

# EUROPEAN SERVICE-LEARNING EXPERIENCES IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE FREIREAN CONCEPT OF *SEMINAR*

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**Abstract:**

Service-learning is growing gradually in European higher education. It aims to instil a sense of civic engagement and responsibility in students and work towards positive social change within society while developing curricular competencies. For some advocates, Paulo Freire's workings would serve as a theoretical anchor for service-learning since he imagined education as fostering a critical and active citizenry. This paper addresses the influence his writings have had on European practitioners. Qualitative data collected by the EOSLHE has been analysed and a content analysis was made of the descriptive summaries of 144 experiences. The Freirean notion of *seminar* applied to service-learning systematises popular wisdom and contributes to a new sense of evolving the social identities of the students toward a fairer society.

**Keywords:**

Service-Learning; Paulo Freire; Higher Education; *Seminar*; European Observatory of Service-Learning in Higher Education (EOSLHE).

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# Introduction

The impact of Paulo Freire on education is acknowledged worldwide. Prior works show how Paulo Freire's perspectives also influence service-learning in higher education. Such are the cases of Deans (1999), Selmo (2018), Lussier *et al.*, (2019), Mtawa & Nkhoma (2020), and Culcasi (2020). However, it is still missing a European overview that shares light on the presence that Paulo Freire's writings have in the rooting of service-learning. That is the purpose of this paper.

Such a work is relevant because service-learning is an innovative pedagogical approach that, in light of McIlrath *et al.*, (2019), instils in students a sense of civic engagement and responsibility, and working towards positive social change within society. By contributing to the enhancement of the fulfilment of the third mission of universities, service-learning can strengthen higher education institutions to prepare a new generation of professionals with a willingness to contribute, civically engaged and socially compromised (Pinheiro *et al.*, 2015). Service-learning can play a decisive role in the social responsibility of higher education, making it transversal and present in all aspects of the university, including research, teaching, knowledge transfer, and management (Aramburuzabala & Lázaro, 2020).

One may ask about the fundamentals of service-learning that make it so appealing for higher education institutions to perform it. We say appealing because, although having started to emerge within a US context since the 1960s (Stanton *et al.*, 1999), service-learning has taken root in Europe gradually. And, according to Furco and Norvell (2019), there is a "robust number of service-learning initiatives already underway across the continent" of Europe (p. 33). Thus, the response could be that service-learning fosters critical and active citizenry, and the emergence of social consciousness that begins simply as learners change to a more thoughtful awareness of active participation in the social order (Bush *et al.*, 2016; Cate & Russ-Eft, 2020).

In this set of social consciousness, we entered and dive deep into the theoretical works of Paulo Freire, which, in light of Deans (1999), act as an anchor for service-learning. For that reason, this article has been organised in order to give an idea of a possible state of the art of service-learning at the European level, and then to detect and highlight the biggest nuances that we were able to verify of the presence

of Freirean foundations in the service-learning experiences performed by European higher education providers.

We have highlighted some ordinal qualitative variables related to the administration of experiences, the curriculum and political-administrative relations. The data relating to such information was derived from the responses surveyed by EOSLHE to institutions implementing service-learning activities at the European level, between 2020 and 2022. The surveys were based on semi-standardized questionnaires.

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# Highlighting the service-learning in Europe

The European Association of Service-Learning in Higher Education (EASLHE) considers service-learning as an experiential educational method in which students engage in community service, reflect critically on this experience, and learn from it personally, socially and academically<sup>1</sup>. These are activities addressing human, social and environmental needs from the social justice and sustainable development perspectives. The aim is at enriching learning in higher education, foster civic responsibility and strengthens communities.

Higher education is a key tool to promote sustainable human development, and therefore should be committed to sustainability in the search for environmental quality, social justice and a viable and equitable economy (Klossner & Grove, 2015). However, for this to succeed it is necessary to engage the entire academic community in the construction of models promoting sustainability, democracy and social responsibility in higher education.

