

A service-learning program assessment: Strengths, weaknesses and impacts on students

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper aims to research the strengths and weaknesses of service-learning programs in order to identify the challenges of their application, the educational possibilities of service-learning and the impact on students.

Design/methodology: An observational case study model was used, through a qualitative research approach based on participant observation. Additional data collection tools were used before and after the service-learning methodology; these included personal interviews, field diaries and videos. Data analysis was performed using Atlas.ti7 qualitative software.

Findings: This paper shows the relevant educational possibilities of service-learning. Students have the potential to take action in response to social problems, using the professional skills they have learned in their degree program, encouraging their critical awareness through reflection processes and promoting their involvement as citizens engaged in their own reality. This work reveals both the strengths and weaknesses of service-learning programs, including the needs assessment, project-based learning, and partnership engagement, all of which are outlined as challenges in terms of their application.

Research limitations/implications: The findings of this qualitative paper pertain to one single case, but they are generalizable to related theories.

Practical implications: This research could be used to a guide to begin or improve service-learning projects in higher education.

Social implications: The findings on the social impact of service-learning for all the agents involved show the positive value of service-learning. Moreover, it shows service-learning is an efficient tool to introduce sustainability and the SDGs in the students' curriculum.

Originality/value: This research reveals the importance of the promotion and evaluation of service-learning in an area where little research has been done in this regard.

Keywords: Service-learning, Competences, Marketing, Higher Education, SDGs, Civic Engagement

Jel Codes: I2, I23, M3, M31

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1. Introduction

One of the biggest challenges facing the society today is achieving a sustainable future while still satisfying present needs, and the solution only can be achieved if we manage to educate students and the future professionals of tomorrow in a different way (Jickling & Wals, 2008). In 2009, UNESCO indicated the importance of curricular sustainability, claiming that we will only achieve a sustainable and more equitable society if we invest in higher education. We must invest in a comprehensive education of students that involves acquiring not only the competencies of a profession themselves, but also those competencies related to social action, with the contribution of their knowledge to improve problems or alleviate social needs, training responsible people who are empathetic with the community around them, and who in the future will continue to care for the environment to which they belong (Samino, 2021). However, degree course specifications and university teaching guides normally neglect those aspects related to social competences, with the integration of sustainability, ethics, values and sustainable development in order to deal with the social, cultural, economic and environmental problems of our century. Various studies highlight the possibilities that service-learning methodology offers for the participation and collaboration of educational communities in improving social problems, providing the opportunity to understand and experience what has been studied in the classroom (McClure Brenchley & Donahue, 2017; Mergler, Carrington, Boman, Kimber & Bland, 2017), connecting theory and practice by allowing students to practice what they have learned in activities based on community needs (Resch & Schritteser, 2021), and favoring reflection and fostering empathy (Herrmann, 2020; Chang, Karin, Davidson, Ripp & Soriano, 2019).

On the other hand, instructors must be capable of proposing classroom activities that motivate and actively involve students in the learning, thus obtaining their involvement not only because it forms part of their continuous evaluation, but also because it represents a much greater professional or personal contribution, or both (Samino, 2021). Authors like Luo, Murray and Crompton (2017) assure that traditional teaching methods, such as master classes, have caused students to lose interest and attention. Consequently, an opportunity emerges to innovate from an educational perspective, introducing innovative course contents, using new educational methods, different materials, and reformulating the roles of teachers and students in the teaching and learning process (Correa & De Pablos, 2009). According to Alvarado (2017), teachers must be committed to this process in order to attempt to attain not only academic benefits in students, but also a personal transformation that derives from experiences in real contexts and that permit developing their growing awareness, converting them into agents of change. However, one of the shortcomings of the Spanish educational system is the lack of techniques and methods that stimulate creativity, promote reflection and connect the classrooms to the real context, putting into practice what is learned in the classroom (Blanco-Cano & García-Martín, 2021).

At this point, it is considered necessary to consider new active methodologies that involve students in the subject, developing curricular activities that involve direct contact with the environment around them and help to solve the social needs that have been detected, permitting the acquisition of both subject and degree-related competences and social competences (Samino, 2021). Service-learning makes educational transformation a more participatory process that educates about values, offering the students a learning experience rich in collaboration and cooperation scenarios that allow them to reflect, work in groups in order to resolve conflicts, accept responsibilities and to be trained as independent, critical individuals (Jiménez, 1997).

