



Higher Education, community and Service Learning: Towards a new centrality of community partners

Educación Superior, comunidad y aprendizaje-servicio: hacia una nueva centralidad de los socios comunitarios

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At this time in history —when universities are being questioned about tremendously complex social challenges such as persistent inequality, the ecological crisis, the fragility of community ties, the discrediting of public institutions or political polarisation, as well as questioning the social value of the university itself— we must reconsider the ties between universities and the communities in which they exist. This context, in turn, forces us to re-examine the role of the community in service learning (SL) activities in Higher Education. SL is a type of pedagogy capable of combining, in an integrated fashion, the three main missions of the university: quality training, knowledge generation and civic engagement with the surroundings.

However, not every aspect of SL has progressed equally. In research and practice, the university's inward focus has often been prioritised: the impact on the student's learning, teacher innovation, the institutionalisation of programmes or the assessment of competences. Until recently, the systematic analysis of the role of the community in these processes has been much less visible. How is SL conceived and experienced by social organisations, local entities, rural communities or vulnerable groups? What are their expectations, resources, tensions and possibilities when becoming involved with the university world?

This monographic issue of *Revista Española de Pedagogía*, entitled 'Higher Education, Community and Service Learning', aims to contribute to that much-needed conceptual development, thus enabling an in-depth understanding of the transformative power of SL while placing the community at the heart of the analysis. Rather than viewing the community as a 'practice context' or a 'target population' for the students' actions, the studies included in this issue highlight how the organisations and groups we work with in the field are actually co-educators, co-creators and jointly responsible for the formative process.

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1. From recipients to co-educators: a necessary change of paradigm

Recent research has shown that—*de facto*—community partners take on a much broader range of functions than is typically recognised. Not only do they show a willingness to host projects, but they also design or co-design interventions, supervise the students' work, guide their performance, contribute local expertise and take part in assessing the processes and results. They act as tutors, mentors, assessors, cultural mediators and 'translators' of academic language and social reality.

In addition to these formal roles, there are others of a more relational and symbolic nature: the community as a 'guide' that accompanies awareness-raising processes, as a 'farmer' that sows the seeds of engagement and social responsibility, or as a 'bridge' that connects worlds that rarely interact on equal ground. This invisible but crucial dimension, from a pedagogical standpoint, makes these social entities authentic educational stakeholders that decisively contribute to the creation of the professional and civic identities of the university student body.

At the same time, the literature shows that community agency is unevenly distributed depending on the context. While control over implementation of the service, everyday oversight or organisation of the internships tends to fall heavily on the entities, their influence on the curriculum design, the learning objectives or institutional policies is quite limited. This results in a 'segmented' power map: the university retains the strategic and regulatory initiative while the community takes on operational and relational responsibility.

In spotlighting these imbalances, the aim is not to question the value of SL, but precisely to strengthen it. If we acknowledge that the pedagogical quality of SL depends on both what happens in the classroom and on what occurs in the field, then it becomes imperative to progress towards more democratic partnership models and joint responsibility, in which the voice of the community is present from the design phase through to the assessment, not just during execution. Thus, the aim of this monographic issue is to contribute to a change of paradigm: from the community as a recipient to the community as a co-author of the university education project.

2. The urgency and relevance of advancing knowledge about the community and SL

There are at least four compelling reasons that support the need for further pedagogical research on the relationship between Higher Education, community and service learning.

Firstly, as a matter of epistemic justice. For years, scientific output about SL relegated communities to the role of 'secondary respondents', sometimes even omitting their point of view completely. Retrieving and analysing their experiences, expectations, benefits and challenges is not merely a gesture of academic courtesy: it is an ethical and methodological requirement for constructing more thorough, less biased knowledge about what actually occurs in SL projects.

Secondly, out of pedagogical motivation. The type of learning that SL promises—integration of theory and practice, critical thinking, civic engagement, social responsibility—depends greatly on the quality of the ties established with the surroundings. Projects designed without community participation tend to be more superficial, less relevant and less sustainable. By understanding what entities need and what they have to offer, it is possible to design richer, more pertinent and transformative experiences.

Thirdly, on organisational and political grounds. The so-called 'third mission' of the university, related to knowledge transfer and social engagement, can only take shape if there is a lively community landscape in which to construct long-term projects. Therefore, it is essential to understand the conditions that foster stable reciprocal partnerships: time, communication, recognition, institutional support, aligning expectations, etc. Research on the role of the community in SL offers specific clues for guiding fairer, more effective university policies on civic engagement.

Finally, there is the inevitable matter of context. Rapid digitalisation, the experience of the pandemic, increasing precarity and vulnerability across broad layers of society and rural depopulation, to name just a few phenomena, are reconfiguring the relationships between the university and its surroundings. Within this new scenario, virtual or hybrid SL experiences are emerging, community stakeholders are becoming more diverse and traditionally marginal spaces (like rural settings or juvenile justice systems) are becoming more visible. It is crucial to advance the understanding of how the community participates and engages in these changing circumstances to avoid reproducing past inequalities under apparently innovative formats.

As a whole, the eight articles contained in this special issue mark a path that ranges from rural memory to social entrepreneurship, from an analysis of university policies to an examination of specific partnerships, from in-person experiences in highly vulnerable settings to virtual proposals co-designed along with rural communities. This diversity of scenarios bolsters, rather than blurring, the underlying message: that university SL can only fully deploy its potential when it acknowledges and cultivates the community as an educational agent, not a mere setting for intervention.

We hope this monographic issue helps consolidate a research agenda in the Spanish-speaking and European spheres in which the relationship between Higher Education, the community and service learning is placed at the centre of the pedagogical debate. To a great extent, in order to progress towards more equitable, more inclusive universities committed to the common good, we must learn to listen to—and to learn with—those in the field who co-construct educational projects with us: the communities and their diverse stakeholders.

Hopefully, these articles will serve not only to describe experiences and outcomes, but also to imagine new alliances between the university and the community, in which SL offers a privileged pathway for joint reconsideration of what education means in and for democratic citizenship today.