The role of community in service-learning projects in Spanish universities: a systematic review (2015 – 2024)

El rol de la comunidad en los proyectos de aprendizaje-servicio de las universidades españolas: una revisión sistemática (2015 – 2024)

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Abstract:

Service-learning (SL) has become established in higher education as a methodology that integrates academic training and social engagement. However, much of the scientific output concerning it has focused on the benefits of SL for students, without observing how it impacts the community. As a first step to examine the study of community participation in SL projects, this article focuses on analysing how the community is conceived, involved, and evaluated in SL projects implemented in Spanish universities. To this end, a systematic review of literature from between 2015 and 2024 was performed, following the PRISMA protocol and using four reference databases in Spain as information sources: WoS, Scopus, Dialnet, and TESEO. The systematic review's search strategy returned 26 studies. These were analysed in depth and found to display limited explicit conceptualisation of the term community, as well as limited active participation by the community in the design and evaluation of SL projects. An instrumental or welfarist vision of the community predominates, which hinders the reciprocity and joint design inherent to the SL approach. There is also a lack of systematic studies on the real impact of these projects in the participating communities. The discussion suggests that it is necessary to move towards more horizontal models of collaboration, where the community is configured as a co-responsible agent and not just a recipient. It is concluded that effective community integration requires the role of the community to be clarified, strategic alliances to be fostered, and systematic evaluation of the effects of SL beyond the university environment.

Keywords: service-learning; community; higher education; University; systematic review; Spain

Resumen:

El aprendizaje-servicio (ApS) se ha consolidado en la educación superior como una meto-
dología que integra la formación académica y el compromiso social. Sin embargo, gran parte
de la producción científica ha centrado su atención en los beneficios del ApS para el estu-
diantado, sin observar cuál es su impacto en la comunidad. Como primer paso para abordar
el estudio de la participación de la comunidad en los proyectos de ApS, este artículo se centra
en el análisis sobre cómo se concibe, se involucra y se evalúa la comunidad en los proyectos
de ApS desarrollados en las universidades españolas. Para ello, se llevó a cabo una revisión
sistemática de la literatura entre 2015 y 2024 siguiendo el protocolo PRISMA utilizando como
fuentes de información cuatro bases de datos de referencia en nuestro territorio: WoS, Scopus,
Dialnet y TESEO. El resultado de la estrategia de búsqueda de la revisión sistemática seleccio-
nó 26 estudios que fueron analizados en profundidad, que evidencian una escasa concep-
tualización explícita del término comunidad, así como una limitada participación activa de
esta en el diseño y evaluación de los proyectos de ApS. Predomina una visión instrumental o
asistencialista de la comunidad, que dificulta la reciprocidad y el codiseño propios del enfo-
que ApS. Asimismo, se constata la falta de estudios sistemáticos sobre el impacto real de estos
proyectos en las comunidades participantes. La discusión sugiere que es necesario avanzar
hacia modelos más horizontales de colaboración, donde la comunidad se configure como
agente corresponsable y no solo receptor. Se concluye que una integración efectiva de la co-
munidad exige clarificar su rol, fomentar alianzas estratégicas y evaluar de forma sistemática
los efectos del ApS más allá del entorno universitario.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje-servicio; comunidad; educación superior; universidad; revisión
sistemática; España

1. Introduction

As a result of social demands and changes to regulatory frameworks, experiential
methodologies have acquired an important role in university education, especially with
regards to the link between theory and practice. These methodological proposals are
supported by linking learning to reflection and comprehension in action (Baena, 2019).
One of these experiential strategies is service-learning (SL), which facilitates learning in
which students and the community participate in a process of transformation. However,
we must not lose sight of the fact that this action only provides an educational dimension
if it promotes active engagement and shared responsibility between all of the agents
involved, both educational and social. Participation that entails acting jointly and in
coordination in real situations and contexts with the aim of improving and transforming
situations and/or people.

Following the implementation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in Spain,
universities have intensified the adoption of active student-centred methodologies. The
Bologna Process set 2010 as its target date for implementation after the ministerial agreement
of 1999, and over the following decade practices were consolidated that were especially
promoted by the drive given to teaching innovation. This scenario spurred the modernisation
of methodological strategies in teaching, including active and experiential methods in the
classroom: problem-based learning, project-based learning, flipped classroom, field work,
oral presentations, etc. The aim was to connect theory with practice in real settings, allowing
students to collaborate, reflect, and contribute knowledge, and so create meaning in what
they learn, as is also the case with the service-learning or SL methodology.