It has been acknowledged that service-Learning is a valuable strategy for the inclusion of civic engagement in the higher education curricula (Opazo & Aramburuzabala, 2019). As a pedagogical methodology service-learning improves academic learning, develops civic and social responsibility, and strengthens the communities (Harte *et al.*, 2019). More recently, scientific works are demonstrating the usefulness of the service-learning in the transmission of values associated with environmental, social and economic sustainability (González-Sánchez *et al.*, 2022). Others demonstrate that service-learning significantly increases students' behaviours related to participation in class, analyses and reflection of experiences and ideas, critical reasoning, and tasks in a foreign language, and increases academic achievement, and active and collaborative learning (Hervás-Torres *et al.*, 2022). Service-learning consolidates curricular content and perception of professional learning in students and

can guide university teachers on how to work on active and experiential methodologies applied in a real context (Ribeiro *et al.*, 2021b). This is done by taking into account the different profiles and characteristics of the participants, considering variables such as gender, age, or target group, among others (Ruiz-Montero, *et al.*, 2022). Service-learning fosters the acquisition of mathematical skills for future teachers, helping them controlling educational interventions in contexts with a high emotional load, promoting a social and civic awareness which is essential for the development of their teaching work (Blanco *et al.*, 2022). Findings suggest that service-learning can promote responsibility, civic engagement, and democratic and transferable competencies (Compare & Albanesi, 2022). These results point to the fact that integration of academic learning and community experience provides students gains, both personal, social and academic skills, developing leadership, communication and critical awareness, time and resources management, and the ability to adapt and respond to challenges of the real (labour market) world (Pais, *et al.*, 2022). Thus, service-learning can contribute to educating students to become, not only reflexive and connected but agents of change for the community (Compare & Albanesi, 2022).

Barriers to the effective establishment of service-learning as a pedagogical approach within higher education institutions can be encountered: time limitations, lack of suitable knowledge and expertise, funding, national and institutional prioritisation, lack of a dedicated coordinating unit, and reward and recognition issues (Aramburuzabala *et al.*, 2019). There are also limitations attributed to the use of institutional data, lack of access to data (Mungo, 2017), methodological design of the service-learning projects, lack of depth (Billig *et al.*, 2005; Pribbenow, 2005), and the short duration of the service-learning experiences (Shouman, 2019). There are cases of limitations related to significant variance in the understanding of social issues and cognitive development learning outcomes (Yorio & Ye, 2012), to the traditional structure of higher education limiting students' abilities to fully appreciate or maximise the benefits of a service-learning course (Palmer & Savoie, 2002), and to the lack of indexed journals publications, peer-reviewed journals (Marcus, *et al.*, 2020).

Speaking in the form of categories, and in response to these limitations, authors have been stating that fu-

1 - See at <https://www.eoslhe.eu/easlhe/>

ture research should assess the impact of service-learning at institutions having robust service-learning programs (Mungo, 2017). Also, it should continue to explore the ways service-learning is experienced by individual participants and what contextual factors are essential for increasing the likelihood that transformative learning will occur (Hullender *et al.*, 2015). Research should seek to determine the factors that shape how faculty are affected by using service-learning pedagogy (Pribbenow, 2005). Also, future research should clarify the components of a social change orientation in service-learning courses (Moely & Ilustre, 2014), and address the extent to which students' descriptions correspond to those derived from course instructors, community partners, recipients of service, syllabus analysis, or systematic observation (Moely & Ilustre, 2014). Moreover, it is important to study whether or not some activities are more relevant than others, and how the multiplicity of programs interacts with participants and influences different outcomes (Celio *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, research should investigate an effective application of technology in service-learning courses, promoting student reflection on their technology integration-related beliefs, knowledge, and skills (Marcus, *et al.* 2020).

Despite the limitations, the results of the studies provide evidence regarding the positive impacts of service-learning programs on students' social consciousness and future career perspectives (Bush *et al.*, 2016). Service-learning brings a lot of benefits to higher education institutions. Significantly improves the quality of the teaching and learning process (Jakšić-Stojanović, 2019), promotes civic engagement among students, encourages personal reflection on their experiences, and how they and their community partners situated themselves in the larger social context (Maccio & Voorhies, 2012). Service-learning has demonstrated benefits across the social work curriculum, its effectiveness in conveying course content, facilitating a shift in student attitudes toward various client populations, enhancing their self-efficacy and competence in social work practice, personal growth learning motivation, and helping students become more engaged in research (Lim, *et al.*, 2017).

