Katharina RESCH[1] (Vienna)

Third Mission and service learning.
A narrative evaluation of the relevance of students' experiences

Abstract

Service learning as a pedagogical approach has gained enormous significance in higher education in the last years. Service learning projects aim to strengthen students' relationships with the community, while also providing impetus for their personal development and civic engagement skills. Measuring service learning, however, is complex, and approaches range from quantitative psychological tools to qualitative reflective practice. This study presents the results of a narrative evaluation of six service-learning projects with 45 students across Europe, using a reflective logbook with weekly assignments. Results show that service learning is relevant for students on three levels: relevance of contents, relevance for working life, and relevance for skills development.

Keywords

Service learning, university's social responsibility, narrative methods, emotional learning, Third Mission

---

[1] email: katharina.resch@univie.ac.at

1   Introduction to service learning

Although service learning has gained significance in higher education in the last years, the integration of service learning into curricula is still perceived as complex, and teachers in higher education often refrain from doing so in favour of other priorities. However, service learning offers a rich potential for cognitive and emotional learning outside the classroom, especially for students in fields of study with limited access to practical working experience.

Service learning is a complex phenomenon with various definitions (CLAYTON, BRINGLE & HATCHER, 2013). In this paper, it is viewed as a pedagogical approach that combines community service with academic goals (WALDSTEIN & REIHER, 2001). It provides both a practical learning experience and meets societal needs, distinguishing it from approaches like charity or volunteering, as Muscott states: "Service-Learning differs from charity or volunteerism by creating a partnership among participants. Instead of viewing themselves as service providers helping the needy, students involved in service-learning projects are taught to view themselves as learning partners." (MUSCOTT, 2000, p. 350)

Service-learning projects aim at strengthening students' relationships with the community while also providing impetus for their personal development and their civic engagement (WALDSTEIN & REIHER, 2001). This encompasses the students' active engagement in solving real-world needs, identifying and clarifying skills they must develop for this learning process, and providing room for critical reflection (LEMING, 2001).

In the sense of deliberate psychological education, service-learning projects implement "action-reflection conditions": Students are offered an opportunity to take on significant roles in real contexts while also being given systematic and continuous opportunities to reflect their experience with the support of teachers, tutors, or guidance counsellors (SPRINTHALL, 1991).

While the concept of civic engagement is viewed on a micro level as targeting personal development, higher education institutions have put into practice related con-

cepts on a meso-level, first and foremost the concept of the Third Mission. This field of practice is defined as diversified practice with diverse inclusion criteria and quality – depending on the universities' focus and strategy. The Third Mission has lately also been used as performance indicator for higher education and is, therefore, increasingly in need of measurable operationalisations. This is something the method of service learning provides very well.

The main premises of this paper are: First, service learning is a methodology that makes Third Mission accessible and measurable. On a strategic level, service learning must be connected to these concepts, and on a pedagogical level, it must be meaningful, practice-oriented, and related to academic goals. As the paper will show, the integration of service learning into study programmes is desirable, but not obligatory for them to function.

Second, there is great need for measuring the effects of the experience and its relevance for students. Clayton et al. state that there is little material on how exactly students experience their service-learning experience and how they handle challenges (CLAYTON, BRINGLE & HATCHER, 2013). However, there are comparative papers on methods for measuring service learning experiences (STEINKE & FITCH, 2007), ranging from quantitative tools measuring cognitive or problem-solving skills (cognitive learning scale, problem-solving inventory, Cornell Critical Thinking Test, etc.) to qualitative protocols targeting experience-based learning to other reflective practices stirring critical thinking (essays, memos).

2 Linking Third Mission and service learning

One mission of the "University Meets Social Responsibility" (UNIBILITY) partnership (2015–2017) was the promotion of Third Mission at the student level using service learning. As Third Mission can be operationalised in various ways (MAHRL & PAUSITS, 2011), service learning can be understood as an ideal didactic tool for merging community needs and academic goals. With this Third Mis-

sion comes the responsibility to evaluate the impact of service learning (WEBER, WEBER & YOUNG, 2010).