SL requires coordinated participation between students and the community to which
the activity is directed. Achieving this relies on the involvement of both as it is based

on cooperation in topics that affect and interest them. In this way, a formative space is generated where "learning adds quality to the service provided and the service makes the learning meaningful" (Battle & Escoda, 2019, p. 5, authors' own translation). It is this participation that can create spaces for authentic learning, spaces where answers are given and alternative solutions are pursued for problems, challenges, or interests that are proposed. Interconnection of nodes that can bridge the gap between the classroom and the territory in which the university and the community are located. Or, as Puig Rovira (2022) notes in another work, in SL "there is no simulation; rather it is a true and authentic activity that conserves all of the strength of what is directly experienced" (p. 26, authors' own translation). Students and community enrich one another in continuous mutual benefit facilitated by a process that is necessarily bidirectional and dialogic (Araya-Pizarro & Verelst, 2023). This requires us to consider both pillars – learning and service – to examine, consolidate, and substantiate this methodology. And, especially, in its essential reciprocity, one of the key features that distinguish it from other experiential methodologies, to move from designing projects for the community to projects with the community (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2023). Designs in which both, with joint-responsibility, commit to the shared objectives.

When reviewing the scientific output about SL, we found many studies of its impact on students' learning, curriculum design in certain modules, or the social dimension of the universities involved (Redondo-Corcobado & Fuentes, 2020). However, the volume of research that centres on the community's perspective in these designs or the impact they have on it is considerably smaller (Araya-Pizarro & Verelst, 2023; Gandara, 2022). If both aspects, learning and service, are necessary elements to ensure the quality of these projects, it is telling that they are not addressed in the same way. This leads us to argue that there is a need to examine in depth what each of them involves and requires, and what impact they achieve. Therefore, we believe it is necessary, in this case, to consider studies of the "service" component and of the key stakeholder that makes it possible: the community to which the action is directed. According to our data, this has received less attention than its counterpart "learning" and the curriculum designs that make it possible. "Especially nowadays, when universities have both the responsibility to form citizens with a sense of social responsibility, and to contribute to addressing the social and environmental challenges facing our society" (Gandara, 2022, p. 302, authors' own translation). In view of all of this, the aim of the present study is to identify and analyse how community is considered and understood in the SL projects that are implemented in Spanish universities, as well as its function in these designs and its presence in our scientific output with the aim of valuing and making visible the essential task of the community.

2. The construct of "community" in SL projects

As a first step in this study, we analysed what we understand by "community" as a key stakeholder in SL projects. This term has a long history in the social sciences, albeit with different meanings as it relates to the value hierarchy of each author (Bond, 2022). We define this concept as "the group of individuals or people who reciprocally identify themselves with certain features, characteristics, and even objectives, that can be shared in certain spaces of life in common" (Santos Rego *et al.*, 2023, p. 36, authors' own translation). This makes sense given that, as Bär *et al.* (2021) note, we live and coexist in a community, we shape ourselves as part of it, and we contribute to its maintenance and development. However, we are also aware that "the difficulties and impediments that this life in common entails are neither few nor unknown" (pp. 244–245, authors' own translation).

In the service-learning methodology, this term is closely related to "service" as a construct as it represents the group to which the formative intervention is directed. The peculiarity of SL is that it requires "the establishment of strong links with the community to provide teaching that goes beyond the four walls of the university" (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2023, p. 13, authors' own translation). Without this collaboration it is not possible to understand that

university and community perform a joint activity in which both contribute to achieving a shared goal (Bär *et al.*, 2021). All of this indicates to us the importance of considering in depth what a community is and who constitutes it, as well as the role it plays – or can play – in the education of our students. Not ignoring the fact that this conceptualisation is also mediated by the theoretical models of the learning process under which each SL project is conceived, given "the high heterogeneity found in the concepts involved, the interpretation of its function, how it can be addressed, and the impacts it can generate" (Araya-Pizarro & Verelst, 2023, p. 146).

