



Revaluating the community in university service-learning: A faculty-led scale

Revalorizar la comunidad en el aprendizaje-servicio universitario: una escala con visión del profesorado

Dr. Miguel-Ángel SANTOS-REGO. Full Professor. Universidade de Santiago de Compostela
(miguelangel.santos@usc.es)

Dr. Ígor MELLA-NÚÑEZ. Associate Professor. Universidade de Santiago de Compostela
(igor.mella@usc.es)

Dr. Jorge SOTO-CARBALLO. Associate Professor. Universidade de Vigo (hesoto@uvigo.gal)

Dr. Xosé-Manuel MALHEIRO-GUTIÉRREZ. Associate Professor. Universidade da Coruña
(jose.malheirog@udc.es)

Abstract

Modern societies expect higher education to engage actively in addressing and resolving problems that are found in the community. Consequently, political agendas must promote the social dimension within the university's spheres of action, emphasising the value of methodologies that align with this objective. One such approach is service-learning, a pedagogical strategy that integrates academic learning with community service. Given that research on this methodology has not extensively addressed the role of the community, this study's aim is to validate a scale designed to assess the level of involvement of collaborating entities in service-learning, based on faculty perceptions. The instrument was administered to 147 faculty members from nine Spanish universities that use this methodology. The data collected underwent both exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis. The final outcome was a scale comprising 16 items distributed across three factors: the entity's engagement with students; the project's intended impact on the community; and the entity's commitment to the project's organisation. The solution obtained is satisfactory in terms of both factorial structure and the levels of internal consistency evaluated. In conclusion, we highlight the distinctive contribution of this study, which lies in grounding the instrument's development in faculty perspectives on this subject.

Keywords: service-learning; university; community; social entities; reciprocity; faculty

Resumen

Las sociedades modernas esperan de la educación superior que se comprometa en el afrontamiento y resolución de problemas existentes en la comunidad. En consecuencia, la

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agenda política ha de promover la dimensión social presente en las esferas de acción universitaria, poniendo en valor aquellas metodologías acordes con tal propósito. Es el caso del aprendizaje-servicio, pedagogía en la que se combina el aprendizaje académico con un servicio a la comunidad. Y puesto que el énfasis en la comunidad no se ha prodigado en la investigación sobre la citada metodología, el objetivo del artículo es la validación de una escala diseñada para analizar el grado de implicación de las entidades que colaboran en el aprendizaje-servicio a partir de la percepción del profesorado. El instrumento se aplicó a 147 docentes de nueve (9) universidades españolas que hacen uso de la metodología. Los datos obtenidos se sometieron a un análisis factorial exploratorio y confirmatorio. Lo que resultó, finalmente, fue una escala de 16 ítems distribuidos en tres factores: implicación de la entidad con las/os estudiantes, pretensiones del proyecto en la comunidad, y compromiso de la entidad en la organización del proyecto. La solución obtenida es satisfactoria, tanto en la estructura factorial como en los niveles de consistencia interna evaluados. Concluimos subrayando la marca diferencial que supone basar la elaboración del instrumento en la visión que el profesorado tiene sobre el particular.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje-servicio; universidad; comunidad; entidades sociales; reciprocidad; profesorado.

1. Introduction

Since the end of the last century, the world has undergone a series of rapid social, economic, political, and environmental transformations that have significantly affected the lives of all groups and communities. These include, among others, questions such as increasing migratory flows, the climate emergency, transformations in the labour market, the need for lifelong learning, the dizzying advances in information and communication technologies, the exponential growth in the creation and dissemination of knowledge, and the new scenarios that define relations between individuals.

Naturally, universities are no strangers to this situation, as it is expected that they will help address global challenges in collaboration with other social and political institutions and bodies. In our context, the development of the European Higher Education Area, alongside organisational and pedagogical reform, also reinforced the social dimension of the university, a key element in the regulatory development of this supranational framework since the Berlin Communiqué (2003).

However, in recent years this question has become the focus of European higher education policies. One example of this is the Rome Communiqué (2020), which calls for greater involvement of universities with their communities in shared, mutually beneficial, and socially responsible activities. This meeting at the highest ministerial level led to a document that set out a series of principles to strengthen the social dimension of higher education (EHEA, 2020).

Here we refer to one of the aspects of university life that has attracted the most attention among academic and civic entities in recent years: University Social Responsibility. This concept, which is also known by several related terms, calls on universities to adopt an explicit social commitment in their policies, initiatives, and activities. This focus is not limited to a vision of sharing science and knowledge with society, but also refers to the establishment of formative connections between the student body and community life, in order to facilitate the exercise of a more participatory citizenship in a framework of democratic life (Coelho & Menezes, 2021).