For this reason, the main objective of this study is to investigate the strengths and weaknesses of service-learning programs to identify the challenges that their application raises, the educative possibilities that it offers and the impact it has on students.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Service-learning as a teaching-learning methodology

Service-learning (SL) at the University level emerges in response to the rebirth of interest in responsibility, citizenship and social service in higher education (Bamber & Hankin, 2011). These same authors define it as a pedagogy that guides student learning towards social service in order to alleviate or improve problems in the

surrounding community, which requires the exchange with and collaboration from community partners on how to approach the needs and solutions, so that their organizational missions are met. This idea is also supported by some authors such as Marta and González (2012) and Martínez (2008), who affirm that the service-learning methodology promotes curricular and social competences through services that improve the community, impacting the civic and social dimensions of academic learning. The aim is to give them and the formative situations greater social significance, by involving the community and making it possible to improve living conditions, by training university students in social responsibility (Martínez, 2008). The main objective of this methodology is to promote social responsibility among instructors and students, and to develop a framework focused on social justice (Lucas, Groot & Towle, 2013).

Service-learning is considered in the "Declaración de Canarias sobre Aprendizaje-Servicio en la Educación Superior" (2021) as a philosophy with a humanistic approach that seeks to improve problems in the surrounding reality through active methodologies which integrate academic learning and community service, achieving a positive social impact and excellent vocational training. SL is touted as a key tool to implement the curricular sustainability proposed by CRUE. Different authors define service-learning along these lines, describing it as an experiential methodology or a teaching approach that places the focus on the students to achieve curricular learning objectives through community service (Paz-Lourido & De-Benito, 2021; Rodrigo & Rodrigo, 2018), with an impact on civic, ethical and social dimensions. It combines community service and academic study through experiential learning in a single process, extending the learning experience through the reflections made (Fung & Fong, 2020), promoting academic achievement, personnel growth and civic commitment, and focusing the teaching-learning process on the needs and problems of the student's environment (Sales & Monfort, 2019; Sepúlveda & Gallardo, 2011), proposing actions, solutions and strategies that last over time, in permanent cooperation with society. Therefore, reciprocity is one of the principles which support this methodology (Asgar & Rowe, 2016), which is beneficial for both the students that take part in SL activities and for the beneficiary population (Fougère, Solitander & Maheshwari, 2020). Service-learning introduces the active participation of students and their exposure to real world challenges (Lancaster & Bain, 2019), and this real involvement in community activities, in addition to building relationships and knowledge, leads to learning (Cleland & Durning, 2019).

The main goal of SL is the learning it provides to students (Blanco-Cano & García-Martín, 2021), which entails a planning of contents to be emphasized or developed and an assessment of the impact it has on learning (Dicks & Mitchell, 2019). In this regard, service-learning is considered to be a highly effective means to achieve competence-based learning, as it is able to show students the skills and knowledge acquired through active involvement by "learning-by-doing" (Raya-Diez & Caparrós Civera, 2013), improving their psychosocial, civic and ethical skills, and acquiring knowledge, know-how and knowing how to act in a specific field (Lorenzo & Matellanes, 2013). To accomplish this, SL projects should contain a reflection phase where students meditate and become aware of the lived experience and constructively debate their observations (Blanco-Cano & García-Martín, 2021; Mackenzie, Hinchey & Cornforth, 2019; Schmidt & Brown, 2016), which will foster a moral reasoning and a reflection on their personal future from a professional and personal perspective (Gil, Chiva, & Martí, 2013). On the other hand, the literature reveals that service-learning, in addition to achieving social and emotional development, promotes academic excellence (Marcus, Atan, Talib, Latif & Yusof, 2019), because curricular contents are better retained when they are integrated into real experiences, and we learn even more when the practices are related to needs or social problems, by generating a commitment. And, in addition, we achieve that students take on a commitment to society and with the ethical responsibility in their professional work, which will presumably have an impact on the social community (Quiroga, 2015). Furthermore, students can benefit from service-learning programs in all curricula (Figuccio, 2020), since SL can be applied in any area of knowledge.

The effectiveness of service-learning has been analyzed by several authors. Hidayah, Muchtarom and Rejekiningsih (2021) assure that SL not only emphasizes the achievement of knowledge, it also develops attitudes and skills that students need, achieving an integrated education, and providing an authentic experience (Salam, Awang Iskandar, Ibrahim & Farooq, 2019), which helps students obtain a superior academic level, major

achievements and critical thinking skills (Phakakat & Sovajassatakul, 2020). Resch and Schritteser (2021) establish that SL promotes the in-depth understanding of what was learned in the classroom and improves the sense of commitment by connecting theory and practice, and allowing students to put into practice what they have learned in classroom through activities that improve community needs. In this way, it provides both insight and an analysis of the social conditions of the beneficiary population (Fung & Fong, 2020).