If we consider the etymology of the term, this indicates links between people to fulfil shared and reciprocal obligations, something that demands joint responsibility (León, 2017). It refers to a dynamic human group in the sense that it emerges, becomes established, maintains itself, evolves, and can disappear. Space and time are shared in the community, and in them interests, problems, objectives, and needs coalesce, which we seek to address collectively. This situation favours the creation of a particular shared identity that facilitates the system of relations that constantly define – and redefine – it. A community is never something static, and conflicts among its members can also occur. It requires the implementation of more or less visible communication, mediation, and negotiation strategies, which work together in the material expression of its identity and sustainability over time.

Based on this idea, we understand that we all belong to various communities, united by invisible bonds that facilitate social relations at the different levels – micro, meso, and macro – at which we move. These are the nodes that shape society, whether physical or virtual, that shape our world from their invisibility. Its fragility derives from the fact that, as it is so habitual, we forget it exists and we end up putting the individual before the collective, which wears away or diminishes its strength. Hence the requirement for continuous cooperation by everyone to maintain and develop it (Puig Rovira, 2021). The university cannot remain distant from this task as it is part of it, interacting in a dialogic process in which both work to achieve common interests.

When reviewing research on SL, the community is included in one form or another. So, do we achieve a link between university and community? Is the community incorporated into these curriculum designs in a participatory and negotiated way? Do we interact with it to achieve the learning and service objectives that we propose? These questions lead us to ask how we define and understand it in our SL projects, and to ask about the role it finally performs. To answer these questions, we used a systematic review of the scientific literature on inclusion and the role of this construct in the SL projects implemented in Spain.

3. Methodology

To address these questions, a systematic literature review (SLR) was performed regarding the concept of community in the framework of the SL projects carried out by Spanish universities. The stages of the process of this review, based on the guidelines of the PRISMA statement, are described below. This protocol, of an iterative nature, provides recommendations to ensure that reviews are adequately founded and are replicable in other research, which requires rigorous documentation of the systematic process of literature searching, screening, and analysis. In particular, PRISMA includes a checklist that makes it possible to establish whether the recommended parameters have been fulfilled (Page *et al.*, 2021), thus helping prevent possible biases.

In the present SLR, a number of research questions about the construct to be studied were established and a search strategy based on Boolean operators and keywords was used and applied to several academic databases. The academic works found were filtered using inclusion and exclusion criteria agreed by the research team, as set out below.

3.1. Research questions

First, the following three research questions were established, which focussed the search strategy:

1. How is the concept of community conceived in SL projects carried out in Spanish universities?

2. What was the level of participation of the community in the framework of the application of these projects?

3. What impact did the SL have on the community?

Secondly, to answer these questions, a search strategy was designed that was limited to works contained in the following databases: Web of Science (sub-bases sci-e; ssci; a&hci); Scopus; Dialnet, as it is the largest and most established database in Spain; and TESEO, a central index of doctoral theses from Spain. These resources were chosen considering the nature of the object of study to encompass the largest possible number of SL projects, as these are distributed across different types of scientific publication: journals, books, book chapters, and doctoral theses.

3.2. Boolean search strings

Search strings were used comprising Boolean operators principally based on the keywords "*aprendizaje servicio*" (service-learning) and "*comunidad*" (community), adding other associated terms and/or synonyms such as "agentes sociales" (social stakeholders), "entidades sociales" (social entities), "partenariado" (partnership), "*partner*", "territorio" (territory), "educación superior" (higher education), or "entorno" (setting) to address the object of study more comprehensively. Table 1 shows the raw results obtained from the search strings. The fields selected were title, abstract, and key words. The search term "ApS" was rejected as, in the test carried out in the study's design phase, it retrieved a concept from the field of medicine, giving false positives.

TABLE 1. Search strings applied to Scopus, WoS, Dialnet, and TESEO

Databases	Boolean search strings
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY((ApS OR aprendizaje-servicio) AND (comunidad OR "entidades sociales" OR "tercer sector" OR partenariado OR partner OR "agentes sociales" OR territorio OR entorno))
Web of Science (WoS)	TS=((ApS OR aprendizaje-servicio) AND (comunidad OR "entidades sociales" OR "tercer sector" OR partenariado OR partner OR "agentes sociales" OR territorio OR entorno))
Dialnet	Integration of the following successive searches in the search engine of the database: (ApS AND comunidad) + (ApS AND "entidades sociales") + (ApS AND "tercer sector") + (ApS AND partenariado) + (ApS AND partner) + (ApS AND "agentes sociales") + (ApS AND territorio) + (ApS AND entorno)
TESEO	The search was done using the database's search engine combining the key words: *aprendizaje-servicio*, *comunidad*, and "*educación superior*"

Source: Prepared by the authors.