In the pedagogical development of universities, one of the most beneficial methodologies for this model is service-learning (SL), owing to its clear potential to situate learning processes within community contexts. More specifically, we define this as a:

pedagogical proposal that addresses the search for concrete formulas to engage the students in the daily life of the communities, neighbourhoods, and nearby institutions. It is conceptualised within experience-based education and is characterised by: a) student protagonism; b) addressing a real need; c) connection to curricular objectives; d) execution of the service project; and e) reflection. (Naval et al., 2011, p. 88)

Such is the weight of the community as an educational stakeholder in SL that many of the characteristics that define the methodology itself derive from the community's relationship with the university. This is the case of addressing real needs within the community, encouraging students' active participation in social service projects, fostering ongoing and shared reflection, and ensuring the reciprocity essential to this combination of learning and service (Hernández-Barco et al., 2020).

However, even though the community is an essential element in the conceptualisation of service-learning, it has not received the attention it deserves in research. More studies and reports have focused on describing students' academic achievements and, to a lesser extent, their civic and social outcomes (Cruz & Giles, 2000; Rodríguez-Izquierdo & Lorenzo, 2023).

We believe these grounds are sufficient to justify considering the community's role in service-learning as the central aim of our research. The aim of this work is therefore to validate a scale designed to evaluate university teachers' perceptions of the involvement of social entities in SL projects.

1.1. What is community in service-learning?

Perhaps the greatest challenge when speaking of the community in service-learning is to define what we mean by it. An initial approximation to the term leads to the analysis by Ferdinand Tönnies, recognised for its distinction between community and society. This German sociologist suggests that, while community (*Gemeinschaft*) refers to a life that is organic and real, society (*Gesellschaft*) alludes more to an imaginary and mechanical structure (Tönnies, 2011). His perspective can be interpreted as meaning that the community is a more natural grouping, characterised by bonds of reciprocity, mutual understanding, and interdependence based on unity and cohesion, whereas society is a more impersonal and artificial grouping, as its formation is more rational and depends on people's capacity for deliberation.

In relation to what concerns us when discussing community in service-learning, both concepts and Tönnies' (2011) corresponding analysis contribute to the epistemic development of the term. His vision of community is certainly the one that comes closest, although we must not forget the intentional, volitional, and deliberative character of his notion of society. Thus, within the framework of SL, the community could be defined as the group of people who reciprocally identify with a series of characteristics, as well as with objectives to be pursued, which may come to be shared in moments and spaces of shared life; something which, in addition to a sense of belonging, requires commitments that are undertaken and actively shared by a majority of individuals in a real-world context (Santos Rego et al., 2023).

It is well documented that the social dimension in this methodology aligns closely with the direct influence of John Dewey's ideas about the community and, in particular, with the educational potential attributed to it (González Geraldo et al., 2017; Santos Rego et al., 2020; Santos Rego, Mella-Núñez & García-Álvarez, 2021). What the American philosopher proposed –and this constitutes his main contribution to SL is to understand the community as the perfect medium for the experiential development of the student body, as it becomes a formative and educational stakeholder, since it is where the activities characteristic of everyday life take place (Dewey, 1995).

It is in his idea about the connections between education, community, and democracy that much of the epistemic and pragmatic construction of SL resides. In the case of higher education, this intellectual prism could be supported by the argument that it is within the community itself that knowledge not always accessible in university classrooms can be found.

Nonetheless, a minimum of rigour in the training process requires access to such knowledge to be produced in a systematic, formal, and even institutionalised way. Social entities must act as partners that are able to mediate and foster contact with the community, all within a functional organisational structure that recognises students' academic and professional realities (Sotelino et al., 2019).

However, SL research has faced the inherent difficulty of defining what and/or who the community is from a structural and organisational perspective. Cruz and Giles (2000) identify two recurring issues in this regard. The first is that the community can be understood either as an entity that is linked to and collaborates with the university, or as the set of people or social group at which the service is directed. The second concerns whether the community is viewed, on the one hand, from a geographical perspective (for example, a neighbourhood close to the campus) or, on the other hand, as a reality that can be intentionally created and constructed.

Bringle et al. (2013) explore this idea in greater depth by analysing specific variables that help define what or who constitutes the community in service-learning. They first highlight the location, since the service may be offered within the university itself, at local, provincial, state, or even virtual levels; secondly, they consider the range of institutions in which it may be represented: governmental entities, organisations connected to grassroots movements such as associations or cooperatives, and non-governmental organisations, among others.

It is clear that the epistemological debate about the community remains open, and not just from a sociological perspective, but also a genuinely pedagogical one. This should not limit or slow down analyses of its role in SL. Turning again to Cruz and Giles (2000), perhaps we should not put too much effort into discussing the community as a social or geographical reality, but instead concentrate more on studying the partnership relations that it establishes with the university; something that strategically entails giving greater consideration to the role that community partners play, or should play, in the dynamics of these projects.