Levesque-Bristol, Knapp and Bradley (2011) detected a more positive environment among the students by increasing their perception of autonomy, competence and interrelationships, which enhanced the sensation and the meaning of the service-learning experience. Condeza, Montenegro and Gálvez (2015) obtained very positive results by recommending a combination of service-learning methodology and a communicative focus for social transformation, in accordance with the findings by Muñoz-Navarro and Del Valle (2011). The objective was to stress communication about issues associated with inequality and poverty, tackling their complexity from the university classroom training of future experts. To accomplish this, college students conducted various communications workshops with children and teenagers from a marginal neighborhood in Chile, in order to learn how to generate local contents in the mass media, such as radio, photography and television; understanding, in turn, the right to access information and to express oneself freely. This experience allowed the lives of the children in this neighborhood to be improved, and it also provided feedback between them and the college students, fostering their understanding and the consideration of other realities. Lucas et al. (2013), as part of their Horizon Project, managed to empower students with the responsibility of evaluating the communications environment, identifying problems, investigating the literature to provide the most up-to-date knowledge and using tools that allowed for the joint creation of proposals with community partners, proposing participative programs in tune with the community itself. In this way, the students acquired competences in order to establish alternative actions, rationally choosing among them, executing them and evaluating them; and for the community, a change mechanism was attained that would persist even once the SL program had ended.

2.2. Evaluation of a service-learning program: research on the strengths and weaknesses

The literature on service-learning has confirmed the effectiveness of this educational approach in pursuit of competences and the professional growth of students. For this reason, it is essential to have tools that contribute to assessing or evaluating SL programs and that make it possible to investigate the strengths and weaknesses of the service-learning programs to identify the challenges that are presented by their application, for both students and instructors.

Various studies, such as that by Blanco-Cano and García-Martín (2021) examine psycho-educational variables such as a civic behaviors, critical reflection, group work skills, empathy and self-perception by students, in order to assess service-learning programs. Miró-Miró, Coiduras Rodríguez and Molina-Luque (2021) analyze different dimensions in the process of a service-learning program: environmental needs, consistency with the curriculum, reflection, plurality, autonomous management, cooperation or involvement and process planning. Meanwhile, other authors, such as Puig, Martín and Rubio (2017), assess SL programs by means of a self-assessment rubric that allows them to see the maturity levels of each of the instructional dynamics or elements analyzed, grouped into three sections: basic, pedagogical and organizational. In the first section, we analyze the needs detection (who decides the social need), the duration and the tasks that make up the service offered by the students (service performance), the perception of the service from the social perspective (meaning of the service) and how to acquire learnings. Dynamic education considers aspects related to contributions by the participants (participation), collective work processes (teamwork), critical reflection processes, public appreciation activities and positive reinforcement (recognition), and the evaluation plan. And in terms of organizational elements, we analyze the role of community partners and the consolidation of SL programs in these cooperating entities (Puig et al., 2017).

Consistent with the scientific literature reviewed, this study conducts a self-assessment of the service-learning project according to the levels of development established by Puig et al. (2017), as indicated in Table 1, in order to investigate the strengths and weaknesses of service-learning programs, based on this self-assessment.

		1	2	3	4
BASIC	Detection of the need	Unrecognized needs. Although there are needs present in the SL project, they have not been detected or previously defined.	Presented needs. The social needs that are addressed in the SL project are defined by educators and/or the cooperating entities, without any student participation.	Decided needs. The social needs addressed in the SL project are chosen by the students, in cooperation with the instructors, after having explored different social problems.	Discovered needs. The students themselves are the ones who discover the need to be met after performing a group research project and obtaining a critical understanding of the environment.
	provision Service	Simple. The service that the students provide takes place over a short period of time and consists of simple activities that are not very demanding or require much commitment.	On-going. The service consists of repetitive and/or easy-to-understand activities that are moderately demanding and require a moderate level of commitment over a longer period of time.	Complex. The service is performed over a long period of time and includes activities with a high level of difficulty, which are very demanding and require a high level of commitment; it thus favors the acquisition of skills and experience.	Creative. The service is very demanding and requires a very high level of participation, since the students themselves must design complex activities that serve to reduce social needs, through large doses of creativity. The duration of the service is variable.
	Meaning of the service	Tangential The service is not performed on the basis of a detected need, and consequently the students do not appreciate its social perspective.	Necessary A service is performed that solves or improves a community problem, although the students sometimes do not appreciate the social dimension.	Civic A service is performed that solves or improves a community problem, where the students perceive its social dimension.	Transformational In addition to performing a service that solves or improves a community problem, while appreciating its social dimension, the students understand the limitations of actions that do not take into account political action.
	learning and socialCurricular	Spontaneous The acquisition of social and curricular skills occurs informally during the service, but the activities are not scheduled or planned to facilitate their acquisition.	Planned Planning exists based on the educational project and on the social and curricular competences to be achieved, designing specific activities for their acquisition, but without necessarily taking into account a connection with the service.	Useful The service is directly connected to the educational project and to the curricular and social skills to be achieved, designing specific activities to encourage their acquisition, and resulting in an increase in the quality of the students' participation.	Innovative The service is directly connected to the educational project and to the social and curricular skills to be achieved, but they are acquired based on a research activity.