3.3. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The inclusion and exclusion criteria proposed for filtering the original sample were agreed by the researchers in response to the need to ensure the relevance, quality, and

coherence of the documentary corpus in the systematic review of SL in Spanish higher education (Table 2).

On the one hand, the review was restricted geographically to the Spanish university system as the regulatory framework and degree of implementation of the EHEA have distinctive features that shape the conceptualisation of the community, the forms of collaboration, and the evaluation of SL. On the other hand, the restriction of the search to databases mentioned above ensures the inclusion of academically rigorous works from Spain, and including articles, books, book chapters, and doctoral theses allows for exhaustive analysis of diverse contributions to the field. Restricting the language to Spanish, English, and Spain's co-official languages favours accessible coverage without compromising the depth of the analysis and sufficiently encompasses the universe of publications generated in Spain.

The 2015–2024 temporal limitation was adopted for methodological and substantive reasons, as it ensures an up-to-date focus, capturing recent trends in the implementation of SL (Helbach *et al.*, 2022). In particular, this limitation made it possible to capture the most recent contributions regarding the implementation of SL in Spanish universities, in line with the consolidation of experiential methodologies in the framework of the EHEA (López-Cirugeda, 2025). The temporal limitation was explicitly applied in all of the databases and was established as an inclusion criterion in the protocol following the PRISMA Statement's guidelines on transparency in restrictions and search strategies (Page *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, the requirement that the academic works address community involvement and the SL methodology made it possible to keep a precise focus on the object of study, excluding tangential research.

Similarly, prioritising open-access publications facilitates the availability of the material, while the limitation to the context of Spanish universities ensures that the results are applicable to Spain. It was decided to prioritise items from open-access sources, as this facilitates the circulation of research data among researchers and ensures the reproducibility of the studies (García-Peñalvo, 2017).

TABLE 2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

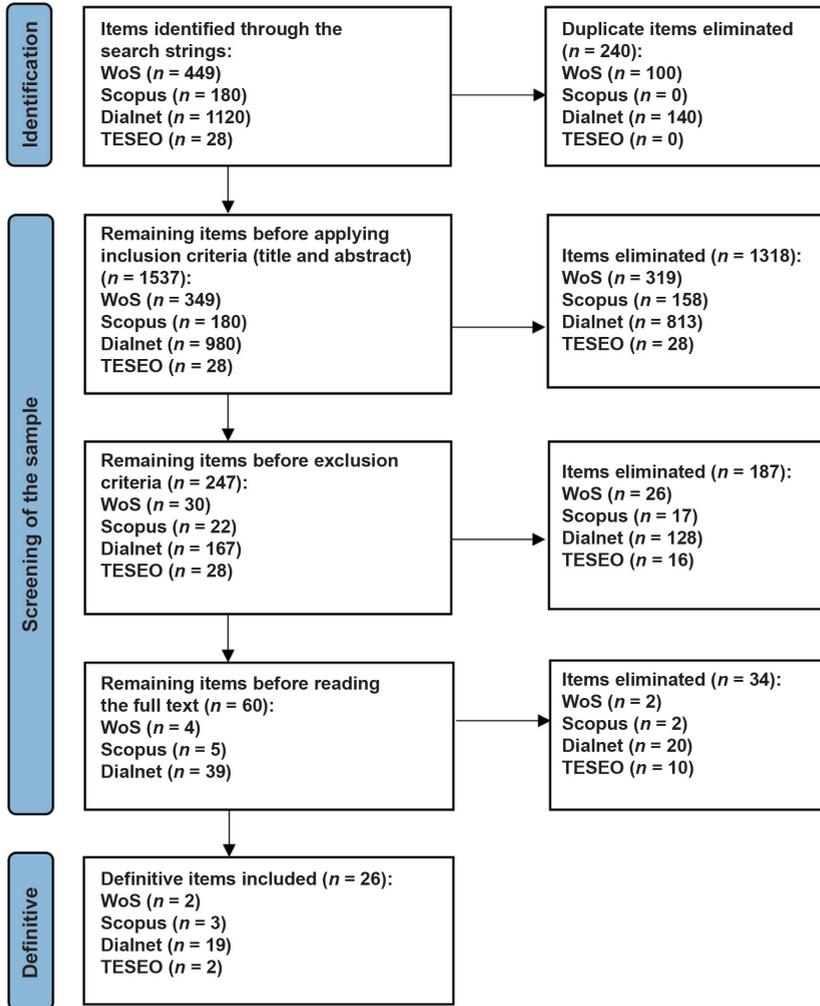| Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Articles, books, book chapters, and doctoral theses indexed in Web of Science (WoS), Scopus, Dialnet, and TESEO	Works with no connection to the field of higher education or relating to non-Spanish universities
English and Spanish languages	Works that do not consider involvement of the community (social entities, partners, social stakeholders, territory, setting, third sector)
Works published between January 2015 and March 2024	Works that do not include the SL methodology
Works published in open-access sources, including embargoed works	Works published in closed access sources
Works confined to the context of Spanish universities	