Within the UNIBILITY project, six universities evaluated students' service learning experiences (Table 1). The goal was to strengthen the relationships of students with the community. Six projects took place in 2016-2017 involving a total of 45 students and evaluating the experience of 24 students specifically. The community target groups were senior citizens, residents in need of legal counselling, parents with special needs, and the general public.

Table 1: Overview of service learning projects

	University	Duration	Topic / Community	n= students in service learning	n= students in evaluation
1	Austria	2 semesters	Healthy Neighbourhoods for Senior Citizens	12	6
2	Portugal	1 semester	Fostering neighbourhood: Opening the university to the community	6	4
3	Slovenia	1 semester	Parentiation – Approaching parents of children with special needs	5	2
4	Spain	2 semester	ClinHab – Law Clinic on Real Estate Law and Residential Mediation	10	2
5	Ireland	2 semester	Raising & Giving Society	4	2
6	Romania	1 semester	Blood Donation Project	8	8
	TOTAL			**45**	**24**

For the purposes of the UNIBILITY project, it was not obligatory to integrate service learning into the curriculum. Projects were classified in three different ways:

- *curricular courses* – service learning was integrated into the curriculum and students received credits (project 1. Healthy Neighbourhood; project 6. Blood Donation;
- *extension projects* – projects which were anchored at the department and supported the community; students received a certificate (project 4. Law Clinic; project 3. Parentiation support)
- *extracurricular projects* – service-learning projects organised outside the curriculum; students did not receive credits (project 5. Raising and Giving Society; project 2. Fostering neighbourhood).

A detailed evaluation of the topics and community target groups shows that the largest target group of community partners addressed were adults (project 2, 3, 4, 5, 6), followed by young adults (project 2, 5, 6) and older people (project 1, 2). The most frequent topics were health and poverty.

3 Methods

3.1 Research design

The project team designed the evaluation of service learning as part of normal coursework in curricular courses (projects 1 and 6) and as an add-on task in the extension and extracurricular projects (projects 2, 3, 4, 5).

The use of logbooks or diaries in qualitative research has become increasingly frequent in recent years (MURRAY, 2018). Murray distinguishes between personal journals for oneself, memoirs as more impersonal diaries written for a potential audience, and logbooks, which contain lists of activities. In this study, we used narratives, which we consider a combination of memoir and logbook. They are best combined with personal follow-ups like, in our case, guidance counselling.

The evaluation was designed as an essay assignment using a logbook (AMORIN, 2017) by posing a weekly question to students for a period of 12 weeks. This week-ly question had to be answered in a narrative form within the week using a Moodle e-learning platform. Additionally, the project teams offered guidance counselling twice a semester for an open discussion about challenges or methodological ques-tions. The focus of the logbook questions was to encourage critical reflection and emotional learning by looking back at the experiences made in the community each week.

3.2   Data collection

The methodological design of the study can be summarised as a guided self-evaluation with guidance counselling sessions twice a semester. The tools were:

- **a logbook**, a personal record of activities, feelings and thoughts, written in the student's native language; (Fig. 1)
- **guidance counselling sessions**, providing a synthesis of their experience in the form of discussions or presentations. Students received and gave oral feedback.