		1	2	3	4
PEDAGOGICAL	Participative	Closed The proposal and scheduling of activities for the students are closed, and no changes can be made.	Delimited The students occasionally provide ideas in the different stages of the procedure, when they are requested by the instructors.	Shared The design and development of activities are carried out jointly between teachers and students, sharing the responsibility.	Student-led The students are the main protagonists and those responsible for the design and development of activities, taking part in and making significant decisions in all stages.
	Team work	Undetermined There is no group work because the service is performed individually, although students sometimes help each other spontaneously and on an isolated basis.	Collaborative Group work consists of the joining of independent tasks performed autonomously.	Cooperative The students work as team on a joint project, complementing their contributions to reach the same objective.	Expansive The group work among the students is cooperative, but also actively incorporates other external agents, promoting the creation of participatory community networks.
	Reflection and critical thinking	Diffuse. Reflections emerge naturally, but do not anticipate or propose activities to promote critical thinking.	Occasional. Activities are occasionally planned to promote reflection and critical thinking, but not as part of the development of SL activities themselves.	Continuous. The reflection and critical thinking by the students are of utmost importance throughout the entire SL project, and activities are planned in this regard.	Productive. In addition to engaging in critical reflection throughout the project, in a planned manner, students integrate these reflections in a synthesis activity that they disclose to the community and/or they create a new contribution to society.
	Recognition	Casual. There are no planned recognition activities, but they may emerge naturally between the agents and participating institutions, showing appreciation for the work done by students.	Intentional. The instructors develop celebratory acts recognizing the students' work, providing positive reinforcement.	Reciprocal. Cooperating entities and/or the beneficiaries of the service, on their own or in cooperation with instructors, propose activities to celebrate and recognize the students' work.	Public. Besides their being mutual recognition, public transcendence occurs as the result of the SL activities, either because they have been made known to the community, or because the administration expresses appreciation for the civic work and disseminates it.
	Assessment	Informal. The instructors do not establish a specific evaluation plan, although they may occasionally and spontaneously evaluate the tasks performed by the students, communicating their assessments to them.	Intuitive. The instructors' evaluation is based on the achievement of certain general learning objectives, objectively assessed, but without using precise indicators.	Competence-based. The instructors' evaluation is based on specific objectives, methods and indicators, the purpose of which is to improve the development of competences by the students and to accredit their achievement.	Multifocal. Students, along with instructors and the cooperating entities, actively participate in the planning and performance of the different competence-based evaluation processes.

		1	2	3	4
ORGANIZATIONAL	partnersCommunity	<i>Unilateral partnership.</i> No cooperating or public entity participates in the project, nor does any party from the tertiary social action sector.	<i>Directed partnership.</i> There is a cooperating public or tertiary social action sector in the SL project, but it is limited to providing the space where the service is provided.	<i>Agreed partnership.</i> There is a joint agreement with a public or tertiary social action sector entity to apply a specific SL project.	<i>Constructed partnership.</i> There is a joint agreement with a cooperating entity from the public or tertiary social action sector, with whom the SL project is designed and implemented from the beginning to the end of the process.
	Consolidation in social entities	<i>Incipient.</i> The participating entity understands what SL is because it has already occasionally participated in a prior experience, or because it has been explained to them, along with the project.	<i>Accepted.</i> The directors of the cooperating entity recognize SL projects and their educational function.	<i>Integrated.</i> The cooperating entity has a program of SL activities, and also has the team and structure needed to implement it.	<i>Identity.</i> The cooperating entity considers SL to be a trait of its own identity and provides sufficient resources to consolidate its development.