Source: Prepared by the authors.

4. Results

With the parameters described above, an aggregate total of 1777 initial items was found: 449 in WoS, 180 in Scopus, 1120 in Dialnet, and 28 in TESEO. From these, a total of 240 items

duplicated in different databases were eliminated. After applying the inclusion criteria using the search engines' filters, the title and abstract of each of the 247 remaining items were analysed, 187 of which were rejected when applying the pre-established exclusion criteria (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. PRISMA Flow diagram with the steps for filtering the results.

Identification

| Items identified through the search strings: WoS (n = 449) Scopus (n = 180) Dialnet (n = 1120) TESEO (n = 28) | Duplicate items eliminated (n = 240): WoS (n = 100) Scopus (n = 0) Dialnet (n = 140) TESEO (n = 0) |

Screening of the sample

| Remaining items before applying inclusion criteria (title and abstract) (n = 1537): WoS (n = 349) Scopus (n = 180) Dialnet (n = 980) TESEO (n = 28) | Items eliminated (n = 1318): WoS (n = 319) Scopus (n = 158) Dialnet (n = 813) TESEO (n = 28) |

| Remaining items before exclusion criteria (n = 247): WoS (n = 30) Scopus (n = 22) Dialnet (n = 167) TESEO (n = 28) | Items eliminated (n = 187): WoS (n = 26) Scopus (n = 17) Dialnet (n = 128) TESEO (n = 16) |

| Remaining items before reading the full text (n = 60): WoS (n = 4) Scopus (n = 5) Dialnet (n = 39) | Items eliminated (n = 34): WoS (n = 2) Scopus (n = 2) Dialnet (n = 20) TESEO (n = 10) |

Definitive

| Definitive items included (n = 26): WoS (n = 2) Scopus (n = 3) Dialnet (n = 19) TESEO (n = 2) |

Source: Prepared by the authors based on Page et al. (2021).

As a result of this screening process, an initial aggregate total of 60 works was obtained. The research team then read their full texts in depth to identify each work's contributions to each of the research questions. Based on this in-depth reading of the full texts, it was established that in some cases the content of these works, despite fulfilling the pre-established criteria, did not address any of the constructs set out in the formulated questions, and so they were rejected. In this last screening step, 34 additional items were eliminated, giving a final sample of 26 references: 2 in WoS, 3 in Scopus, 19 in Dialnet, and 2 in TESEO.

5. Analysis of the results

Based on in-depth readings of the selected documents, their content was discussed in light of this study's three research questions: How the concept of community is conceived in the SL projects designed in bachelor's or master's modules. What level of community participation is facilitated and what are the roles entrusted to it. And identifying studies that focus on evaluating the impact in the receiving community. Ultimately, how – in the 26 works selected – the community to which the service is directed participates in the design, development, and evaluation of the SL project implemented. Before progressing in the analysis, we must note that of the 1537 non-duplicate items that address SL in Spanish universities, 1511 only consider the community as service recipient. It is also striking that it can be inferred from the excluded works that the community's presence is limited to a utilitarian focus which is restricted to exchange of goods and services or to field work.

