SERVICE-LEARNING AT UNIVERSITY: ADDRESSING SOCIAL CHALLENGES FROM THE EDUCATION

Elena Mª Díaz-Pareja, Juana Mª Ortega-Tudela, & África Mª Cámara-Estrella
Department of Pedagogy, University of Jaén (Spain)

Abstract

The work presented is part of the Teaching Innovation Project 'Social responsibility in the University: APS in the Degrees of Education'. In the development of this project, a collaboration agreement was signed with the Spanish Committee of Acnur (UNHCR). Within the university volunteer program of this NGO "Let's not leave anyone behind", students of the Degree in Early Childhood Education of the University of Jaén have had the opportunity to deepen their knowledge of the living conditions of refugees.

The main aim of the collaboration with UNHCR has been to offer university students the opportunity to build the learning process acquired in the Degree by promoting social transformation, through the Service-Learning methodology, developing training activities, raising awareness of this issues and proposals of work to develop them with the students of Primary Education.

After a period of intense training, university students have subsequently designed and implemented their own awareness campaigns in different schools in Jaén.

Through real material used in the refugee camps and the material created by the students themselves, more than a hundred primary school students have been able to approach the reality of forced displacement and have better understood in the lives of more than 70 million people in the world who are suffering it.

In the implementation of the project, there has been the participation of an asylum seeker, which has provided the activities carried out with the precise contextualization of being able to share real experiences in a live voice.

Once the evaluation of this experience is achieved through discussion groups, the results show that the experience has been enriching for all those involved in the project and that Service-Learning fosters motivation, social responsibility, reflection and ethical commitment in the students.

Keywords: Service-Learning, university, refugees, social commitment.

1. Introduction

Among the different commitments that the university must face nowadays, those related to society acquire special relevance, because the improvement and transformation of reality is a priority task. In order to achieve this responsibility, the institution as a whole and the training that it offers must change substantially, creating links with the community and giving to students the possibility of having a comprehensive education aligned with social demands (Esteban and Martínez, 2012). In this sense, methodological strategies are a fundamental element for making this change possible. Among them, we highlight the training model of Service-Learning (SL).

The SL is, according to national and international researches, one of the greatest benefits to all participants involved in the process (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, and Gray, 2001). The SL can be defined as an active methodology, which combines two key elements: the learning that students do while acquiring contents, skills and curricular competencies and, the service, which is provided to the community by implementing this knowledge into practice (Folgueiras, Gezuraga, Aramburuzabala, 2019).

Puig, Batlle, Bosch and Palos (2007) distinguish four dimensions to consider when working with SL:

- The essence refers to the most basic and essential elements such as responding to real needs of society, performing a useful service and linking learning to academic curriculum.
- The pedagogy based on the actual experience lived by students, encouraging their participation and awareness of lived experience, promoting cooperation and looking for the project success and its recognition.
- Networking with the community: It is necessary to collaborate with other social institutions and organizations, to provide students service possibilities.

- Purposes: to promote values education through practice, encourage civic engagement and use knowledge as a tool for improving the quality of life.

Therefore, SL has become in recent decades in one of the better methodologies to promote relations between University and community, in order to achieve an improvement for all. In this respect, Olson and Brennan (2017) state that when a commitment is established between the university and the community, a positive transformation of higher education can be achieved. When we practice SL at the University, we contribute to open it to society, creating links between different institutions in order to participate in the social reality that students will have to face in their professional future. These are systematized activities aimed at improving relations between different groups, participating in the social framework, and giving meaning to the theoretical knowledge acquired (Campo, 2010). Hence, SL creates learning contexts that offers the possibility to develop communicative skills, capable of regulating the participation in debates, in solidarity projects in which the participants are involved as part of and intervening in them.

Even more, SL provides the necessary elements at a conceptual, procedural and instrumental level for the design and develop of projects that link the received learning with the labour world, a fact that acquires great relevance at the present time since the educational model is based on the acquisition of skills (Fernández, Arco, Hughes and Torres, 2014).