1.2. What should the community's role be in SL?

Community stakeholders should undoubtedly be regarded as partners who collaborate actively in the project's construction (especially when setting its objectives), otherwise the project would be a sort of "laboratory" where students put their knowledge into practice without genuine relations of exchange (Compare et al., 2022). The research by Miron and Moely (2006) is evidence in this line. They conclude that the greatest benefits are reported by institutions that have a voice in the management of the project, and where there have been particularly good relations with students.

It is therefore important to define the functions that can be expected of the entities collaborating in a service-learning project, noting the tasks that have an academic aspect and, of course, not limiting them to activities in which they act merely as passive receivers of a service. It is clear that community partners must be involved in matters such as joint planning with teachers, looking for direct connections with the reference curriculum, supporting and monitoring students, creating moments dedicated to reflecting on the experience, participating in the evaluation of learning, or organising a closing event or project celebration event, among others (Rubio, 2015).

They should therefore be regarded as an additional educating agent, whose clear involvement in students' education must be sought. Indeed, Compare et al. (2022) noted that the organisations themselves sometimes view their participation in training and guiding students as the most important of all of the tasks that they carry out in the SL projects.

However, other studies, such as Arribas-Cubero et al. (2022), have established that social entities have a reduced scope in the different activities. This low participation might be due to the challenges they encounter in relating to the university and engaging with the student

body. In this regard, they highlight issues such as coordinating schedules and calendars, limited capacities (for example, resources and the availability of engaging activities for students), and the educational responsibilities that SL entails (motivating, supervising, and evaluating students) (Karasik, 2020).

It is beneficial for teachers to support their partners in carrying out their tasks with the desired quality, something that helps students recognise the competence and professionalism of the entities they work with, as the effect that this conduct might have on the partners' motivation and feeling of self-efficacy as co-educator stakeholders is not insignificant (Compare et al., 2022). It is a question of teachers and entities working together to establish learning objectives, determine the relationships between students and entities, and even select methods to evaluate learning and monitor the project (Rinaldo et al., 2015).

However, apart from their participation and involvement in the development of these initiatives, there is a central element that defines the role to be played by the community in service-learning. We are talking about reciprocity. In other words, the university-community relationship should be established under the principles of effective reciprocity, based on respect, trust, genuine commitment, balance of power, shared resources, and fluent communication between universities and community stakeholders (Jacoby, 2015).

There are even those who elevate reciprocity to a central characteristic of the methodology (Petri, 2015). Adopting this principle has come to be regarded as an important quality criterion for service-learning (Santos Rego et al., 2025), even though it entails a transformation of the relationships to be established and of the roles that both parties –the academic and the community– must play.

In short, it would be a pathway for reformulation that is explained in the three pillars, which, according to Dostilio et al. (2012), would support reciprocity in SL: first, the exchange of benefits, resources, and actions between universities and entities; second, the bidirectional influence of the personal, social, and environmental contexts of the different stakeholders, which recommends taking into account the interests and ways of being and doing of both parties; and thirdly, generative capacity, insofar as this guides social innovation, as university-community relations should pursue new knowledge, experiences, and learnings that might contribute to social transformation.

The move from more traditional service-learning (where responsibilities and decision-making are located primarily in the university) to a type that is more reciprocal and based on exchange and collective participation involves reformulating the roles played by the different stakeholders, making reciprocity a distinguishing feature in the quality of the projects (Santos Rego et al., 2025).

1.3. Research into/on the community in SL

Despite what we have previously reviewed and established regarding the central role of the community in SL, research assessing students' learning outcomes and competence development has been considerably more prolific (Santos Rego, Mella, Naval & Vázquez, 2021). Furthermore, the attention paid to the community in this field of study has primarily focused on exploring its satisfaction with the results, or, more specifically, on examining the factors that either encourage participation or, conversely, restrict and hinder involvement (Chika-James et al., 2022; Compare et al., 2022; Cronley et al., 2015).

A first pathway that is apparent in the literature relates to the information collected directly from the community itself, i.e. through the organisations with which there is collaboration. What predominates are qualitative instruments, such as interviews (Chika-James et al., 2022; Gerstenblatt, 2014; Miron & Moely, 2006; Rinaldo et al., 2015) and discussion groups (Cronley et al., 2015; Sandy & Holland, 2006). This could be explained by the small samples used, or by the open character of the information that is sought. Naturally, there are also studies that use

questionnaires (Karasik, 2020; Shek et al., 2021) or mixed studies (Compare et al., 2022; Paulson & Davis, 2024).