5.1. How do SL projects conceive the concept of community?

The largest percentage of the selected publications concentrates on this question in one way or another. Their concern is not so much with defining what is understood by community, but with how to articulate this relationship so that it is *de facto* reciprocal. A large proportion of the articles analysed focus on illustrating that the service is not defined as a donation, as happens in volunteering activities, but rather is the result of a collaboration. Nevertheless, "although at present it is common to consider the need for joint and coordinated work by the different agents who have an educational impact on the community, even today, this approach is frequently more theoretical than real" (Arriaga *et al.*, 2021, p. 102).

When they attempt to describe what "community" comprises as a construct, they agree in one way or another that it is a constantly evolving concept that requires a feeling of belonging in the people who comprise it, which facilitates their engagement (Santos Rego *et al.*, 2023). "The starting idea is to travel together and build something shared. In this sense, the recognition and construction of a joint project go hand in hand" (Romañá & Campo, 2022, p. 149, authors' own translation). In these articles, we find recognition of the importance of integrating students into real situations where they confront their social situation, something that boosts the sense of belonging to the community when observing the impact of their participation (Arriaga *et al.*, 2021; Gezuraga, 2016). This confirms the relevance of coordinating communities in the same setting to generate authentic ecosystems that make it possible to enrich their social capital. Something that involves connecting the different nodes in a single territory while accepting their horizontality, joint design, transversality, and joint responsibility in a process of collaboration between all of the social stakeholders (Baig *et al.*, 2023; Graell, 2015). They emphasise that the university also learns and benefits from these collaborations by expanding and diversifying its perspective thanks to the contributions of local stakeholders. The need to unite the community's knowledge with academic-professional knowledge to be able to propose solutions for the community's problems is also considered (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2023). As Gandara (2022) states, "as well as the support that SL can give to the community, much can also be learnt from it" (p. 307, authors' own translation).

This involves knowing, recognising, connecting, and working jointly, bringing together the needs and/or interests of the territory from a local perspective. "In a context where all of the stakeholders and spaces are necessary to educate successfully, it is vital to establish mutual links of joint responsibility and reciprocity in them to build shared educational projects" (Bär *et al.*, 2021, p. 247, authors' own translation). And also to recognise that one is not only part of the problem, but also of the solution (Rubio i Serrano, 2015). Links that describe a relationship characterised by closeness, equity, and integrity (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2023), necessarily united with reciprocity. Accordingly, projects are generated based on the principles of respect, trust, engagement, shared resources, and clear communication between participants (Santos Rego *et al.*, 2023; Arriaga *et al.*, 2021). Without these principles,

it will be hard to implement SL projects where all agencies contribute to the development of society (Sotelino *et al.*, 2019).

To answer this research question, we reviewed the terms that are used as synonyms for community, finding constructs such as partnership, social entities, third sector, social stakeholders, or territory, and so these were also included in this analysis. However, we should note that the social entity, social stakeholder, or third sector are not "community", even though without them it would not exist. They are part of it at the micro, meso, and macro level, and it is in these constructs that on most occasions the projects are developed. For example, Rubio i Serrano (2015) notes that social stakeholders are part of the community, but their role in the project is to serve as a way to connect with the individuals to whom each project is directed. Through them, the partnership – the alliance or the association to achieve the objective proposed between the two parties – is put into practice. Further evidence of this same conceptualisation is found in other articles, as in the case of Graell (2015), who champions the need for alliances between different people or organisations that share the same objective. Or relations of partnership based on being able to have "two or more organisations coming together to create something new, something that they could not achieve alone and which is even more than the sum of their actions" (Sotelino *et al.*, 2019, p. 199, authors' own translation).

In fact, the selected articles are in line with the experience of Santos Rego *et al.* (2015), who argue that the community often serves as an active educational stakeholder by providing real needs and situated knowledge, thus enriching the students' formative process. Gozálvez and García-García (2020), for their part, observe that the students' engagement promotes critical and jointly responsible participation that strengthens ethical and civic competences. In addition to this, Arbués *et al.* (2020) note that in a society marked by hyperconnectivity and weakened social ties, SL is proposed as a way to revitalise civic engagement and rebuild community bonds through higher education.