Table 1. Levels of development of the variables to be analyzed in a SL project (adapted from GREM, 2014 in Puig et al., 2017, pp. 127-128)

3. Method

3.1. Participants and instruments

The evaluation of the service-learning program and research on its strengths and weaknesses was carried out at the College of Legal and Social Sciences at King Juan Carlos University. A total of 88 students from the Marketing degree program participated, who were given the opportunity to participate in this project. All the students were registered for the subject Communications Policy and Digital Advertising, a required one-semester course (6 ECTS credits) in the third-year syllabus. The ages of the students ranged from 20 to 25 years, and 62.64% were female and 37.36% were male. All students taking the course voluntarily decided to participate in the SL project, which required them to attend orientation sessions, complete experience journals, participate in the interviews with the instructor and perform the service-learning activities within the framework of the continuous course assessment.

It was decided to evaluate the service-learning programs in this area of knowledge of higher education, Business Economics, since there are very few studies in the literature on the promotion and evaluation of service-learning programs specifically in the field of marketing. As a result, it could contribute interesting and unprecedented findings.

The central focus of the service-learning program was the reduction of inequalities (Sustainable Development Objective 10), specifically, Goal 2, promoting the social inclusion of individuals regardless of their age, race, gender, ethnic group, religion, economic status or origin (Naciones Unidas, s. f.). Based on this SDO, increasing the awareness of the residents of the neighborhood surrounding the university (Vicalvaro) and the university community itself was established as the objective of the SL program, with regard to a detected social problem: the need for the integration and co-existence with migrants and refugees, identifying the entire neighborhood community, both native and migrant, as those responsible for the achievement of a stable co-existence. The social context of cities has experienced a gradual increase in recent years of migrants who come to live alongside us in our neighborhoods, which requires increased awareness on behalf of all citizens of their situation and integration for a stable, long-lasting cohabitation. The percentage of foreign residents in the historic city center

of Vicálvaro (Madrid) represents nearly 21% of the total population ("Padrón municipal de habitantes 2020 del Distrito 19", s.f.).

Through the programming and implementation of communications plans based on service-learning, a program of reflective activities was articulated, which culminated in the provision of services in favor of the social problem that was detected, in a shared dynamic among the university, the town council and entities of social action. Based on a briefing presented by the Development and Assistance Foundation, a cooperating social entity, the students were required to develop a communications plan which required them to make direct contact with the community, analyzing its social needs and offering a communications action that would achieve the proposed objectives and reach the target population. The prior development of specific classes on service-learning and non-profit marketing was necessary, as well as the participation and cooperation of social entities in the tertiary sector, public administrations and the surrounding community, which made it possible to focus on the proposals not only in the development and transformation of the community context in relation to the detected social problem, but also on the curricular and professional education of the students, taking into account a different reality and vision.

The evaluation of the service-learning program received no financing, but both the Institutional History Chair of the university and the Dean's office of the campus where the activities were carried out financed some of the materials, with some actions being sponsored by neighborhood businesses. This confirms the cooperation of other participants that committed themselves to the service-learning program, in addition to the Development and Assistance Foundation, an entity in the tertiary social action sector that was a partner in the project; students, teachers and administrative and services staff of the university and the neighboring community, all of whom actively participated in the activities that were carried out.

3.2. Design and procedure

Given the specific characteristics of the objective and the study itself, it was decided to use an observational case study approach. The case study was executed in three phases, following the method described by Martínez Bonafé (1988):

- Pre-active phase: the theoretical foundations were analyzed; the institutional and social context of the selected educational area was defined; the research questions and objectives were proposed; the contextual influences were defined, as were the resources that would be needed and the timing; and the research process was proposed.
- Interactive phase: the intervention and field work were carried out. Qualitative information was collected before and after applying the service-learning methodology, through the different tools that have already been described.
- Post-action phase: the final report on the study was written, detailing the critical reflections on the case studied.