Given that these entities are central to the project, we have noted above that most of the works revolve around their perception and satisfaction, especially in terms of benefits obtained and difficulties experienced. However, there are also studies in which the instruments explore realities such as the voice and role of the entities or the interactions established (Miron & Moely, 2006); the relationship of the students with the (local) community in a broader sense (Gerstenblatt, 2014); or questions relating to the role of the teachers that could be improved in the opinion of social entities (Karasik, 2020). The questionnaire designed by Compare et al. (2022) deserves special mention for its breadth, as it asks the entities for information about their general perception of the project, the responsibilities and role assumed by the person who tutors the students (evaluation, monitoring, etc.), their motivations for participating in SL, the difficulties encountered in organisational and pedagogical terms, and the results obtained.

There are also works in which the community's participation in the projects is analysed from the perspective of the teachers. This is the case of the proposal by Gelmon et al. (2001). In their renowned work, they propose a multidimensional model for assessing SL (teachers, students, community, and university as an institution). It includes an interview and a questionnaire for the teachers, which, among other aspects, seeks information about the community's participation in the projects. These are studies where teachers provide information about the extent to which the entities are involved in questions such as assessment, reflection, or their own training in this educational methodology (Sáez, 2024; Santos Rego & Lorenzo, 2018).

This second route is undoubtedly (and by some distance) the one that is less explored, hence all the more reason for us to base this contribution on the teachers' view of the participation of the community in the service-learning projects. Having instruments intended for teachers to collect information about the role of social bodies will enhance our understanding of how universities perceive the community's educational and social role in developing and evaluating service-learning.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

We used convenience sampling to select the participants. We found teachers who use the service-learning methodology by analysing the calls for educational innovation projects at the universities involved in the research, and by using publications and participation in conferences on this topic.

The final sample comprised 147 academics from 9 Spanish universities: Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha (10.9%), Universidade da Coruña (13.6%), Universidad de Jaén (2.7%), Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (9.5%), Universidad de Navarra (9.5%), Universidad Pablo de Olavide (3.4%), Universidade de Santiago de Compostela (30.6%), Universitat de València (7.5%), and Universidade de Vigo (12.2%). These academics are primarily from the fields of Social and Legal Sciences (56.5%), Experimental Sciences (16.3%), and Health Sciences (12.2%), with a smaller presence from Engineering and Architecture and Art and Humanities (7.5% each). The majority were women (66%), and the mean age was 50.25 years ($SD = 9.30$), with a minimum of 31 years and a maximum of 72.

They have stable posts as civil servants (49%) or as permanent statutory staff (e.g. tenured or permanent academic staff) (25.9%). They have extensive university teaching experience ($M = 18.7$; $SD = 9.83$), and in the last 2 years have participated in teaching innovation courses (85%), primarily relating to teaching-learning methodologies and strategies. Furthermore, 71.4% collaborate, or have collaborated, with civic-social organisations. They are trained in

SL (97.3%), and their motivation for using this methodology stems from the results it can achieve in students' learning.

2.2. Measurement instrument

Within the framework of the research project, a questionnaire was designed with the goal of identifying the nature and scope of community participation in university SL projects. It includes a total of 32 questions, of which 4 use Likert-type scales. Here we will focus on the scale used to analyse teachers' perspectives on the role of the community in these projects. For its design, we drew on an instrument previously developed by the team in another study (see Sáez, 2024), together with the works of Chong (2014) and Santos Rego et al. (2023).

The first version of the questionnaire was prepared by the team from the Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, who coordinated the project. It was then sent to the rest of the researchers from the universities involved in the study, with each university preparing a report to improve the wording and eliminate or incorporate items. All contributions were reviewed by the initial team to determine their inclusion or rejection, based on a criterion of agreement or disagreement. Finally, the decisions were communicated to all the universities, together with the reasons for them. The four scales were also sent to four experts in SL and research methodology, who were asked to evaluate them based on a correction template considering criteria of validity, placement, intelligibility, and unambiguity.

2.3. Procedure

The questionnaire was administered in the second semester of academic year 2023–24 (March–June) in the nine universities (eight public and one private), having received a favourable report from the Bioethics Committee of the Universidade de Santiago de Compostela (code USC 45/2023). Once authorised by the data protection officer of the Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, the instrument was sent with a covering letter to the teachers who use SL. It was completed individually online using the SurveyMonkey software.

2.4. Data analysis

First, we calculated the descriptive statistics of the sample, analysing the properties of the items. We then performed an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with the IBM-SPSS 29 software package, using principal component extraction and the Varimax rotation. From there, we calculated the reliability of each factor using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Finally, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was carried out to evaluate the model's fit (IBM-SPSS AMOS 29).