It was decided to conduct a qualitative evaluation, since service learning as a learn-ing experience is both cognitive and emotional, and studies show that emotions are highly relevant for learning experiences (GARNER, 2010). Reflecting on emotion-al responses supports critical thinking skills in students. Additionally, the aspect of reflection is underreported and often lacking in literature on service learning (BROWN & SCHMIDT, 2015).
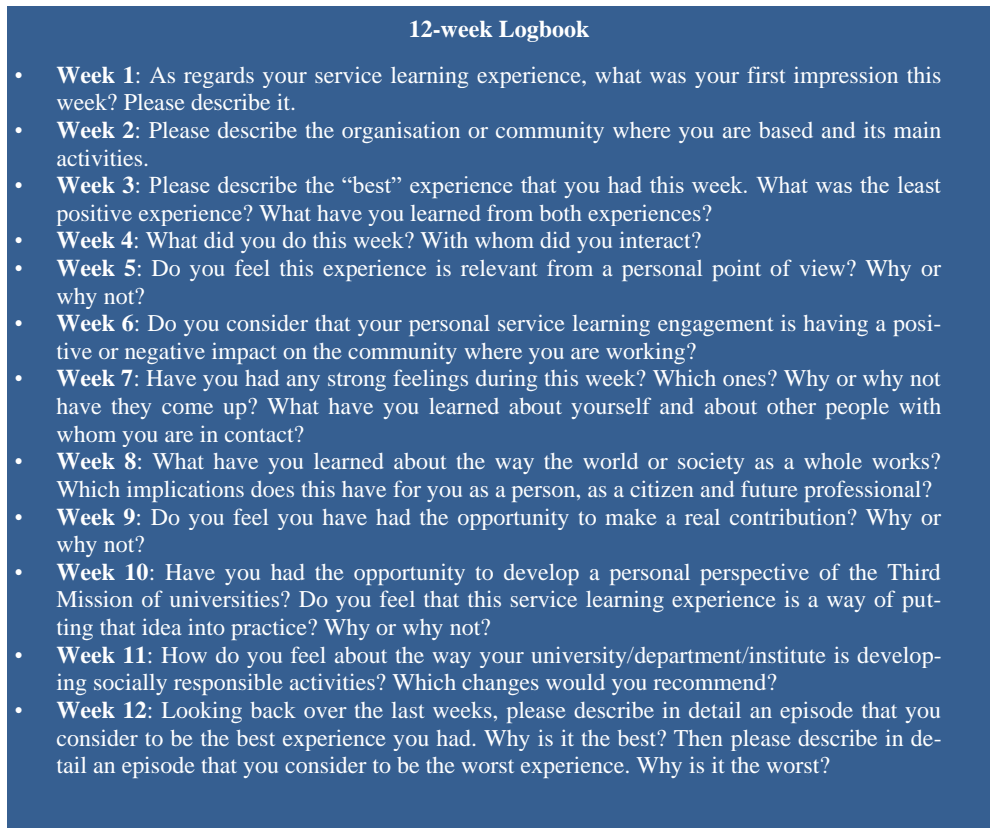
12-week Logbook

- **Week 1**: As regards your service learning experience, what was your first impression this week? Please describe it.
- **Week 2**: Please describe the organisation or community where you are based and its main activities.
- **Week 3**: Please describe the "best" experience that you had this week. What was the least positive experience? What have you learned from both experiences?
- **Week 4**: What did you do this week? With whom did you interact?
- **Week 5**: Do you feel this experience is relevant from a personal point of view? Why or why not?
- **Week 6**: Do you consider that your personal service learning engagement is having a positive or negative impact on the community where you are working?
- **Week 7**: Have you had any strong feelings during this week? Which ones? Why or why not have they come up? What have you learned about yourself and about other people with whom you are in contact?
- **Week 8**: What have you learned about the way the world or society as a whole works? Which implications does this have for you as a person, as a citizen and future professional?
- **Week 9**: Do you feel you have had the opportunity to make a real contribution? Why or why not?
- **Week 10**: Have you had the opportunity to develop a personal perspective of the Third Mission of universities? Do you feel that this service learning experience is a way of putting that idea into practice? Why or why not?
- **Week 11**: How do you feel about the way your university/department/institute is developing socially responsible activities? Which changes would you recommend?
- **Week 12**: Looking back over the last weeks, please describe in detail an episode that you consider to be the best experience you had. Why is it the best? Then please describe in detail an episode that you consider to be the worst experience. Why is it the worst?

Figure 1: 12-week logbook

3.3 Data Analysis

To analyse the narrative accounts of students, the data was read at the end of the semester and the researchers, using content analysis, identified categories to measure the relevance of service learning. The researchers used an inductive approach and identified themes that emerged from the logbooks. The counselling sessions

were observed by one or more researchers who then wrote short memos of the observation.