A qualitative study was conducted, based on participant observations, specifically, on natural participation-observation. This technique makes it possible to capture the reality and the social interaction of a specific group of individuals, meticulously collecting data and organizing it through a non-intrusive method, as the researcher belongs to the environment of the group that is intended to be studied (Maestre, 1990; Taylor & Bogdan, 1990). In this manner, the researcher herself shares the context and the experience with the subjects being researched, directly discovering the information from inside the group and understanding the scenario, which allows her to make decisions about the research design and to make alterations as necessary. During the participation-observation, the instructor, a native member of the professor-student relationship, becomes an observer of other subjects who also belong to the same group, the students, and this minimizes the risk of opposition and increases the accessibility of the researcher, as she has greater facility to relate to all the members, which increases the viability of the study and makes this technique one of the most complete, since besides making a diagnosis through the observation procedure, it formulates proposals and solutions based on the findings

(Samino & Rivero, 2018). The level of participation was natural, since both the observer and the group are considered to be members of the educational community. Following previous experiences in the systematization of educational experiences and in order to avoid biases derived from the researcher's interpretive frameworks in the observation (Schensul, Schensul & LeCompte, 1999) and to improve the rigor and validity of the data, it was decided to extend the qualitative data collection through other additional information gathering tools: personal interviews of the students, field notebooks or "experience diaries" kept by the students before and after the SL methodology and videos of the students. In this way, a triangulation was achieved by forming a "team" with the students themselves when collecting and interpreting the qualitative data. In addition, evaluation rubrics were used to evaluate from a curricular perspective the service-learning activities implemented by the students.

Three cycles of semi-structured interviews were carried out with nine groups of students who participated in the SL program, one before applying the service-learning methodology, another at the midpoint of the intervention and the last one upon finishing the program. The field diaries were also completed as a group before applying the service-learning methodology and at the end of the experience. In them, students were required to include not only information about specific events, but also about the meaning of the event and possible improvements. The instructor-researcher completed her field diary throughout the entire intervention process.

Different sources were used to examine the service-learning project itself. The institution itself (Institutional History Chair at King Juan Carlos University) completed a preliminary evaluation rubric and an intermediate evaluation rubric, in which a grade of "suitable" was obtained; and a final rubric with a project evaluation of "excellent". The Service-Learning Project Evaluation Commission, which forms part of the University Service-Learning Office of King Juan Carlos University, felt that it would be worthwhile to repeat the project and granted it practically the maximum score. In addition, this research used a self-assessment rubric developed by Puig et al. (2017), adapting it following the recommendations by Blanco-Cano and García-Martín (2021) and Miró-Miró et al. (2021), using different instruments to collect data on the basic, pedagogical and organizational variables indicated in Table 1, evaluated according to the levels of development established by Puig et al. (2017).

3.3. Data analysis

The data were processed using Atlas.ti qualitative research software. This software permits a cyclical examination of the texts analyzed through a description and analysis of the content that produces holistic representations based on the evidence (Samino & Rivero, 2018). The analysis followed the QDA model by Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2013), which includes five different phases: exploring, cataloging, recoding, ranking and expressing the model.

The documents analyzed with Atlas.ti7 software included the students' field diaries and the instructor-researcher's own diary, as well as the student interviews before, during and after the program. The contents were analyzed in three blocks (educational experience, pedagogical aspects and relationship to the cooperating entity), categorizing the concepts analyzed within each block. The first block included the following categories: perception of the social problem and empathy, curricular and professional contribution, personal and social contribution, civic attitude, satisfaction and motivation and association of the learning to the service. In the pedagogical aspects block, the following were categorized: complexity of the tasks, team work, problem-solving and/or conflict resolution capacity and the adaptation of the course contents to the SL program. The last block analyzed the role of the cooperating entity and its relationship with the students over the course of the program.

In order to assess the impact on the students, the grades on the continuous assessment work and the students' final course grades were evaluated. In order to evaluate the continuous assessment work, the instructor analyzed the videos that were recorded of the service, provided by the students, through a competence- and social-based rubric that was previously made available to the students. In addition, the students themselves completed a self-assessment rubric and a co-evaluation rubric of their teammates in order to assess the social competences that were acquired.

4. Results

4.1. Impact on the students

In order to understand the implications of the service-learning methodology for the students, a content analysis and a discourse analysis of the field diaries and student interviews were performed. The grades earned on the continuous assessment work were also analyzed using the service-learning methodology in order to evaluate the acquisition of curricular competences.

The students maintained that they have strengthened many of the curricular competences of the degree program, which helped them better understand the profession for which they were training, and opened their minds to new marketing focuses. This was manifest in their academic results, which reflected a motivation stemming from the work well done. More than 44% of the students obtained a grade of “outstanding” on the continuous assessment work using the SL methodology, while slightly more than 35% earned a grade of “very good” and 20.45% received passing grades, with no student failing the course and all taking part in these continuous evaluation activities. The final results of the course were also very positive, with no failing grades, only 22.73% of the students earning merely passing marks and more than 60% receiving “very good” and 13.64% earning “outstanding” grades. Only three students decided to drop out of the course and not sit for the exam.

