What does it mean to be (come) an Engaged University?

Third European Conference on Service-learning in Higher Education
Slovakia, 2020

Service-Learning for the integral education of university students: measuring the impact on soft skills and flourishing

Irene Culcasi[1], Claudia Russo[2], Maria Cinque[3]

Abstract.
The change in Higher Education policies internationally and nationally is requiring universities to educate students not only in narrow, knowledge-based specialisations but to go further, seeking the integral education of the person. It then becomes fundamental to try to implement experiential learning practices that facilitate the emancipation of students both on an individual and social level. The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of the Service-Learning approach on the development of soft skills and flourishing in a group of university students at LUMSA University of Rome. As a case study, an online questionnaire survey was administered to students from different degree courses who attended an annual Service-Learning Lab.
The analysis of the data show that Service-Learning positively influences soft skill development. These findings offer new insights towards a better understanding of Service-Learning benefits for undergraduate students.

Keywords: Service-Learning; Higher Education; Integral Education; Soft Skills; Flourishing.

[1] Irene Culcasi, Dipartimento di Scienze Umane, LUMSA, Piazza delle Vaschette, 101, 00193, Roma, i.culcasi@lumsa.it

[2] Claudia Russo, Dipartimento di Scienze Umane, LUMSA, Piazza delle Vaschette, 101, 00193, Roma, c.russo@lumsa.it

[3] Maria Cinque, Dipartimento di Scienze Umane, LUMSA, Piazza delle Vaschette, 101, 00193, Roma, m.cinque@lumsa.it

What does it mean to be (come) an Engaged University?
Third European Conference on Service-learning in Higher Education
Slovakia, 2020

Introduction

In the Report to the European Commission on Improving the quality of teaching and learning in Europe's higher education institutions, it is stated that "Universities […] should not educate students only in narrow, knowledge-based specialisations, but must go further, seeking the integral education of the person […] which concerns behaviors, attitudes, and values" (High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education, p. 36, 2013). In other words, universities should also train students on meta-competences and personal skills (personal, social, and civic), that are also called soft skills, thus helping the full integration of the students in an ever-changing social and cultural scenario that make knowledge and hard skills rapidly obsolete. Soft skills are also essential to exercise the competence of citizenship (including democratic involvement, social cohesion, equity and human rights, ecological sustainability) and thus the ability to contribute to the good functioning of the society and the common good. It then becomes fundamental to try to implement educational practices that are directed towards these objectives. It is necessary to promote practices that facilitate the emancipation of students both on an individual and social level.

In order to focus on the development of the human being in all his dimensions, valuing the empowerment of the subject who actively contributes to the construction of him/herself and the community in which he/she lives, a special pedagogical approach is needed. A valuable strategy can be identified in Service-Learning (S-L) (Selmo, 2018), that is a learning/teaching approach that combines *Service* (solidarity service to the community, citizenship) with *Learning* (the acquisition of professional, methodological, social and didactic skills) in order to help students develop knowledge and skills through a solidarity service offered to the community (Fiorin, 2016).

It is, therefore, a pedagogical proposal representing a real paradigm shift implying a "rethinking" of the curriculum according to the logic of improving reality and a rediscovery of the value of teaching/learning methods oriented towards the integral education of the person without being reduced only to the cognitive and operative dimensions (Culcasi, 2020). Service-Learning, which has been developing around the world since

What does it mean to be (come) an Engaged University?
Third European Conference on Service-learning in Higher Education
Slovakia, 2020

the end of the 1960s, has its roots in the civic concern of the North American pedagogist John Dewey and in the South American educator and philosopher Paulo Freire's concept of transforming the world through reflection and action (Deans, 1999). These two "giants", on whose shoulders walk our current pedagogical thinking, have generated innovations, inspired educators, favored the birth of a multiplicity of experiences that have prepared the ground for Service-Learning, although they have never explicitly theorized it (Fiorin, 2020). Today, this approach has become a worldwide pedagogical movement, taking on its own characteristics in different cultural contexts. In Italy Service-Learning has only recently appeared, although the proposal has been received with great attention and is spreading surprisingly quickly. The first input date back to the publication of Maria Nieves Tapia's book (founder of CLAYSS, Latin American Centre for Learning and Solidarity Service), "Educazione e Solidarietà" (2006), and some limited training initiatives. The next step was taken in 2014, when the Postgraduate School (Scuola di Alta Formazione) Educating for Encounters and Solidarity (EIS), was established at the LUMSA University of Rome. EIS is a center dedicated to Service-Learning, directed by Professor Maria Cinque and chaired by Professor Italo Fiorin. The EIS School promotes the institutionalization of Service-Learning in universities and schools throughout the national territory and carries out an intense activity of research and dissemination through seminars, conferences, training initiatives, and publications. Regarding the application of Service-Learning at LUMSA University, until the academic year 2018/2019, the projects were carried out as integration of curricula programs; from 2019/2020 the students have the opportunity to attend a transversal course on Service-Learning with a certification of educational credits. Students who engage in service often remark that they learn a great deal about themselves as a result, and research has demonstrated that Service-Learning is positively associated with various forms of personal development (Astin & Sax, 1998; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Morgan & Streb, 2001; Selmo 2014). According to some studies, Service-Learning can strengthen the preparation of students in non-academic skills, social and personal skills (Astin et. al., 2000; Derr et al., 2016; Eyler, 2002; Yoro and Ye, 2012;).