2. Design

The present experience is framed within an Innovation Project called 'Social responsibility at the University: SL at the Education Degrees'. Specifically, we focus this project on the subject Inclusive School, in which the 2nd year students of the Degree in Early Childhood Education of the University of Jaén develope different activities based on the Service-Learning methodology. In order to develop the practical part of the subject, the group-class was divided into smaller groups (6-8 participants) and each group was proposed to choose a social or educational institution for performing the type of service they have choosen (creation of educational resources, conscience and awareness-raising campaigns, workshops and others), taking into account the contents which they worked on the subject and how they connect them with practice. All these actions were developed under the supervision of the teacher. Two of these student groups chose the NGO SPAIN with UNHCR to work with and carry out a direct service in two schools. For this, the following work scheme was used:

- A training seminar on the APS methodology was carried out with the groups involved. The main aim of this seminar was to inform students about what this methodology consists of and how it should be carried out.
- We contacted with representatives of Spain with UNHCR (UNHCR-UNHCR), who visited the University and offered students the opportunity to collaborate in their "Let's not leave anyone behind" program. For this, a collaboration agreement was signed between the University of Jaén and UNHCR and training activities were carried out with the students involved in the SL project. (https://diariodigital.ujaen.es/sin-categoria/alumnado-de-la-uja-participa-en-un-proyecto-sobre-los-retos-de-los-refugiados-puesto; https://www.europapress.es/andalucia/noticia-alumnado-uja-participa-proyecto-retos-refugiados-20190514131659.html).
- At the same time, the students began to inquire about the possible services that could be carried out around this theme, linking them to their curriculum and the needs of the environment. Two public schools in the city that were working on issues of equality, interculturality and social justice were contacted and proposed to participate in this experience.
- The groups defined and organized their respective projects. In this case, they opted for awareness campaigns for primary school students. With the campaigns we designed, it was intended to make the reality of refugees known and provide an opportunity for school children to empathize with the refugee living conditions. In order to develop the campaigns, we designed two sessions for each school. During the first, an asylum seeker gave a talk to show their situation and contextualize their problem. At the second session, a gymkhana was developed. In this gymkhana, and through real material used in the refugee camps and the material created by the students, more than a hundred Primary students were able to put themselves in the skin of many people who are suffering the forced displacement of their origin countries.
- Once the service was implemented, the process and the students' learning were evaluated. Each group delivered a final report with the following structure: introduction, project objectives, theoretical justification, process description, technical data sheet of the actions and materials designed, conclusions and bibliography.

2.1. Objectives

The main aim of this Innovation Project was to use SL methodology for the development of the different subjects involved within, and at the same time, to improve the specific competences of the college students.

The specifics objectives developed with this experience were the following:

. To identify the real needs of schools involved in the project.

. To encourage social engagement between university students, schools and the program developed by UNHCR.

. To train students for the implementation of the service.

. To design intervention projects based on identified needs.

. To transfer to the real context the projects designed by the college students.

2.2. Methods

In this paper, we present the qualitative dimension of the experience. The techniques for collecting information were:

- direct observation, which was carried out during each session
- Pre-training and post-training evaluation (PPE), developed by the representative of the UNHCR Spanish Committee (using evaluation sheets and open questions)
- Final reports (FR), delivered by the college students at the end of the project and evaluated by the subject's teacher;
- Discussion groups (DF) composed by teachers from schools involved and college students.

A content analysis of the data was carried out in order to obtain results and draw conclusions about the whole develop of the SL Methodology.

3. Results and discussion

The results show that the experience was enriching for all the participants. Even more, they suggested that student participation in SL was associated with positive outcomes in motivation, task engagement, social responsibility, reflexion and ethic commitment (Celio; Durlak and Dymnicki, 2011).