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive indices

The initial scale comprised 17 items (see Annex) with five answer options, from not at all to a lot. After the reliability analyses, these were reduced to 16 (eliminating item 3). Table 1 shows the results. The statistics are acceptable, as values greater than 2.00 indicate extreme skew and lower values represent normality, while values between 8.00 and 20.00 would also reflect extreme kurtosis. The sample then has a normal distribution, which justifies the use of parametric tests.

TABLE 1. Descriptive Statistics and Indices of Skew and Kurtosis for the Community Participation in SL Projects Scale

Item	M	SD	Skew		Kurtosis	
			Standard error	Standard error	Standard error	Standard error
1	4.48	.668	-1.112	.226	.823	.449
2	3.23	1.530	-.275	.227	-1.395	.451
4	3.58	1.294	-.693	.227	-.585	.451
5	3.28	1.428	-.392	.229	-1.197	.455
6	4.31	0.772	-1.316	.229	2.704	.455
7	3.70	1.381	-.794	.228	-.617	.453
8	2.79	1.514	.118	.228	-1.468	.453
9	3.34	1.443	-.437	.229	-1.149	.455
10	3.90	1.267	-1.126	.227	.292	.451
11	3.78	1.163	-.873	.229	.167	.455
12	4.46	.758	-1.868	.228	4.764	.453
13	3.86	1.122	-.960	.228	.329	.453
14	3.85	1.179	-.840	.228	-.153	.453
15	3.71	1.219	-.771	.228	-.226	.453
16	3.56	1.286	-.633	.228	-.588	.453
17	4.15	1.161	-1.545	.229	1.676	.455

As Table 2 shows, all of the item–total correlations are significant.

TABLE 2. ITEM-TOTAL CORRELATIONS FOR THE COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN SL PROJECTS SCALE

	Total	1	2	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Total	1																
Pearson.	147																
N																	
1		.444**	1														
Pearson.		<.001															
Sig.	147	147															
(2-tailed)																	
N																	
2		.590**	.151	1													
Pearson.		<.001	.068														
Sig.	147	147	147														
(2-tailed)																	
N																	
4		.632**	.046	.461**	1												
Pearson.		<.001	.581	<.001													
Sig.	147	147	147	147													
(2-tailed)																	
N																	
5		.768**	.300**	.560**	.470**	1											
Pearson.		<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001												
Sig.	147	147	147	147	147												
(2-tailed)																	
N																	
6		.578**	.361**	.138	.310**	.394**	1										
Pearson.		<.001	<.001	.097	<.001	<.001											
Sig.	147	147	147	147	147	147											
(2-tailed)																	
N																	
7		.522**	.246**	.180*	.395**	.314**	.337**	1									
Pearson.		<.001	.003	.030	<.001	<.001	<.001										
Sig.	147	147	147	147	147	147	147										
(2-tailed)																	
N																	
8		.646**	.283**	.457**	.492**	.686**	.189*	.224**	1								
Pearson.		<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	.002	.006									
Sig.	147	147	147	147	147	147	147	147									
(2-tailed)																	
N																	

3.2. Dimensionality

The exploratory factor analysis (EFA), using the principal components extraction method and Varimax rotation, enables us to determine the dimensionality of the scale, with the following descriptive statistics: KMO = .84; $\chi^2(136) = 1186.6$; $p < .001$. The initial extraction gave three significant factors that explain 58.24% of the variance. Factors one and three contain five items and the second six (Table 3).

TABLE 3. Rotated Factor Loadings, Community of Each Item, and Variance Explained by Each Factor in the Scale of Community Participation in SL Projects

Item	Factor I	Factor II	Factor III	Communality (h ²)
8	.771			.640
2	0.762			.606
5	.738			.706
4	.602			.514
9	.594			.636
15		.883		.787
11		.781		.647
16		.693		.664
14		.542		.399
12		.527		.526
1		.434		.313
10			.680	.615
6			.665	.583
7			.657	.487
17			.578	.531
13			.544	.550
% explained variance	40.16	10.92	7.16	

Factor I, which we have called “involvement of the entity with the students”, describes core activities that the entity carries out with students who participate in the projects: evaluation (item 8), training (item 2), supervision (item 5), designing activities (item 4), and facilitating processes of reflection (item 9). Factor II includes 6 items that define the “project’s objectives in the community”: supporting its development and not just providing a temporary service (item 15); addressing its needs in a sustainable manner (item 11); benefiting the community (item 16), recognising and valuing its members (item 14); strengthening relations between the university and the community (item 12); and adaptation to the circumstances of the community (item 1). Factor III, for its part, groups items on “involvement of the entity in the organisation of the project”: university and entity/organisation celebrate/share the benefits (item 10); defining the functions of each group involved (item 6); identification of social needs (item 7); giving their opinion on the project and its results (item 17); and evaluation of perception of the fulfilment of the entity’s objectives (item 13).