On the other hand, the data analysis shows that thanks to the SL methodology, the students were more involved in autonomous decision-making and improved their capacity to overcome obstacles within their civic action.

4.2. Self-assessment of the SL project: identification of weaknesses, strengths and challenges presented by its application

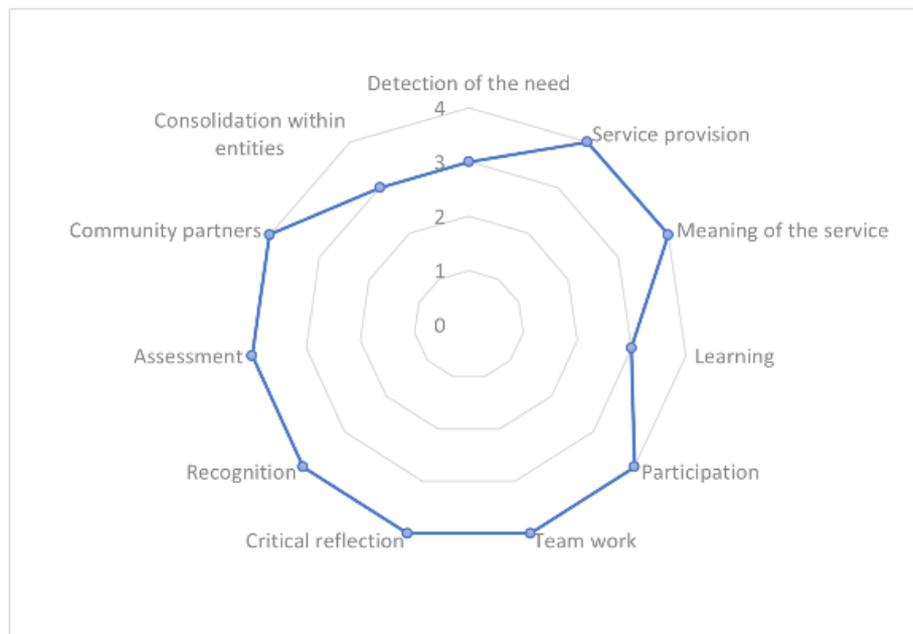


Figure 1. Self-assessment of the SL project

The researcher used information based on student discourse (field diaries and interviews) and discourse from her own field diary to conduct the self-assessment of each of the variables indicated in Table 1. The results of the self-assessment of the service-learning program can be seen in Figure 1, where the level achieved is indicated for each of the variables analyzed. As can be seen, the highest level is reached for the variables: performance and meaning of the service; contributions by the participants (participation); teamwork, reflection and critical thinking; public appreciation activities and positive reinforcement (recognition); evaluation plan and community

partners, which were perceived as strengths of the service learning program; seen as weaknesses were: needs detection and learning, perceived as the greatest challenges posed by the application of a service-learning program in higher education, for both students and instructors; and the consolidation with entities, a challenge primarily for the cooperating entities, but also for participating instructors and students, since they must try to find an entity with a consolidated level of identity or at least one integrated from the perspective of service-learning.

- Detection of the need

Need detection reached level 3, in other words, the needs acted upon were decided on by the students with the help of the instructor, through the analysis of the different problems. In this way, the students played a greater role in selecting the need, with the instructor promoting opportunities for constructive conversation and understanding in order to achieve the participation of the entire group in the decision regarding the need to be met.

- Service provision

A creative service was provided, with complex tasks in which the students were required to design the service in order to meet a specific need, using all their skills and knowledge, which was quite demanding and required a very high level of participation. Therefore, the highest level was reached.

- Meaning of the service

This meaning alludes to the social footprint left by the service provided. This footprint can be measured through the social impact achieved through the SL activities or the civic awareness that the students expressed after performing the service (Puig et al., 2017). In this experience, the meaning of the service reached level 4 because it was transformational. The students not only had the will to cooperate and were active in detecting the need, finding out about the entity and about the target social group and analyzing the impact of the activity, they were also aware of its social dimension and perceived the difficulty of modifying people's beliefs and behaviors, and the difficulty of attending to such a large vulnerable group, understanding that, even though community service tasks are all well and good, they can never reach the same objectives as public policies and political action.

On the other hand, a significant impact was achieved, since the SL activities performed by the students attained an extraordinary level of participation by the university and local neighborhood community.