Among the 144 service-learning experiences collected by EOSLHE, the vast majority of the respondents were academic staff followed by leaders/managers and researchers. A large section of respondents was responsible for service-learning project management. The total number of students involved in the experiences

was 10.381. The approximate number of final beneficiaries was 108.612. With regard to the type of higher education institutions that participated in this survey, the most numerous were universities. Almost all institutions provide support regarding the design, implementation, and management of service-learning experiences. The majority of the universities were state and non-faith-based institutions, although non-state-run universities and non-faith-based institutions are increasingly practising service-learning, with each passing year closer to 50%. The majority of the institutions decided to run these projects the year after, which states high ratings of continuity. The most representative discipline areas of the service-learning experiences were education, economy-business, medicine & health and psychology. From our findings, it is clear that service-learning experiences were mainly configured as a part of a subject matter and then as a specific service-learning course. Most of the students were undergraduates, followed by master's students, and PhD students. The majority of students enrolled on a voluntary basis, rather than mandatory.

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, service-learning experiences were developed mainly in person, while online or hybrid projects were less reported. Regarding the connection to the Sustainable Development Goals<sup>2</sup>, the projects were grouped according to their purpose of improving the quality of education, reducing inequalities, and promoting good health and well-being. Gender equality, cultural diversity, peace, justice, strong institutions, and sustainable cities and communities were important aims of the services offered. The most representative community partners were non-profit organisations, educational centres, and associations. Churches, foundations, civic centres, and public administration also played their role<sup>3</sup>.

As Britt (2012) mentions, service-learning is an exercise that moves from skill-set practice and reflexivity to civic values and critical citizenship, then to learning and working on social and political issues aiming at social justice activism. That is, to participate directly and actively in and contribute to the policy process - to make a change. It is also our understanding that this service-learning conceptual framework is grounded or derives from Paulo Freire's acquisition of critical consciousness and action-reflection dialectic of praxis that we will try to develop next.

2 - See <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

3 - For more information and details about this subject, consult Ribeiro, A., & Aramburuzabala, P., Paz-Lourido, B. (2021). *Annual Report: Procedures and main findings*. European Association of Service-Learning in Higher Education. Madrid.

# Paulo Freire at the roots of service-learning

It is always difficult to comment on Paulo Freire's work because it involves risks associated with the fact that we do not know the whole work and that we have not studied everything that is normally available to readers. It is true that Paulo Freire tried to give answers to the problems of his time, but he does not provide an answer to everything. And here the risks also increase due to the fact that we have not lived the context of the production of his work, which is crucial for anyone who wants to comment on what someone thought and lived, whether from a political, educational or pedagogical point of view (Pavan & Lima, 2020).

The literature review on service-learning mentions Paulo Freire's contributions in a limited way. The mentions available reflect the following concepts. For Butin (2006) service-learning manages transformative pedagogy, linking the classroom with the real world, engages the cognitive with the affective, and theory with practice, disrupting a banking model of education premised on passive students, expert faculty, and the 'simple' transfer of discrete and quantifiable knowledge. For Bush *et al.*, (2016), service-learning gives emergence to social consciousness, thoughtful awareness, active participation in the social order, and contextualised views of the social world. Service-learning enables students writings to community partners for supporting and promoting changes in society (Wurr, 2018). For Lussuier *et al.*, (2019), service-learning dynamizes critical literacy, action and reflection, where participants can problematize textual encounters in the interest of social justice, change and the development of political awareness, critical consciousness, the communal process of evolving social consciousness, and humanising pedagogy. Critical consciousness and action can transform structures and policies (Assaf *et al.*, 2019). For Clever & Miller (2019), service-learning fosters equity and diversity of multicultural learning, fully developing reciprocity between students and the marginalised populations they serve. It serves teacher-students discussion of the concrete reality of their lives, between general curriculum and know-

ledge as the fruit of the lived experience of students as individuals, and advocates the problem-posing approach in which students and teacher construct and negotiate knowledge together through dialogue (Keller, 2019). For Culcasi (2020), service-learning is about radical changes, impacting individual identities, and relationships among education, human beings and society. Is about creating educational models able to convert theory into practice, innovative pedagogy, promotion of identity, formation, and integral growth of the individual (Culcasi, 2020).

