising from COVID-19

COVID-19 has imposed a new delivery mode on education in general, by suddenly moving all teaching and learning online. While the preparation part of a Service Learning project in which the students receive instructions from the teacher and the final reflection part in which the student reflect on their community service activities, and even assessment and grading can easily be transferred to an online learning environment, the community service part – the essential part of a Service Learning project – can be adapted, however there are challenges, both technological and conceptual, since community service activities are mostly tasks that are completed on site and depend on interaction with the community. Such in-person interaction, however, has been made difficult by the social distancing rules. This can affect the social component of Service Learning by reducing the opportunities for developing social skills in a traditional way. Online interactions can only partly substitute the in-person interaction and some service learning projects had to be discontinued (comp. EOSLHE). However, there are also examples of successful transition to online activities.

Conclusion

Using Service-Learning as a pedagogical tool in language learning courses in higher education is not a new concept. However, such courses come with the aim to develop the students' language proficiency. The novelty of this suggested course outline is that the academic content for the students to develop in practice – as well as the takeaway for the receiving organization –would be within the field of culture and society. This means that the language course has more the role of a vessel for the Service-Learning outcome in a way that the project has not been able to find elsewhere.

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