After multiple iterations and revisions, three categories were derived from the material in terms of relevance of service learning. Other categories, such as time management or institutional support, are not included in this paper. Citations from the narrative accounts underline the interpretive claims of this study below.

4   Findings

The students participated actively in different project stages: exploring problems/resources in the community, selecting participants, determining what activities to employ, evaluation, and follow-up activities. A relevant part of service learning was the opportunity for students to use their skills in these phases, to engage in significant roles in real contexts, and to work with community partners. The purpose of the evaluation study was to encourage them to reflect on the relevance of these experiences. They reported relevance on three levels: 1) relevance of contents of service learning projects, 2) relevance for working life and their resumé, and 3) relevance for skills development (Table 3).

Table 2: Findings of the study

Relevance of service learning	Representative quote from the logbooks	Observation data from counselling sessions
1) relevance of contents of service-learning projects	*"The thought that I or someone close to me might find themselves in such a situation helped me to dedicate time and commitment to this project, so that the students, professors and the population in general realize the importance of donating blood." (23 year-old female student from Romania).*	Students reported being subject to real-world problems and social needs they had not been aware of before. Needs of older people, people in need of legal aid and poor citizens were named often. They were critical about the limited duration of their engagement.
2) relevance for working life and their resumé	*"I would like to emphasize the importance of obtaining work experience, which is essential to achieve a consolidated vocational training." (21-year-old male student from Spain).*	Several students asked for a confirmation or official certificate from the university to be incorporated into their resumé. This implies the relevance of their service learning experience for work.
3) relevance for skills development	*"It was an opportunity to put into practice competencies that I did not know I had. (...) it seems to me an excellent opportunity for students to learn in a real context." (28-year-old female student from Portugal).* *"I felt really empathetic towards some of the participants as they told me some of their life stories." (22-year-old female student from Portugal).*	Students reported on conflicts, emotions, and discrepancies in working styles between different participants involved in the interaction and the need to communicate and resolve these issues actively. They also mentioned specific skills they acquired, like survey development, PR skills, and counselling skills.

Relevance of contents and topics

Students realised the societal relevance of the service learning projects they were involved in. The more relevant the specific content of the service learning project,

the stronger the students' commitment and effort observed. The most frequent issues students were exposed to were poor health and poverty.

Through this exposure, they were able to slip into significant roles as citizens offering support or service. Embracing their responsibility of citizenship as an active participant of a group or project led to acknowledging the relevance of social needs. As responsible citizenship in this context includes being part of collective action – individuals acting on behalf of others in the community – this trains them in civic engagement (ADLER & GOGGIN, 2005).

Students felt that their role as engaged citizens was strengthened and that their worldviews changed. They also reported personal development in terms of self-esteem and motivation, patience, perseverance in the face obstacles, and a sense of responsibility. *"My work has from day one shaped my worldview and personal opinions [...]. That being said, I personally have become more willing to push and remain stubborn in the face of adversity."* (21-year-old student from Ireland)

Relevance for working life

Service learning as a real-world experience had the potential for students to make their future occupational path more concrete. All of the involved 45 students accomplished their tasks and finished their service learning experience, without any of them dropping out. The observation protocols of the counselling sessions show that many students were eager to integrate service learning into their resumé, no matter whether it was a curricular or extra-curricular course or an extension service of the university. Students underlined the importance of work experience and experience outside the classroom in general as something valuable for their professional future. This has also been emphasised in previous studies about the effects of service learning (McLAUGHLIN, 2010).

Relevance for skills development

For students, the service learning experience on or off campus was relevant also because it contributed to skills development on two levels: social learning and emotional learning. They developed ideas for real-world contexts and were able to

discuss them with other relevant participants in the community, with guidance counsellors, or with other students, which contributed to social learning outside the classroom. Being part of collective action also promoted certain soft skills, like communication skills, flexibility and conflict management – as can be seen in the logbooks.