On the other hand, the expression territory also appears, and opens up some very interesting options for SL projects as it underlines the value of the setting where the community is located, where different social stakeholders act, coming together in shared projects. Knowing the setting, or in other words, "'territorialising' education and 'educationalising' the territory" (Collet & Subirats, 2016, authors' own translation). "It is these setting-based educational practices with a community character that must make it possible to overcome individualism and generate strong communities based on their social capital" (Bär *et al.*, 2021, p. 247, authors' own translation). In essence, connecting the different times, spaces, and social, educational, and community stakeholders in shared projects, so that, as Baig *et al.* (2023) emphasise, "the territory is not merely decoration, a resource with which to generate particular interactions, but an intelligence with which to design and jointly produce" (p. 16, authors' own translation). Ultimately, the community is conceptualised as a territory that is present as a starting point to identify the communities that comprise it, as well as the entities and stakeholders within it, in order to progress towards the idea of a networked effort (Rubio i Serrano, 2015; Bär *et al.*, 2021).

Finally, it is also essential to mention the limitations and problems identified when mentioning community. Among others, there is a disconnection "between what the university regards as collaboration and what is generated in my organisation as a result of collaboration through SL" (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2023, p. 23, authors' own translation), as teachers are concerned with students' learning. And the community, logically, is concerned with the service it provides to the general public. This situation means that the use of different languages between the two groups has still not been overcome. Something else that stands out, especially among teachers, is lack of time as an obstacle to building relationships of trust that develop into equitable agreements in this encounter. Another problem that hampers the implementation of SL projects is the breakdown of the sense of community, causing "a personal and vital relocation with regards to not feeling like part of the framework of a particular territory along with others" (Sotelino *et al.*, 2019, p. 201, authors' own translation). This situation is reflected in the disregard for key values for the development of the community, such as

cooperation, solidarity, reciprocity, and recognition of the other. And this could ultimately undermine the community itself and, consequently, affect the individual.

5.2. Does the community participate actively in SL projects?

When addressing the second and third questions posed in this research, we observed a significant reduction in the number of publications that address both of them.

As has already been observed, the perspective of teaching designs and the voice of the students dominate, while the community, with its different entities and groups, remains the service recipient that is offered. This is a weakness of many SL projects, where the community is present solely as a recipient of students (Gezuraga, 2016).

They also consider students' learning, but without addressing the community's participation in evaluating students' learning achievements. One surprising work, among other examples, is a recent article (Díaz-Iso *et al.*, 2025) which features as explicit exclusion criteria: "They report on instruments with the aim of measuring different stakeholders' perception of the experience", and/or "they report on the experience's impact in the community" (p. 574, authors' own translation). Nonetheless, we have found research that asserts "the need to involve all of the people affected to foster their participation in projects of this type" (Arriaga *et al.*, 2021, p. 102, authors' own translation). To do so they propose flexible roles and diverse spaces for participation as key elements to generate mutual interest and respect as stakeholders involved in achieving shared goals (García-Romero, 2018). They first require the university to understand and recognise these entities and groups with which it will develop a project as the best way to generate mutual trust, to present a shared responsibility that can respect the time, situations, and languages of both parties (Graell, 2015). This will be achieved if we provide spaces for dialogue about the design, implementation, and evaluation of the projects that we want to develop in a given context. Keeping an open mind, accompanying, training, being flexible in times, in objectives, making the participation of these entities visible. In essence, recognising them (Romañá & Campo, 2022), as:

> How we collaborate with the community is a defining aspect of SL, going beyond the idea of projects for the community to projects with the community. Such a collaboration requires constant communication between the partners […], clearly defined roles and responsibilities for the project's partners; and a shared vision of the results. (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2023, pp. 16–17, authors' own translation)

This author adds another relevant requirement so that the community is fully integrated in SL projects: training them in this methodology. To know what is intended and what is expected of them in such a way that they can set out what SL means for them. However, "it is its deployment in the local field and with diverse material expressions that makes it possible to mobilise different stakeholders in the territory and create local educational networks that take shape in the potential of the neighbourhood, the town, or the city" (Bär *et al.*, 2021, p. 245, authors' own translation).

Being aware that they are part of a network that contributes to the development of the community they form part of and that the community requires something more than individual commitment (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2023). And, even, "seeing SL not just as a learning methodology, but also as a channel for building a fabric with the social entities and bringing in other collaborations" (Gandara, 2022, p. 309, authors' own translation), from which proposals to consolidate new projects emerge.