What does it mean to be (come) an Engaged University?
Third European Conference on Service-learning in Higher Education
Slovakia, 2020

Moreover, a growing body of evidence shows that Service-Learning can be viewed as a civic setting in which meaningful interactions with others and civic contributions can lead to Flourishing (Hatcher et al. 2016). Given these scientific evidences the objective of the present study is to see if soft skills and Flourishing levels increase in a group of university students who participated in the S-L course. By soft skills, we mean a dynamic combination of cognitive and meta-cognitive skills, interpersonal, intellectual, and practical skills. Soft skills help people to adapt and behave positively so that they can deal effectively with the challenges of their professional and everyday life (ERASMUS+ K2 eLene4work 2015-2017). By Flourishing we mean a combination of feeling good and functioning effectively; Flourishing refers to the experience of life going well and it is synonymous with a high level of mental well-being, and it epitomises mental health (Huppert 2009; Keyes 2002; Ryff and Singer 1998). A growing body of evidence shows that high levels of well-being are good for individuals and society. In cross-sectional, longitudinal and experimental studies, high levels of well-being have been shown to be associated with a range of positive outcomes, including effective learning, productivity and creativity, good relationships, pro-social behavior, and good health and life expectancy (Chida and Steptoe 2008; Diener et al. 2010; Lyubomirsky et al. 2005).

1. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 24 university students (87.5% females), aged between 21 and 32 (M_{age}=24.23, DS=2.84), who took part in a Service-Learning course between October 2019 and May 2020. Students who participated in the course attend the following degree courses: Clinical Psychology (14 students), Psychology of Organisations and Human Resources Management (3 students), Science of Education (1 student) and Science of Business Communication, Marketing, and Advertising (6 students). The program included: five 2-hour training meetings between October and November 2019 and 40 hours of reflection and service activities

What does it mean to be (come) an Engaged University?
Third European Conference on Service-learning in Higher Education
Slovakia, 2020

by May/July 2020. In the first five training meetings, the students were introduced to Service-Learning pedagogy and developed the phases of motivation, diagnosis, ideation, and planning (Tapia, 2006).

The Service-Learning projects carried out covered the following areas: Cyberbullying (Research-Based and Advocacy Service-Learning), Psychological Well-being (Indirect Service-Learning), Time management during the pandemic (Indirect Service-Learning), State and design of school buildings (Advocacy Service-Learning), Addictions (Direct Service-Learning), Donation of bone marrow (Advocacy Service-Learning) and disability (Direct Service-Learning). The Direct Service-Learning projects were completed before the pandemic while the other projects continued in an online format, adapting to new needs. One of the projects was designed specifically for the social problems that emerged during the lockdown (Time management during the pandemic). We can consider these latest projects as e-Service-Learning. By e-Service-Learning (Electronic Service-Learning) we mean Service-Learning mediated by ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) and designed for situations where face-to-face communication between students, teachers, and beneficiaries of the service is not possible (Ruiz-Corbella, García-Guterriez, 2020). In other words, e-Service-Learning occurs when the instructional component, the service component, or both are conducted online (Waldner, McGorry, Widener, 2012).

Participants filled in an online questionnaire before and after the S-L program. All the participants gave their consent for their research participation before filling in the questionnaire. The questionnaire took approximately 30 minutes.

This study was carried out according to the European law of privacy and informed consent (GDPR 2016/679), and according to the ethical guidelines of the Italian Psychological Association (APA).