"...the motivation after the gymkhana was very good, it was really successful, because the boys and girls give us really news ideas while we proposed the activities, even, some of the groups asked us to repeat some games, but it was impossible because we did not have enough time." (Group 1. FR)

"... the design of the gymkhana was a very motivating and creative task for the developed of the chosen topic. It gave us the possibility of implicate to the children and make them participant from the very first moment." (Group 2. FR)

We agree with Folgueiras, Gezuraga & Aramburuzabala (2019) when they state that the previous training is essential before the develop of a SL Project. In our case, the college students applauded the different training sessions. They argued that the training sessions allowed them to better design of their projects. Even more, the mere fact of participating in SL Projects offered to the college students the possibility of learning about the relevance of their professional and civic commitment with some disadvantaged collectives at risk of social exclusion (Mayor y Rodríguez, 2016).

"... for two months, we attended training talks given by ACNUR representatives, in which they made us know how lucky we are, and how few we value it. During the sessions, they have talk about disadvantaged places, about the day-a-day suffering of some people, about how they can be manipulated just because they want to put in safe to their families, or flee their country due to fear of persecution... ... most of the people who suffer from it are women and children. It has made us reflect and value more what we have today. " (G1. DG)

In this sense, the participation of the college students in the SL projects contributed to enhance their self-knowledge and self-esteem, as well as to the development of social and reflection skills. All the above mentioned, as Mayor (2019) states, implies the possibility of creating environments that offer different situations for analysis, criticism and awareness of their own actions, while give a personal and social meaning to their own experience.

"In one session, we worked the control of our lack of confidence and how we can solve it. While we were doing some activities, we realized that not only the people who suffer have uncertainty about the future or, even about the present time, but also people who apparently have no problems can be disbelief. And we realized that we ourselves can find the better solution." (G2. DG)

An aspect that the college students stand out positively is that the participating institutions and agents are involved into the action. It becomes an extra source of motivation for students, since they experience the usefulness and recognition of their work and effort.

"During these two months, while preparing the gymkhana, we were in contact with the schools to find out where the gymkhana was going to take place, to know what space we had, the number of children, the classes and the resources they could offer us." (G1. DG).

"The good cooperation between the children of the schools,… the motivation and interest they put in the development of the activities that we proposed,… the good use of the materials that the school provided us and the good treatment received by both the teachers and the students from the school was the best. "(G2. FI)

In addition, the knowledge acquired at the university subject by the students has improved the service provided. They demonstrated that they were able to apply this knowledge into the practice. Moreover, the service favoured the students' acquisition of new knowledge that make possible the resolution of new detected needs (Tapia, Amar, Montes, Tapia and Yaber, 2013).

"The school students worked cooperatively during the different gymkhana games. Also, in several groups there were students with some difficulties but, this was no inconvenience since, the tasks were designed for any student with or without difficulties. Always the classmates worked together. "(G1. DG)

In relation to the problems and limitations detected, they are generally reduced to the unforeseen events that arise in practice, related to problem solving and decision making (Chiva-Bartoll, Pallarés-Piquer and Gil-Gómez, 2018).

"The only problem to highlight is the lack of time we had to implement our work in the school because we were assigned more Primary groups to work with. However, everything went as planned." (G2. DG.)
"The gymkhana was intended to be done outdoor in the playground but, due to weather problems, we had to do it in a covered playground. Even so, it did not cause any problems and we were able to carry it out as it was intended"(G1. FI.).

4. Conclusion

Trough SL projects, the Education Degrees' students from the University of Jaén develop multitude of activities in their training course that can reverse in benefits for the society that surrounds them.

The subjects of their university training are focused on developing in them capacities that they will later have to put into practice in their professional work. Many of the university subjects (especially in the practice activities) require that the students carry out resources, materials, programs, etc., that could be used by different institutions taking advantage of these results.

Thus, our college students develop a series of practical activities that can offer answers to the demands of schools and social institutions. It is a big benefit for the institutions we collaborate with.

Moreover, carrying out these activities contextualized into real situations means that students are involved and interested in teaching practices, with the design and development of teaching resources, thematic workshops, etc.

With this, our project offers Learning, while our students learn from their subjects in a more realistic and connected way, and Service, while their elaborations can serve as support to teachers, students, schools and social institutions.

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