3.3. Reliability

We then calculated the Cronbach α coefficient based on the analysis of the internal consistency of the final version of the scale and all of its components. The analysis of the 16 items gave an alpha coefficient of .89 (indicating high internal consistency) which did not increase when eliminating any of the items. Table 4 shows the homogeneity index and alpha coefficient for each of the factors that comprise the scale. As for the internal consistency of the items that comprise Factor I, the α coefficient was .84, which indicates good reliability. The value of the items from Factor II is .81, while the consistency of Factor III falls to .77. If we consider the table, we can see that the alpha does not increase when eliminating any of the items.

TABLE 4. HOMOGENEITY INDEX (HI) OF THE COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN SL PROJECTS SCALE

Item	HI	Cronbach's α if the item is removed
Factor I		
2	.627	.825
4	.547	.839
5	.759	.799
8	.680	.814
9	.636	.823
Factor II		
1	.389	.814
11	.633	.764
12	.562	.788
14	.478	.803
15	.705	.746
16	.708	.745
Factor III		
6	.523	.750
7	.450	.775
10	.633	.699
13	.614	.708
17	.578	.720

3.4. Estimation of parameters and evaluation of fit

After analysing the construct validity and reliability of the scale, we performed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using the IBM-SPSS AMOS 29 programme, estimating the parameters of the original model under the maximum likelihood estimation criterion, in order to test the adequacy of the three-factor model. This is the model shown in Figure 1, where the standardised regression weights can be seen, as well as the covariances (all of them are significant: $p < .01$).

FIGURE 1. CFA MODEL FOR THE SCALE OF COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN SL PROJECTS..

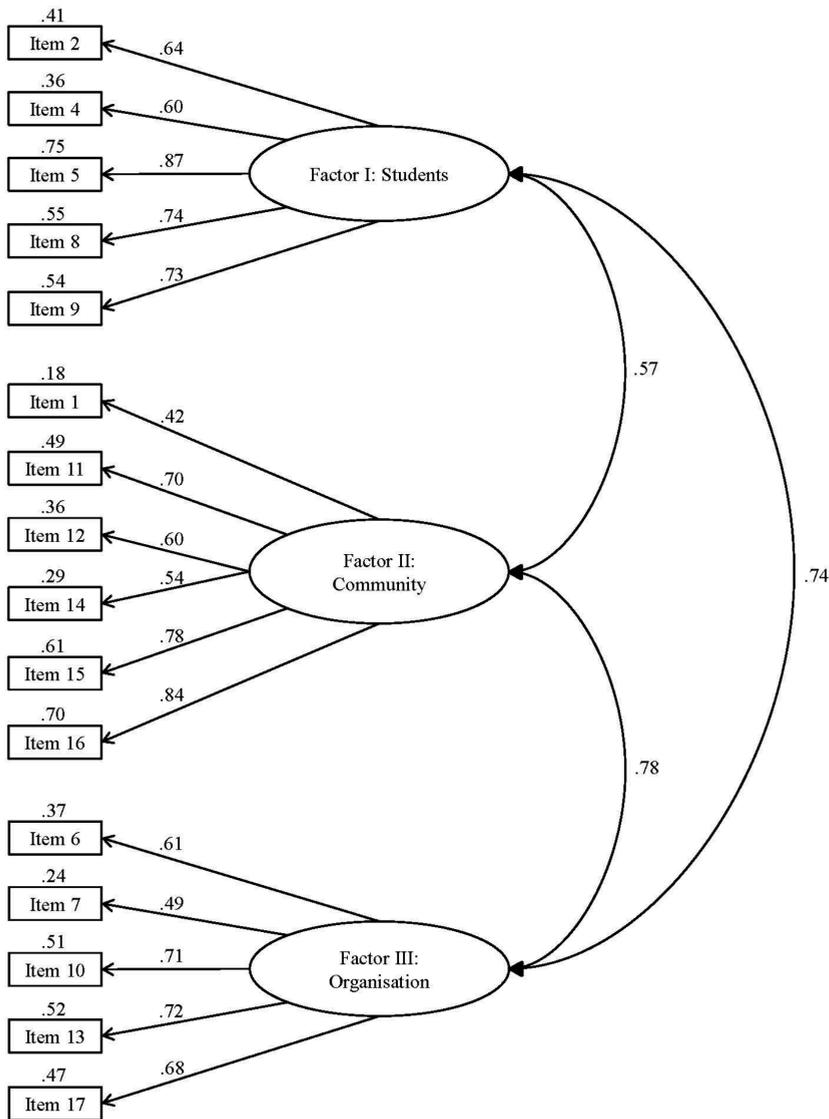


Table 5 presents the fit indices, which enable us to confirm that the proposed model is adequate to explain the role of the community in SL projects. This is consistent with the theoretical structure that guided the preparation of the scale and its items.