2.2. Measure

Soft skills. In order to assess the participants' soft skills, we used a new scale developed during the European project ERASMUS+ K2 eLene4work (2015-2017). The scale is composed of 15 subscales, for a

What does it mean to be (come) an Engaged University?
Third European Conference on Service-learning in Higher Education
Slovakia, 2020

total of 119 items. The scale takes into account the following skills: communication (13 items; $\alpha_{beforeSL}$=.74; α_{postSL}=.87), teamwork (14 items, $\alpha_{beforeSL}$=.89; α_{postSL}=.86), conflict resolution (10 items, $\alpha_{beforeSL}$=.77; α_{postSL}=.76), negotiation (6 items, $\alpha_{beforeSL}$=.85; α_{postSL}=.82), leadership (8 items, $\alpha_{beforeSL}$=.91; α_{postSL}=.91), self-evaluation (5 items, $\alpha_{beforeSL}$=.89; α_{postSL}=.88), flexibility and adaptability (2 items, $\alpha_{beforeSL}$=.79; α_{postSL}=.90), learning (12 items, $\alpha_{beforeSL}$=.87; α_{postSL}=.91), analytical skills (8 items, $\alpha_{beforeSL}$=.92; α_{postSL}=.93), creativity and innovation (5 items, $\alpha_{beforeSL}$=.89; α_{postSL}=.85), problem solving (8 items, $\alpha_{beforeSL}$=.89; α_{postSL}=.82), processing data and information (6 items, $\alpha_{beforeSL}$=.83; α_{postSL}=.84), digital communication (10 items, $\alpha_{beforeS}$ =.79; α_{postSL}=.86), digital creativity (7 items, $\alpha_{beforeS}$ =.72; α_{postSL}=.67), and digital problem solving (5 items, $\alpha_{beforeSL}$=.76; α_{postSL}=.87). An example of item, related to conflict resolution subscale, is: "During a conflict, I always try to find a compromise".

Flourishing. To assess the participants' flourishing, we used the Flourishing Scale (FS; Diener et al., 2010; Italian validation by Di Fabio et al., 2016). The scale consists of 8 items, ranging from 1 ("Strongly disagree") to 7 ("Strongly agree"). Items describe essential aspects of positive human functioning, namely: positive relationships, having a purpose in life, and feeling of competence. An example of an item is: "I actively contribute to the happiness and well-being of others" ($\alpha_{beforeS}$ =.88; α_{postSL}=.86).

2.3. Data Analysis

The SPSS-20 Software was used. At the baseline, we described the study variables in terms of means, standard deviations, and range across the two times (pre and post SL). Then, we employed the paired T-test in order to assess if there were differences in variable mean-levels between the two times.

3. Results

Descriptive statistics of study variables are reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of study variables

What does it mean to be (come) an Engaged University?
Third European Conference on Service-learning in Higher Education
Slovakia, 2020

	Pre S-L			Post S-L		
	M	SD	Range	M	SD	Range
Soft Skills						
Communication	3.20	.33	2.62-3.85	3.22	.42	2.62-4.00
Teamwork	3.25	.40	2.54-3.92	3.92	.36	2.77-3.92
Conflict resolution	3.32	.32	2.90-3.80	3.26	.30	2.90-3.80
Negotiation	3.21	.43	2.50-3.83	3.21	.45	2.33-4.00
Leadership	2.96	.63	1.38-4.00	3.04	.61	1.13-4.00
Self-evaluation	3.22	.53	2.20-4.00	3.37	.49	2.40-4.00
Flexibility and Adaptability	3.17	.72	1.00-4.00	3.25	.64	2.00-4.00
Learning	3.33	.40	2.58-4.00	3.20	.50	2.13-4.00
Analytical skills	3.00	.52	2.00-4.00	3.20	.48	2.00-4.00
Creativity and Innovation	2.84	.63	1.20-4.00	3.20	.37	2.50-4.00
Problem solving	3.21	.48	2.13-4.00	3.10	.43	2.33-4.00
Processing	3.02	.48	2-17-4.00	3.09	.50	2.20-4.00
Digital communication	2.82	.52	1.60-3.89	3.09	.35	2.57-4.00
Digital creativity	2.92	.48	1.86-4.00	3.04	.43	2.00-4.00
Digital problem solving	2.89	.49	2.20-4.00	3.36	.41	2.75-4.00
Flourishing	5.61	.81	3.88-6.75	5.90	.64	4.13-7.00

Note. S-L=Service-Learning, M=mean, SD=Standard Deviation

Paired simple T-test highlighted an increase, over the two times, in mean-levels among various variables, namely: creativity and innovation [t(23), -2.86, *p*=.009], digital communication [t(23), -2.09, p=.048]. Moreover, analytical skills [t(23), -2.04, *p*=.053], self-evaluation [t(23), -1.98, *p*=.059], and flourishing [t(23), -1.98, *p*=.060] were barely significant.