Emotional learning was recorded by students as the result of personal encounters with people in need, as can be seen in this student's description, who also describes emotions of astonishment, empathy and being moved by the person's story and feels that she was able to make an impact with service learning: *"I felt really empathetic towards some of the participants as they told me some of their life stories."* (22-year-old female student from Portugal)

5 Conclusions

Service learning has a rich potential for learning, which can be expressed well by means of narrative accounts. Students felt they had an impact on services and the well-being of people in the community, that they were part of collaborative learning and actively participated in relevant socially responsibility projects. The students were also critical regarding the too short duration of the projects.

Collecting narrative accounts in the form of logbooks using diaries worked well and generated rich data, although a cross-national analysis between the six universities analysing the differences in data material still remains to be done. Nevertheless, measuring the effects of service learning using variations of (research) diaries and observations can augment the canon of qualitative methods in this area very well.

Additionally, the narrative data suggests that learnings emerge not only in relation to skills development but also to worldviews. This reinforces the idea that service learning is a vital part of civic engagement and responsible citizenship.

Finally, service-learning projects can be seen as possibilities to initiate novel relationships with the community; however, they must be formally structured and led by transfer offices or other departments in charge of the Third Mission, strengthening the relationships between non-university partners and the higher education sector.

6 References

Adler, R. P., & Goggin, J. (2005). What do we mean by civic engagement? *Journal of Transformative Education, 3*(3), 236-253.

Amorim, J. P., Coelho, M., Coimbra J. L., Dias T., Gomes I., Menezes I., & Rodrigues F. (2017). *UNIBILITY IO5 Report: USR Service Learning Projects.* University of Porto.

Brown, J. M., & Schmidt, N. A. (2010). Service-learning in undergraduate nursing educationl Where is the reflection? *Journal of Professional Nursing Education, 1*, 1-6.

Clayton, P. H., Bringle, R. G., & Hatcher, J. A. (2013). *Research on Service learning. Conceptual frameworks and assessment.* Vol. 2a. Students and Faculty. Stylus Publishing.

Garner, P. W. (2010). Emotional Competence and its Influences on Teaching and Learning. *Educational Psychology Review, 22,* 297-321.

Leming, J. S. (2001). Integrating a structured ethical reflection curriculum into high school. *Adolescence, 36*, 141, 33-45.

Mahrl, M., & Pausits, A. (2011). Third Mission Indicators for New Ranking Methodologies. *Evaluation in Higher Education, 4*(1), 43-65.

McLaughlin (2010). The "Real-World" Experience: Students' Perspectives on Service-Learning Projects. *American Journal of Business Education, 3*(7), 109-118.

Murray, M. (2018). Narrative data. In U. Flick (Ed.), *The SAGE Handbook of qualitative data collection* (pp. 264-279). London: SAGE.

Muscott, H. S. (2000). A review and analysis of service-learning programs involving chidren with emotional/behavioural disorders. *Education and Treatment of Children, 23*(3), 346-368.

Sprinthall, N. A. (1991). Role taking programs for high school students: New methods to promote psychological development. In B. P. Campos (Ed.), *Psychological intervention and human development* (pp. 33-38). Porto: Instituto de Consulta Psicológica, Formação e Desenvolvimento e Louvain-La-Neuve: Academia.

Steinke, P., & Fitch, P. (2007). Assessing Service-Learning. *Research and Practice in Assessment, 2007/2*, 24-29.

Waldstein, F. A., & Reiher, T. (2001). Service-learning and students' personal and civic. *Journal of Experiential Education, 24*(1), 7-14.

Weber, J. E., Weber, P. S., & Young, M. A. (2010). Measuring service learning outcomes: text-retest reliability of four scales. *Psychological Reports, 107*(2), 611-616.

Author

Dr. Katharina RESCH, MSc ‖ Universität Wien, Postgraduate Center ‖ Spitalgasse 2, Hof 1, A-1090 Vienna

www.postgraduatecenter.at

katharina.resch@univie.ac.at