WRITTEN REFLECTION AS A "MOVEMENT" IN A QUALITY SERVICE-LEARNING PROCESS

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Abstract

Nowadays, Service Learning (SL) is considered as a form of experiential education. This perspective is based on the recognition and enhancement of experience as an ordering criterion of teaching and learning methods. In these terms, learning offers students the opportunity to experience a deeper understanding of personal competences. Thus, the central element of the SL is the link between personal and interpersonal development with cognitive development and the curricular path.

Investing in authentic conditions of subjectivity and consequently promoting the production of significant knowledge towards research parameters encompass the possibility of collaborating and interacting with a plurality of actors with different interests and perspectives. Besides its strengths the knowledge processes in terms of feasibility and applicability to real community life.

Written reflection is an essential element in a quality SL project, as on the one hand it helps students to connect what they observe and experience within the community, on the other hand, it allows teachers to understand if what they have taught so far manages to go "beyond" the classroom by generating effective strategies and possible significant learning. Thus, writing ca be considered as an interesting means which constitutes a useful self-training approach relating to an experience from which to extract significant materials and traces of one's personal learning.

In this research it was aimed to give voice and consistency to the actions and thoughts of the university students who, through Service-Learning activities, have enhanced the narrative training monitoring tool: the logbook. A sample of 153 students, enrolled in the fifth year of the Bachelor of Science in Primary Education (academic year 2021-22), at the University of Palermo, its was asked to report in writing all the observations, challenges and achievements, as well as the desired prospects for the future.

Writing, a source of strategic information to be able to identify the progress of experience and skills, is thus considered an engine-training effect for the construction of critical thinking and personal identity. Written reflection is the main pivot for transforming meanings, re-examining them and consolidating them in learning, knowledge of oneself and of the group, and at the same time awareness of one's role as active citizens. Therefore, this study aims at identifying good practices in the face of social commitment, analyzing the development of experiences and promoting a self-directed attitude.

Keywords: Learning experience, learning environments, service learning, written reflection, self-direction.

1. Introduction

Today, there are many definitions of Service Learning in the literature, and they find their pedagogical synthesis in learning by doing. Experiential learning looks at being in the situation (acting in the first person) as an authentic method that facilitates the transfer of knowledge and skills from the situation to the internalization of contents.

Service Learning (SL) is configured as an educational strategy based on youth empowerment, more precisely an experiential methodology that focuses attention on a process of community growth (both of the individual and of the group, and thus of the territory to which it belongs) in terms of self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-determination, leading all the protagonists to consciously appropriate their own potential.

Reminding us that experience is recognised as a vital aspect of educational contexts (Schutz & Pekrun, 2007), learning and teaching are practices that activate, and converge, flows of inner (emotion) and outer (expression) experience (Denzin, 2007).

For this reason, the "voice" of students is an indispensable element in Service Learning, because it opens the door to the desire for reflection, participation, decision-making, stimulating them to be more actively involved in community affairs in the future (Morgan & Streb, 2001).

Astin and colleagues (2000) point out that SL experiences generate significant emotional and personal growth in students, and that reflections on their learning are "strongly linked to emotions" (p. 91).

Reflection is the segment that unites Service and Learning, because it guides and helps students connect what they observe and experience, in the community in which they serve, with the content they learn in the classroom. Power (2010) reminds us that it is only possible to make authentic sense of experience through careful reflection. Consequently, the quality of reflection is the greatest challenge for the SL: it determines the implementation of effective structures to guide students, and meaningful strategies to assess learning outcomes (Ash, Clayton & Atkinson, 2005).

It is crucial to give learners the time and space they need to understand, evaluate and master their social, emotional and civic competences, which are gradually activated in the experience. Service Learning to be of 'quality' needs an effort (which we can call commitment) to push (motivate) students beyond basic knowledge and understanding, towards deeper levels of understanding (growth).

So, during the SL there are various activities that can be used to promote reflection, such as writing, thanks to which it is possible to create a new meaning, a new understanding of problems and to ensure a better organization of actions in a continuous work-process of the self. Writing provides material to think about, on which the reflective act can pause, analysing and re-analysing data continuously, in order to think about them in depth; it therefore allows for consistency to be given to actions, thoughts and emotions, making recursivity on them possible (Carson & Domangue, 2013).

Service Learning, going beyond the physical context (the classroom), adopts written reflection as a fundamental vehicle of 'movement'. In parallel, this process allows teachers to understand what students are actually learning, what their expectations and ideas are forming throughout the service about certain situations, people or activities.

Reflective processes are essential to provide feedback to the recipients, they represent a real educational experience. It is in this space that students learn to consider different approaches to problems, weigh the strengths and weaknesses of each possible solution, and carefully make reasoned decisions (Manring, 2012).

Written reflection is the key to good service learning, as it fosters consolidation of learning, introspection and knowledge of self and group, and at the same time awareness of one's role as a citizen.
It is through reflection that students become aware of what they are doing and the meaning they want to give to the service experience they are having. Supporting written reflection processes means working for the construction of critical and autonomous thinking, for the maturation of one's personal identity, for the understanding of values such as solidarity (He & Prater, 2014).

Writing thus turns out to be an interesting device, constituting a useful self-formative approach, relating to an experience, bringing out significant materials and traces of one's personal learning.

2. Objectives and methodology

The reflections presented in this paper are linked to the Service Learning Project carried out at the University of Palermo with a sample of 150 students enrolled in the fifth year of the Degree Course in Primary Education (academic year 2021-22).

Giving voice to their experiences, actions and thoughts, the challenges they encountered and the results they achieved, and their desired prospects for the future, enhanced the monitoring tool of narrative training: the logbook.