TABLE 5. FIT INDICES OF THE INITIAL AND FINAL MODELS OF THE SCALE

χ^2	df	p	$\chi^2(p)$	GFI	CFI	RMSEA [CI]	SRMS
296	114	.000	2.60	.828	.835	.105 [.090-.119]	.070

4. Conclusions

This work has focused on service-learning from a community vision, as the literature has frequently shown the central role of social entities and groups in the epistemic and practical construction of this educational strategy (Hernández-Barco et al., 2020; Rodríguez-Izquierdo & Lorenzo, 2023). However, to date research has generally prioritised the study of students' academic results (Santos Rego, Mella, Naval & Vázquez, 2021) to the detriment of the attention to the community in the framework of this methodology (Cruz & Giles, 2000). For this reason, this study proposed a model to measure community participation in SL from the teachers' perspective.

The proposal consists of a three-factor scale based on a rigorous theoretical framework whose central focus is the advisability of evaluating the involvement of the community beyond the results obtained (Chika-James et al., 2022), valuing the processes and the configuration of relationships based on reciprocity and, of course, on the participation of the entities as educational stakeholders (Compare et al., 2022; Santos Rego et al., 2023).

Under this premise, the three factors of the scale collect information about the entity's involvement with the students, the project's objectives in the community, and the involvement of the entity in the organisation of the project. In short, it is a scale designed to determine the nature of the partnership relations established between the entities and the universities, rather than the level of satisfaction with the results obtained (Miron & Moely, 2006; Rinaldo et al., 2015). More specifically, the exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses indicate that the solution of the scale is satisfactory in both its factorial structure and the evaluated levels of internal consistency.

What our study makes very clear is that, without the community –strategically viewed through social entities of different natures and contextual relevance (Sotelino et al., 2019)–, university service-learning would not attain the levels of theoretical consistency and practical functionality that its contribution is frequently reported as providing to high-quality competency training in higher education (Santos Rego et al., 2025).

Such a consideration is backed on this occasion by the sense and formative scope given to community commitment in these projects by university teachers who have experience in the use of service-learning and whose recognised motivation in this regard is the potential optimisation of results that the methodology can demonstrate in a large proportion of the students.

With this expectation (which we have confirmed in previous studies) and supported by extensive contributions from the literature on the subject, we validated a scale designed to measure the involvement of civic and social organisations in service-learning programmes or projects. The distinguishing feature here is that the instrument's development is grounded in faculty perspectives on this subject. Indeed, the analyses performed to validate the scale highlight that the lowest scores are found in items from Factor I (the entity's involvement with students), reflecting the entity's limited participation in activities such as evaluation, reflection, or monitoring (Arribas-Cubero et al., 2022; Karasik, 2020).

While we remain wary of any inclination towards idealisation, the fact that the teaching staff are individuals who recognise the requirements and/or conditions to take into account in the participation of the community as an educational stakeholder in higher education is of extra value for the advance of good service-learning in universities. We should not forget that this is where we can find a crucial example of the theoretical effectiveness of a methodology whose epistemic credentials, which derive from pragmatism, need constant pedagogical legitimation in the situated practice provided by the community or communities, making service a magnificent opportunity for personal and professional learning.

In the contemporary society of algorithms and of the inevitable digital tension linked to their obvious entry into campus life, maybe service-learning will, here and now, open dialogic pathways so that, in the community, some of the best proposals for realising the creative potential arising from our cooperative nature as social beings can be taken up again. It is no coincidence, and with good reason, that it has been said that we are dealing with a pedagogy of and for common action.

As an academic work, this one has limitations and opens new possibilities to continue to advance in this line of research. On the one hand, the self-reported nature of our data could introduce social desirability bias, which would suggest a need to reinforce the teachers' perspective and contrast it with that of decision makers at the entities involved in the projects. On the other hand, given the specificity of the participants and the conditions under which the research was carried out, we had to opt for convenience sampling of the participants within the universities involved in the study when selecting them. However, it would be opportune to expand the sample by using a probability method, which would permit increased external validity.

Author contributions

Miguel Ángel Santos-Rego. Conceptualisation, data curation, formal analysis, funding acquisition, investigation, methodology, project administration, resources, supervision, validation, visualisation, writing-original draft, writing-review & editing.

Ígor Mella-Núñez. Conceptualisation, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, resources, validation, visualisation, writing-original draft, writing-review & editing.

Jorge Soto-Carballo. Conceptualisation, investigation, methodology, resources, validation, writing-review & editing.