An example of this type of approach can be found in the work of Miró-Miró *et al.* (2021), where they confirm the educational possibilities of digital narratives in the processes of designing and implementing community actions to exercise a citizenship that is committed to its own reality. They involve the whole of the educational community and they favour frequent and regular communication between all of the participants that can keep all of the parties collaborating and establishing a shared vision. In this way they are able to propose common goals to work on the needs of that community, they

establish plans of action to achieve the specified objectives, and they share knowledge and resources.

5.3. Do we evaluate the impact of our SL projects in the community?

There was very little evidence to answer this third research question: "There is no consistent research on the impact of SL [...] and much less on the relationships established between the two parties" (Santos Rego *et al.*, 2023, p. 39, authors' own translation). In this case, what we can report centres more on the silences. Rodríguez-Izquierdo *et al.* (2023) also consider this idea in depth, complaining that "too many SL projects provide more benefits for the university than for the community, a situation regarded as evidence of an unequal association" (p. 14, authors' own translation). They also argue that going into greater depth in knowledge, needs, and mutual interests with the aim of improving the designs to implement in each territory is the only way to progress in the connection between the two (Arriaga *et al.*, 2021, authors' own translation), given that:

> Service-learning projects have an impact on the community in that the partnerships created between the organisations involved, with the aim of improving the community and learning from real-life experiences in a controlled manner (Graell, 2015, p. 89).

And this is achieved if both parties have proof of the benefits obtained, of the improvements and transformations achieved (Santos Rego *et al.*, 2023). This challenge cannot be avoided if we are to advance in the sustainability of our SL projects, which will help to continue building this essential network that "generates communities that are stronger and less isolated, providing active participation in the setting" (Rubio i Serrano *et al.*, 2021, p. 128, authors' own translation). Universities and those of us who support SL cannot allow ourselves to ignore our impact in the community. It is our responsibility to ensure that our actions and/or theoretical considerations do not give the message that the community's participation is irrelevant.

6. Conclusions

There is no doubt that we are facing a shift in the pedagogical model in the university and that the SL methodology is a proposal that has gradually established itself in our classrooms. Its presence in all areas of knowledge reflects its capacity to combine theory and practice, knowledge and experience, in real contexts. That said, in the scientific output about the SL proposals implemented in higher education, studies of students' learning, of the innovative experiences based on this methodology are predominant. But not studies of the community or the entities with which SL is developed. Despite the small number of publications that focus on the community, there is no doubt that over recent years a very interesting line of research has begun, which, on the one hand, seeks to define and clarify what is understood by this construct, who forms it and makes it possible and sustainable over time, along with their necessary involvement in achieving agreed common goals. And, on the other, to identify the nature of its collaboration in SL projects, its functions and roles, and the elements that facilitate joint responsibility in achieving the proposed objectives. Studying its impact and how it is identified in the short and long term, who should participate in its design, implementation, and evaluation in each phase of the project, its sustainability, problems and limitations of the service, the roles of each member, etc., are essential topics to consolidate this methodology which we will address in future research. As well as considering in depth the role of universities in the territories of which we form part.

In this study we have been able to illustrate the benefits that SL provides for the university and the community, but it is still necessary to address its limitations and offer more practical applications and future lines of research that will allow us to set out more precisely how to change the focus of our attention in SL. In a way that shows that the presence of universities in the territory is filled with ethical and civic sense.

Another area that remains unresolved is the need to identify, and at the same time interconnect, the role of the people who take part in these projects and the impact they generate in universities, social entities, the community, and even society itself. Each of these objectives requires a different form of analysis, different categories and evaluation tools, without losing sight of the interconnected nature of all of the elements that comprise each project. As well as to relate them to the university's role in the community, in its more or less immediate territory, a true commitment to the community by the university. And to its capacity for openness and engagement in social problems through various actions rooted and supported in time, among which SL occupies an increasingly recognised role. This is the case thanks to the radically transformational capacity of SL as it boosts the convergence and participation of all of the agencies and stakeholders from a territory. But this will not be possible if relationships of partnership are not forged between entities and the university that facilitate a new ecosystem, a network that interacts in the interest of the common good. Relations of learning and service that mutually support one another on a plane of horizontality, joint design, transversality, and joint responsibility.

Author contributions

Marta Ruiz-Corbella. Conceptualisation, data analysis, writing – original draft, review and editing of final version, supervision.

Iñaki Celaya. Methodology, data curation, revision of the fourth draft and of the final version.

Victoria Vázquez-Verdera. Data analysis, revision of the third draft and of the final version.

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