The research aimed at identifying good practices in the face of social engagement, analysing the development of experiences and promoting a self-directed attitude, because written reflection constitutes the main pivot for transforming meanings, re-examining them and consolidating them into learning, self- and group knowledge, and at the same time community awareness.

Writing, as a strategic source of information to be able to identify the progress of experience and skills, has thus been considered a formative engine for the construction of critical thinking and personal identity (Rofle & Freshwater, 2020). Valuing writing to develop reflective skills means promoting expressions of meaning that are rooted in dialogicality, cooperation with others, and the friction that knowledge has with skills.

Reflection, and also writing (an activity that best satisfies the expression of people's inner identity), are indispensable elements for an authentic and meaningful SL experience. There are 6 aims (steps) that accompanied the students, through written reflection, in terms of personal and professional growth.

- STEP 1 - Varying moments of using critical and creative skills, processes that are intrinsically linked;
- STEP 2 - Realising a 'unique' product, a deeply intellectual work that takes the form of a written paper;
- STEP 3 - Promoting expressions of meaning that are rooted in dialogicality, cooperation with others, and the friction that knowledge has with skills;
- STEP 4 - To develop self-determination and self-regulation in learning;
- STEP 5 - To know how to identify the characteristics and components that characterise learning for formative growth;
- STEP 6 - Learning to decide what and how to write, to use the available time effectively, to select known material in order to enrich the paper, to try to apply new strategies, suitable for the success of the task.

3. Discussion

Following a reading of the data, it was possible to note how the use of narrative practices led the students to enhance the experience by questioning it, giving it authentic meaning (Table 1). Reflection thus made it possible to focus on achievable objectives through appropriate methodologies, improving the quality of teaching. Experimenting and implementing one's skills, inclinations and acquired knowledge, hypothesizing solutions to a problem through writing skills were all steps that characterized the Service Learning experience.

For 41.3% of the students, writing is the best way to express their identity; "storytelling" involves mastering one's language, being able to communicate one's thoughts to the Other, knowing and acting with attention, curiosity and respect. "*Narrating clarifies thoughts and emotions* [...] *allows one to rethink and organise thoughts, perceiving oneself as a subject endowed with autonomy and intentionality*".

Therefore, writing results in a harmonious combination of thought, the written word and movement.

Table 1. Enhancing experience by questioning it.

N.	WRITTEN REFLECTION AS…
62	Self-narration
18	Observation of context
54	Exploration of experience
16	Emotional report

The results show that 36% choose to use it to explore the experience, because, in addition to be a means of shaping any idea or personal experience, written reflection is a time to train one's ability to concentrate by defusing attitudes of closure; it therefore represents the key that allows human beings to interface with the society in which they live.

Under the guise of critical and creative thinking, writing 'asks' in what terms one wants to be the protagonist of a story, bringing out interests, ambitions and fears, fostering personal development, improving the linguistic-expressive capacity, renewing the way one perceives the context and perceives oneself in order to relate with one's self and the world (Hunt, 2005).

The reading of the data showed that the experience was characterised by: (1) Perceived impact on social change based on one's own identity; (2) Resilience: exploring internal and external resources as an encouragement to achieve goals; (3) Social responsibility: elements investigated for the interconnection with the Other; (4) Responsiveness to social conditions within the community, and problem solving skills; (5) Perspective taking: valuing oneself and others as possibilities in the making.

From the beginning to the end of all activities, we asked the students to reflect on their own person, to identify which 'relationship' between internal and external factors would be most effective in a Service Learning course (Table 2).

Table 2. Reflection on the most effective relationship.

Relationship: internal and external factors	BEFORE	*freq.*	AFTER	*freq.*
Strengths/Opportunities	102	68%	40	26,6%
Strengths/threats	29	19,3%	25	16,6%
Weaknesses/Opportunities	18	12%	73	48,6%
Weaknesses/threats	1	0,6%	12	8%

A substantial change in values can be noted.

After the experience, 49% of the students choose weaknesses-opportunities as the best relationship for good service learning, putting strengths-opportunities in second place (previously at 68%), positive internal factors capable of sustaining an advantageous situation.

Students' reflections show that challenges and insecurities represent a redemption of self-esteem and emotional self-regulation.

Knowing how to seize opportunities from weaknesses proves to be an effective strategy; working on threats (external factors) enables one to act. Strengthening skills means learning to reflect critically on problems and the possibility of change, understood as improvement.

So, while on the one hand Service Learning responds to the need to bring students to learn about the social and environmental reality also in its problematic aspects, "narrating themselves"; on the other hand, with respect to methodological aspects, it is proposed as an innovative didactic, experiential methodology that relies on empowerment and responsibility.

3.1. Conclusion

Learning through a cycle of action and reflection offered students the opportunity to experience a deeper understanding of personal skills; indeed, central to the SL is the link between personal and interpersonal development with cognitive development and the curriculum.

Supporting the students' reflective process led to exploring emotional and cognitive aspects, which should not be seen as separate areas, but rather as part of the whole. "Responding" to one's feelings and attitudes during the SL experience means being aware that affective and cognitive components have an impact on behaviour, and that the behavioural dimension of reflection in SL complements the emotional one: thinking with acting. Reflection on this aspect should ensure a perspective of continuity over time. Students need to reflect on who they are during SL activities, but in relation to a retrospective view of their own experience and a hypothetical view of their future behaviour.

By combining service with a reflective framework, the benefits to students, faculty, and the community agencies far exceed those of service or learning offered separately.

Seeing themselves recognised and simultaneously acknowledging their experiential knowledge constitutes a training exercise in which continuity is the crucial element. Completing service activities does not mean finishing the journey, but rather beginning to reflect: it is a process of transformation, a circular process, rich in learning and opportunities, through which young people, and with them the community, continue to grow.

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