4. Discussions and conclusion

This study explored the impact of Service-Learning on the Flourishing and soft skills development of higher education students. The findings of this study suggest that Service-Learning is an influential element for soft skills development in students, in particular for creativity and innovation skills and digital communication skills. At an international level, several studies have widely studied Service-Learning, showing that it is a teaching/learning strategy that has a deep effect on students, going beyond the improvement of learning and knowledge linked to each of the courses or projects (Furco and Root, 2010). Although research on soft skill

What does it mean to be (come) an Engaged University?
Third European Conference on Service-learning in Higher Education
Slovakia, 2020

development in Service-Learning is limited, the results of this study align with findings from prior research, including positive impacts on communication skills (Astin & Sax, 1998; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Astin et al., 2000; Jouannet et al. 2016). That digital communication was significant can be related to the fact that the majority of the projects were e-Service-Learning. Regarding creativity and innovation skills these findings accord with the research of Terry (2008) who discovered that the Service-Learning instruction promoted creative thinking.

Findings from this study on Flourishing levels are interesting because a previous research has not only highlighted the effects of Service-Learning on human Flourishing but has also shown that the effects last into early adulthood (Bowman et al. 2010).

Findings from the examination of archival data in this study have several limitations and additional research is needed to further explore themes explored in this study. As the main limit, the scope of our study was constrained to the findings of a Service-Learning course with a little number of participants. Additional research is needed to quantify the development of soft skills and to compare the effectiveness of different types of service-learning engagements (e.g. stakeholder interview/evaluation) and implementation strategies, such as types and frequency of reflections.

5. References

Aramburuzabala, P., McIllarth, L., Opazo, H. (Eds.). (2019). *Embedding Service-Learning in Higher Education. Developing a Culture of Civic Engagement*, New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.

Astin, A.W., Sax, L.J. (1998). How undergraduates are affected by service participation. *Journal of College Student Development*, *39*, 251–263.

Astin, A.W, Sax, L.J., Avalos, J., (1999). Long-term effects of volunteerism during the undergraduate years. *The Review of Higher Education*, 22(2), pp. 187-202.

Astin, A.W., Vogelgesang, L.J., Ikeda, E.K., Yee, J.A. (2000). How Service Learning Affects

What does it mean to be (come) an Engaged University?
Third European Conference on Service-learning in Higher Education
Slovakia, 2020

Students. *Higher Education*, (144), i–104.

Bowman, N., Brandenberger, J., Lapsley, D., Hill, P., Quaranto, J. (2010). Serving in College, Flourishing in Adulthood: Does Community Engagement During the College Years Predict Adult Well-Being?, *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being*, 2 (1) 14–34 DOI:10.1111/j.1758-0854.2009.01020.x

Chida, Y., Steptoe, A. (2008). Positive psychological well-being and mortality: A quantitative review of prospective observational studies. *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 70(7) 741–756. DOI: 10.1097/PSY.0b013e31818105ba

Council of the European Union, (2018). *Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning*. Official Journal of the European Union. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604(01)&from=EN

Culcasi. I. (2020) The pedagogical proposal of Service-Learning: service scenarios in learning societies, *INTED 2020*.

Deans, T., (1999). Service Learning in two keys: Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy in Relation to John Dewey's Pragmatism. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 6 (1) 15-29.

Derr, T., Malinin, L.H., Banasiak, M. (2016). Engaging citizens and transforming designers: analysis of a campus-community partnership through the lens of children's rights to participation. *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship,* 9 (2), 53–64.

Diener, E., Wirtz, D., Tov, W., Kim-Prieto, C., Choi, D. W., Oishi, S., & Biswas-Diener, R. (2010). New well-being measures: Short scales to assess flourishing and positive and negative feelings. *Social indicators research*, *97*(2), 143-156. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-009-9493-y

Diener, E., Helliwell, J.F., Kahneman, D. (Eds.). (2010). *International differences in well-being*. New York: Oxford University Press.

What does it mean to be (come) an Engaged University?
Third European Conference on Service-learning in Higher Education
Slovakia, 2020

Di Fabio, A. (2016). Flourishing Scale: Primo contributo alla validazione della versione italiana. *Counseling. Giornale Italiano di Ricerca e Applicazioni*, *9*(1), 1-5.