These works manifest that service-learning providers have been looking for the fundamentals of their socio-political and educational action. Service-learning providers have been approaching closer to a critical and socially disruptive democratic experience, built upon experience, transformative, meaningful and accountable concepts. Deans (1999) revealed that Paulo Freire's writings would serve as a theoretical anchor for some service-learning advocates since he imagined education in a particular way of fostering critical and active citizenry. Years later, Deeley (2015) stated that service-learning involves a change in the ways of thinking or of knowing, awakening, an increasing awareness, cognition and liberation. And, in line with Cipolle (2010), the idea of 'praxis' emphasises service-learning as action and reflection upon the world in order to change it through the development of a deeper awareness of self, of the broader perspective of others, of social issues, and seeing one's potential to make a change.

Having this in mind, service-learning is rooted in bridging the divide that exists between the higher education "ivory tower", and students, communities outside of academia, and the real world. Through the Freirean perspective, service-learning permits students to become aware first-hand of the effects of underdevelopment, assisting them with creating solutions containing an element of social justice, finding their voices as advocates and activists in a supportive environment, where peers are available to assist potential problems that may arise (George, 2015).

Dialogue and trust, one's actions matching one's words, are, therefore, significant to education. Reciprocity, reflection, responsibility, reality and commitment to relativism arise as the liberating 5 R's of service-learning (Push & Merrill, 2008), to which I add respect. Respect, because through these critical educational principles, the teacher's thinking will become authenticated only by the authenticity of the students' thinking, who think for themselves,

following the trend of their own thoughts, avoiding any tentativeness of people imposing their thoughts, words and actions upon them.

In line of Paulo Freire's writings, service-learning projects should touch, first and foremost, on questions regarding autonomy, participation, democracy, decision-making, school-community (family) connections, human rights, emancipation, social transformation, fairer society, whether in the field of formal, non-formal and informal education or social education, solidarity and the common good. Of course, we cannot ignore the fact that it is impossible to distinguish in his workings what belongs to the political struggle and revolution and what belongs to the pedagogical sphere.

We are aware that Paulo Freire took the political instrumentalization of pedagogy and education to its ultimate consequences, reinforcing the idea that the school must be at the service of revolution, and social transformation and not the demand for truth and knowledge (Freire, 1977). We acknowledge that when he places the group, the collective, and not the person, as the subject and centre of the education/learning process, he promotes social revolution (social humanism) and not the development and realisation of each person's potential (personalist humanism) (Freire, 1977). We are aware that such conflict between human and social humanism, not only reduces bibliographic references but as well as limits the character of his theoretical framework.

Therefore, this not only allows us to question his works in the form of manifestos for political and revolutionary struggle, also as being one of the sources of some naivety and low methodological density that, not infrequently, is attributed to the programs and research carried out in service-learning. But as long as there are social and cultural differences between humans, service-learning is more or less Freirean in character, with its more or less nuanced tendencies of political radicalism, aversion to liberal capitalism and western cultural education.

In addition to Paulo Freire, service-learning is also rooted in the progressive, pragmatic and constructivist educational works of John Dewey, William Kilpatrick (cf. Sheffield, 2005), and C. Wright Mills (cf. Hironimus-Wendt & Lovell-troy, 1999). Above all, the works of John Dewey's play focus on the primacy of personal experience - personalist humanism (cf. Giles, 1987). This allows service-learning providers to build programs that more or less nuance each of

these trends.

One of the most eloquent realisations of Freirean thought in the scope of service-learning is the practice of *seminars*. By inviting each participant in the service-learning programs to carry out a reflection that is intended to be critical, each participant reflects on their past and present service-learning practice, always with a view to returning to practice. Throughout the practice of *seminars*, each participant addresses questions emerging from concrete service-learning practice and everyday experience. In the *seminar* work, each participant identifies these issues, establishes the relationships between them and the practice of service-learning and, based on a systematic confrontation of lived experiences, tries to describe and interpret the successes, failures and impasses in which they find themselves (cf. Freire, 1977). In the end, operational indications that can be translated into concrete actions ought to be derived. Through the Freirean approach to the *seminar*, there are no more answers or practical theories capable of giving an immediate solution to each problem - everything is to be invented and created on an equal footing (Freire, 1977). Each participant brings the same experiences and lessons they were able to draw from them. This basic material is then confronted, produced and systematically elaborated in a joint work. Everyone has their say and no one has ready-made formulas (Freire, 1977). The reflective work on the practice of service-learning according to the Freirean concept of the *seminar*, allows the teacher to present himself as a coordinator who creates the conditions and invites the groups of students to understand and interpret each one of their reality. To ask not only how but also why, relationships between partial or specific phenomena and the global reality in which they are inserted and explained are established (Freire, 1977). The role of the teacher is to collect the elements that exist in the group in a disorganised way or in a pre-conscious state and to return, in an organised way, these elements to the analysis of the group. It is a mission to facilitate awareness within the group.

