

‘GET ME INVOLVED AND I WILL LEARN IT’. SERVICE-LEARNING CASE OF STUDY AT UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

Schools cannot live in isolation from social realities. They are part of a wider community with diverse needs and interests. A preliminary study reveals that, in the field of English, primary school learners experience a decrease in motivation as they grow up, resulting in a number of difficulties in acquiring communicative competence in a foreign language. In response to this problem, we have designed an approach that links social reality with the school environment through the Service-Learning methodology. The aim is that our first-year students of the Primary Education degree at the University of Avila, through a service to the community based on the creation of English workshops for primary school students, acquire skills in the subjects of didactics and English at the same time as the primary school students foster their motivation and improve their competences in the foreign language. Our methodology is based on Service Learning, since it addresses a social need: the lack of motivation towards the foreign language and its application within a specific social context. It is a transversal and qualitative study in which university students undertake tasks of observation, design, development and evaluation of practical proposals. The results obtained through observation records, evaluation rubrics and open interviews confirm that learning by doing in community fosters the acquisition of competences and values of all the agents involved in the service. In conclusion, our study aims to ensure that our university students learn through community service and are capable of provoking positive changes in their environment.

Keywords: *Social reality, Service-Learning, lack of motivation in English language, qualitative study, students of the Primary Education degree.*

1. Introduction

In the realm of contemporary education, the intersectionality of academic knowledge and community engagement is becoming increasingly recognized as a catalyst for comprehensive learning experiences (Bellanca, 2010). As educators, we find ourselves at the juncture of not only imparting subject-specific knowledge but also instilling a sense of social responsibility and fostering holistic development in our students (Furco & Norvel, 2019).

As a result, many universities are integrating forms of engaged education that provide students with experiential learning opportunities in and with the surrounding community (Bell, 2010; Fitzgerald et al. 2012). One such practice linked to experiential learning is often referred to as service-learning (SL) or community-based learning (Kuh, 2008). Service learning is a pedagogical approach that transcends the traditional confines of the classroom, integrating academic learning with real-world community needs to benefit students, faculty, and community members (Carrington, Mercer, Lyer, & Selva, 2015). Students participate, and reflect on, services that benefit the (local) community as part of their curricular activities (Bringle and Hatcher, 1995; Tijsma et al., 2020; Cress et al., 2013). This educational approach seeks to inform how the SL student addresses the community's needs and promotes authentic relations between the two parties (Rosenkranz, 2012). Within academic settings, SL combines specific course learning objectives with community service to give SL students opportunities to cultivate their civic knowledge and interpersonal skills (Cashman & Seifer, 2008; Cress et al., 2013). Meanwhile, for those who receive service in an SL program, SL creates an open atmosphere where they can exchange their perspectives and skill sets with individuals providing service (Rosenkranz, 2012; Cress et al., 2013; Jacoby, 2015).

The social service of the University of Salamanca has created grants for the implementation of service-learning projects to promote their implementation in the different subjects in order to meet the

different social needs that arise and also to work towards the objectives of sustainable development (SDG).

This research seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on innovative pedagogical practices and their impact on students' development. By examining the theoretical underpinnings of SL and its application in fostering the sustainable objectives 5 (education of quality) and 10 (reducing inequalities) within primary education, it has been developed a partnership with a local school district to provide a SL programme, which aimed to design and implement different workshops for students of primary education whose motivation towards the English language has been sapped. we aim to provide insights that resonate not only within academic circles but also reverberate in the broader spectrum of education and societal enrichment.

2. Objectives

There were the following goals for the research: to bring future pre-service teachers closer to classroom reality; to analyse possible changes in the attitude of both participants towards the foreign language; to design learning situations that promote learner autonomy; to apply the content acquired in a practical way, contributing to the common good; to utilise active methodological tools that favour meaningful learning; to establish structures to develop citizenship awareness; to link social engagement with knowledge learning; to develop methodological strategies in English language learning to be applied in the primary classroom.

3. Method

This research arises in response to a key objective of Unesco: to support quality education. It addresses a proven social need of demotivation towards the foreign language in primary school learners and its application within a social context, a school in the city of Avila.

The research design employed a qualitative case study methodology and interviewing and observation tools (Denzin, 2008) in which a phenomenon within a particular context is researched through various data sources. A thorough analysis of individuals or groups unveils various aspects of the current situation. Our focus was on understanding the significance of real-time experiences for the subjects themselves, rather than extrapolating results to broader groups of individuals.

3.1. Participants

The participants are 70 preservice students enrolled in the subjects of Didactics and English in the first year of the Primary Education Degree of the University of Education and Tourism of Avila and the schoolers from first to sixth of Primary Education, ages from 6 to 11.

3.2. Research tools and data processing

Each of the seventy preservice students was assigned to a cooperative group formed by six of them and each group was paired with a class of the Primary school that took part in this study. Firstly, they were given a rubric of observation that filled in their first visit to the school. Then, they created a workshop to be carried out in that class and in the second visit they put it into practice and left extra digital resources for each class. Next, they visited school again and conducted an interview with the teachers who had been observing the workshops in each class. They videotaped and took notes. They then produced a transcript combining the information from the oral videotapes and written notes that were analysed using a qualitative content method (Denzin, 2008). Finally, preservice students took a self-assessment in the last class of Didactics and English and the teachers of Didactics and English conducted a 10-minute personal dialogue with all the schoolers of the Primary school to talk about how these schoolers had felt during the workshops. This was done in order to create an opportunity for dialogue that would interest both parties involved.

4. Findings

Based on the analysis of the results obtained, we can state the following findings arising from our investigation.

The transcripts produced by the preservice students highlighted that the development of the different workshops in each class of Primary Education fostered schoolers' motivation towards the English language, changed the attitudes of schoolers towards the English subject and promoted the use of active methodologies. The words: motivating, engaging, social needs, positive initiative, approach to

reality and active learning were repeated by all teachers when defining how they had perceived this experience on their learners. Furthermore, teachers interviewed remarked that schoolers had been demanding the use of the extra resources for the whole week and parents had been given access to them so that schoolers could continue working at home. Therefore, we can state that applying SL projects is beneficial for all involved and brings together social engagement and knowledge learning.

With regards to the self-assessment produced by the preservice students it is important to mention that 100% of them felt satisfied with the results obtained and considered that this project had approached them to the reality of the classroom. All of the preservice students felt part of an important issue and being in contact with the reality allowed them to foster citizenship awareness.

Last but not least, the ten minute personal dialogue produced between the schoolers and the researchers of this study together with the observation applied in all the sessions devoted to this research confirms that the relationship and interaction between the schoolers and the future teachers (preservice students) has been very enriching for both, since for the schoolers it has been an innovative moment where they returned their attention to learning, and for the future teachers it has served as practice and a way of getting closer to reality. Therefore, this kind of initiative should be part of the programme of both subjects (Didactics and English) in the upcoming years.

5. Conclusions

This research demonstrates the effectiveness of the use of service-learning. The proposed objectives have been achieved and the contents have been applied in a practical way to contribute to a social need. It has responded to Unesco's sustainable development objectives 5 and 10, and the results underline the need for implementing this type of methodology on a continuous and stable basis within the Primary Education Teaching degree.

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