ERASMUS+ K2 eLene4work 2015–2017. http://elene4work.eu

Eyler, J., Giles D., (1999). *Where's the learning in service-learning?* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Eyler, J. (2002). Reflection: linking service and learning – linking students and communities. *Journal of Social Issues,* 58(3), 517–534.

Fiorin, I., (2016). *Oltre l'aula. La proposta pedagogica del Service Learning*. Milano: Mondadori Università.

Fiorin, I., (2020). Una via italiana al Service-Learning. In Indire, *Innovare la scuola con il Service Learning. Un percorso di ricerca con le scuole del Movimento delle Avanguardie Educative*. (in publication).

Furco, A., Root, S. (2010). Research Demonstrates the Value of Service-Learning. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 91(5), 16–20.

Hatcher, J.A., Robert, G.B., Thomas, W.H. (2016). Research on Student Civic Outcomes in Service Learning: Conceptual Frameworks and Methods, *Stylus Publishing*, LLC.

High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education, (2013). *Report to the European Commission on Improving the quality of teaching and learning in Europe's higher education institutions.* DOI:10.2766/42468

Huppert, F.A. (2009). Psychological well-being: Evidence regarding its causes and consequences. *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-being,* 1, 137–164. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-0854.2009.01008.x

Huppert, F.A., So, T.T.C. (2013). Flourishing Across Europe: Application of a New Conceptual Framework for Defining Well-Being. *Soc Indic Res,* 110, 837–861, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-011-9966-7

Jouannet, C., González, M.S., González, T. (2016). Metodologías A+S: una oportunidad de

What does it mean to be (come) an Engaged University?
Third European Conference on Service-learning in Higher Education
Slovakia, 2020

desarrollo de habilidades transversales en estudiantes universitarios, *Actas VII Congreso nacional y II Internacional   de Aprendizaje Servicio Universitario*, Santiago de Compostela.

Keyes, C.L.M. (2002). The mental health continuum: From languishing to flourishing in life. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 43*, 207–222. DOI:10.2307/3090197

Lyubomirsky, S., Sheldon, K.M., Schkade, D. (2005). Pursuing happiness: The architecture of sustainable change. *Review of General Psychology, 9*, 111–131. https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.9.2.111

Ministry of Instruction University and Research, (2018). *Una via Italiana al Service Learning*. Department of the education system of instruction and training. https://www.miur.gov.it/web/guest/-/una-via-italiana-per-il-service-learning.

Morgan, W., Streb, M., (2001). Building citizenship: How student voice in service-learning develops civic values. *Social Science Quarterly*, 82(1), 155–169.

Ruiz-Corbella, M., García-Gutiérrez, J. (2020). Aprendizaje-Servicio en escenarios digitales de aprendizaje: propuesta innovadora en la educación superior, *RIED. Revista Iberoamericana de Educación a Distancia,* 23(1). http://dx.doi.org/10.5944/ried.23.1.24391

Ryff, C.D., Singer, B. (1998). The contours of positive human health. *Psychological Inquiry, 9*, 1–28. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327965pli0901_1

Salam, M., Awang Iskandar, D.N.F., Abang Ibrahim, D.H. (2017). Service Learning Support for Academic Learning and Skills Development, *Journal of Telecommunication, Electronic and Computer Engineering,* 9, 2-10.

Selmo, L. (2018). Service-Learning e l'eredità pedagogica di Paulo Freire. In S. Colazzo, P. Ellerani (Eds.), *Service Learning: tra didattica e Terza Missione. Ripensare e riprogettare l'organizzazione nelle scuole e nelle università* (pp. 91-102). Salerno: Università di Salerno.

What does it mean to be (come) an Engaged University?
Third European Conference on Service-learning in Higher Education
Slovakia, 2020

Selmo, L. (2014). *Democrazia, impegno ed educazione. La metodologia del service-learning*.

Milano: Unicopli.

Tapia M.N., (2016). Uno sguardo internazionale. In I. Fiorin (Ed.), *Oltre l'aula. La proposta pedagogica del*

Service Learning (pp. 3-9) Milano: Mondadori Università.

Terry, A.W. (2008). Student voices, global echoes: Service-learning and the gifted. *Roeper Review*,

30(1), 45-51. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02783190701836452

Waldner L.S., McGorry S.Y., Widner C. (2012). E-Service-Learning: The evolution of Service-

Learning to Engage a Growing Online Student Population, *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and*

Engagement, 16(2), 123-150.

Yorio, P.L., Ye, F., (2012). A Meta-Analysis on the Effects of Service-Learning on the Social,

Personal, and Cognitive Outcomes of Learning, *Acad. Manag. Learn. Educ*., 11(1), 9–27.