Xosé Manuel Malheiro-Gutiérrez. Conceptualisation, investigation, methodology, resources, validation, writing-review & editing.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Policy

The authors declare that they have not used artificial intelligence (AI) in the preparation of this article.

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Author biographies

Miguel A. Santos Rego

Doctor of Philosophy and Educational Sciences from the Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, where he is currently University Professor in the Department of Pedagogy and

Didactics (Faculty of Educational Sciences). He has been a visiting researcher and visiting professor in the universities of Florida International University, the University of Illinois, Johns Hopkins, and the University of Texas in the USA. He is the author of forty books and some two hundred articles in journals of accredited quality in the field of the educational sciences, and he has supervised 37 doctoral theses and directed 23 research projects. National Educational Research Prize. He was Vice-Rector for Faculty Affairs at the Universidade de Santiago de Compostela. He is currently head of the Comisión Gallega de Informes, Evaluación, Certificación y Acreditación (Galician Reports, Evaluation, Certification, and Accreditation Commission, CGIACA-ACSUG), as well as coordinating the ESCULCA Research Group, recognised as a Competitive Reference Group in the Galician R&D system.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8593-6881>

Ígor Mella-Núñez

International Doctorate in Education and Special Prize from the Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, where he is currently Associate Professor in the Department of Pedagogy and Didactics (Faculty of Educational Sciences). He is a member of the ESCULCA Research Group, the RIES (Immigration, School, and Society Network) research network, and the UNIASC (University, Innovation, and Learning in the Knowledge Society) Excellence Network. His principal research interests are higher education, service-learning, and competence development. In relation to these topics, he has participated in various research projects with regional, national (State R&D&I Programme), and European (Erasmus+ Programme) funding.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0189-4619>

Jorge Soto-Carballo

Doctor in Educational Sciences from the Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, degree in Pedagogy, and three-year degree in Teaching. He was Vice-Rector of the Universidade de Vigo (2018–2022) and Secretary of the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia in Pontevedra (2002–2005). He is currently a professor in the Faculty of Educational Sciences and Sport at the Universidade de Vigo (Pontevedra campus). His research focuses on teacher training and the use of smart educational technology in educational contexts. He has participated in research projects with regional, national, and international scope and is the author of numerous scientific publications in the field of education. He is part of the Editorial Committee of the *Revista de Investigación en Educación* and of the Advisory Committee of the *Revista Galega do Ensino*. He is a member of the Sociedad Española de Pedagogía (Spanish Society of Pedagogy) and of the Society of Transnational Academic Researchers (STAR), and is also an assessor in high impact academic journals.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6768-4078>

Xosé M. Malheiro-Gutiérrez

Doctor in Philosophy and Educational Sciences from the Universidade de Santiago de Compostela and Professor in the Department of Pedagogy and Didactics of the Faculty of Educational Sciences of the Universidade da Coruña. He was previously a professor at the University of Vigo (2001–2002) and the University of Santiago (2003–2008). He has published different works on educational intervention of Galician emigration to the Americas and won various prizes relating to historical educational research. He is a member of the ESCULCA (Universidade de Santiago de Compostela), GICEPEC (Universidad Complutense de Madrid), and the Política educativa, Historia e Sociedade (Educational Policy, History and Society) (Universidade da Coruña) research groups. He belongs to the SEDHE (Spanish Society of the History of Education) and is a member of the Nova Escola Galega pedagogical renovation movement. He researches migratory processes and their implications on the school; the content of school textbooks; the use of photography and film for studying the school memory, and the development of SL projects in the university setting.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5992-9522>

Annex. Scale of community participation in SL projects

Indicate, on the scale provided (with 1 being not at all and 5 a lot), how developed each of the following aspects is in relation to the service-learning project/experience in your subject:

	1	2	3	4	5
The project is flexible and can adapt to the circumstances of the community					
The students receive training from the entity/organisation					
The entity/organisation receives training in the SL methodology					
The entity/organisation participates in the design and structuring of the project activities					
The entity/organisation participates in the supervision of the students					
The functions of each group involved are defined (teachers, students, and community)					
Work is carried out with the entity/organisation to identify social needs					
The entity/organisation participates in the evaluation of the students					
The entity/organisation facilitates the students' processes of reflection					
The university and the entity/organisation celebrate/share the benefits of the project					
The project addresses the needs of the community in a way that is sustainable in the long term					
The project strengthens relations between the university and the community					
The evaluation of the project takes into account whether the objectives of the entity/organisation are being met					
The members of the community are recognised and valued for their participation					
The project was designed to support the development of the community and not just to provide a temporary service					
There is continuous feedback to ensure benefits for the community					
The members of the entity/organisation have the opportunity to give their opinion about the project and its results					

Note: Item 3 was eliminated following the analyses of the reliability of the scale.