The participants' gains are at the level of creativity, critical vision, self-management, solidarity, personal work methods, and individual ways of understanding and acting on reality (Freire, 1977).

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# The influence of Paulo Freire's writings on the service-learning experiences at the European level

Based on the content analysis of of the 144 summaries of service-learning experiences provided by respondents to the EOSLHE questionnaires, we elaborated some considerations for students, universities, teachers and the general community<sup>4</sup>.

Regarding the students, the trend is that service-learning programs are made in a way that allows students, not only to participate in activities designed collaboratively in partnerships by universities and local organizations, but also to reflect in such a way as to gain an enhanced sense of responsibility (E45). Through these experiences, students are expected to meet and experience real-world contexts, exploring the responsibility and democratic dimensions (E21). Students are trained to become committed to the common good and do something for others or society (E40). Service-learning stays focused on the personal and group growth of students, defining and reaching social objectives, and their civic and democratic participation, favouring social justice compromises (E11).

Regarding the universities, service-learning is practised as a course of study with a highly practical emphasis, aiming to enable students to reflect on their professional activities for people, society and ecology (E10). It additionally uses its experiences and contacts, not only with companies but also with institutions and associations, to actively engage in a dia-

logue with politics, business and society (E52). It is practice-oriented teaching in close cooperation with external partners (E29).

Regarding teachers, they have been designing learning objectives on issues such as social innovation and sustainable development, across disciplines, while encouraging collaboration among future professionals (E30). In order to address the increasingly complex problems facing society, teachers have been adopting multi and interdisciplinary approaches allowing for a range of perspectives. In order to confront the increasing fragmentation and diversity of urban society, teachers have been producing new knowledge and tools to support social work practice. They have been doing it with a focus on civic engagement, cooperative and multiple learning, and the importance of critical reflexive learning (E66).

Regarding the community, higher education institutions have been recognizing gradually the value of such experiences and established partnerships with non-profit organizations to allow professionals to confront social inequalities and commit themselves to their reduction, (especially in the cases of social services, health, social education and economic local development).

Students and teachers are in constant interaction, with constant feedback and reciprocal learning. Service-learning programs have been gradually focusing people to rethink the subject and enriching the experience by motivating students and teachers to look for solutions collaboratively, reinforcing their social commitment to the common good through learning. By becoming more aware of their educative responsibilities, service-learning can act as a form of raising prevention of social inequalities, conflicts, and fracture lines between individuals, networks, and sub-cultures of different groups and their institutional and political environments.

4 - Based on Bardin (2008), the content analysis was carried out according to the association's chaining structures, also analyzing the underlying evaluation attitudes of the social actors.

# Conclusion

Paulo Freire's writings seem to be playing a role in enriching learners' experiences that can be transferred to other contexts. That constant learning migration looks to work as an invitation for service-learning providers to step out of themselves for the encountering, the compromising, to the social transformation of the contexts in which we live. Such a process is a shared migration of images service-learning providers get along the programs. This process facilitates the promotion of coeducation and social-cultural diversity - values which have fostered the development of social and civic competencies. The implementation of Paulo Freire's writings in service-learning acts as a form of highlighting the social-referential nature of man. This is done by making major breakthroughs, breaking and reshaping the boundaries traditionally drawn between higher education institutions and their society at large. It contributes to the creation of a new sense of evolving social identities toward a fairer society. But given the revolutionary trend of Paulo Freire's thoughts and practices, service-learning gets its balance in confronting this trend with others' more personal humanising. It seems to us that Freirean thought applied to service-learning through the concept of the *seminar*, encourages the processes of creative destruction, where the innovation resulting from the inherent dialectic leads to the destruction of previously established practices. This innovative trend encourages long-term thinking rather than pressure for results, collaboration rather than competition, and decentralization rather than the iron grip of control.

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- E45; E21; E10; E40; E11; E52; E29; E30; E66 - Experiences number collected by EOSLHE. Table with title and country.