- Curricular and social learning

The learning was useful, achieving level 3, which means that the planned curricular learning, the social competences to be attained and the continuous assessment work were directly connected to the service. The instructor intentionally oriented the service-learning activities towards curricular and social competences that the students needed to acquire, so that they put into practice the professional learning associated with the degree program, which favored the service quality.

- Participation

The highest level was obtained in the participation variable: guided participation. From the outset, it was the group of students that assumed the leadership role in the SL activity, becoming in the main characters and undertaking the responsibility for the design and development of the activities, intervening and making significant decisions in all stages. This involved higher levels of participation, planning, personal and group initiative and delegation of responsibilities.

- Team work

Extensive group work was involved (level 4). In addition to performing cooperative work in which the students complemented one another in roles and functions in order to perform the service, and where

they shared both individual as group contributions that were closely interrelated and interconnected, other external agents were also incorporated in the SL, as public or social action entities, primary and secondary schools, performing group work and creating networks of community action that were joined by new participants. This entailed the use of social skills on the part of the students.

- Reflection and critical thinking.

The reflection and critical thinking variable also reached the highest level: productive reflection. This means, on the one hand, continuous and planned reflection through the keeping of experience diaries, exercises and regular meetings to share reflections previously made by the students. And, on the other hand was the implementation of photographic and video reports, as well as other publicly disseminated SL activities, which created new contributions to society based on their own reflections about the detected social problem. All this represented an incentive that resulted in a commitment to the course subject and the social need. While the real experience of the service provided them with a sense of personal and professional empowerment, it also made them aware, as professionals and citizens, that they should be involved in caring for society and in social responsibility.

- Recognition

Recognition was public and reciprocal, showing the students that their experience was a success. The social entities and the educational institution worked together to hold an event of public recognition to celebrate and recognize the students' work, showing a video presentation of the activities that were carried out. This event was attended by persons from both the entities and university, in addition to those benefiting from the service. Additionally, both the university and the cooperating social institutions publicly disseminated the civic value of the activities and expressed their gratitude to the students, posting on social networks that transcended the university setting. It is thus assessed that the highest level was achieved for this variable.

- Assessment

A competence-based assessment was carried out, where the teachers based the evaluation on objectives, methods and specific indicators, the purpose of which was to improve the development of competences by the students, demonstrating their achievement. The students were previously informed about the competence-based assessment rubric to be used and, subsequently, the score they earned on each item, in order to assess which competences were attained and which required more work. In addition to this competence-based assessment, a multifocal (level 4) assessment was carried out, in which self-assessment and co-assessment practices were introduced, both by the students themselves, and by the instructor and the participating entities, in addition to that of the SL project itself.

- Community partners

A partnership was created, i.e. the institutions involved (the university and the social entity) jointly designed and applied the project from the start to finish of the process, both contributing their experience to shape a beneficial project that would also improve their environment. Over the course of the project, more public and social entities, primary and secondary schools were added that were interested in SL activities. Therefore, the maximum level was reached for this variable.

- Consolidation in social entities

An integrated consolidation exists in the cooperating social entity (level 3). This implies that the entity has the necessary team and structure in order to implement SL activities in cooperation with the university and monitor the project, although service-learning is not considered to be an identifying trait of it, and therefore it does not provide sufficient resources to consolidate the development of ongoing SL projects.

5. Discussion, limitations and practical and social implications

This research has made it possible to improve our understanding of the educational and social opportunities this methodology offers for higher education. In addition to promoting a citizenry that is more committed to the current reality, the real experience of the students in designing and implementing the community services through professional competences that are acquired in the course and the degree program show the potential of the university to take action on social problems in its surrounding environment. These results support previous studies that state that SL helps improve the civic attitudes of the students (Blanco-Cano & García-Martín, 2021; Miró-Miró et al., 2021; Fougère et al., 2020; Chiva-Bartoll, Gil-Gómez, & Zorrilla-Silvestre, 2019; Sevin, Hale, Brown, & McAuley, 2016; Taylor & Leffers, 2016). At the same time, this study has made it possible to understand that projects addressing social problems related to vulnerable groups and/or migrant groups manage to change the negative perception that the students might have about this group, increasing their understanding and improving their behavior toward inclusion and diversity, as is supported by the literature (Case, Schram, Jung, Leung, & Yun, 2020; Garbarino & Lewis, 2020; Iyer, Carrington, Mercer & Selva, 2018; Lawson, Cruz & Knollman, 2017; Mergler et al., 2017; Beauvais, Foito, Pearlin, & Yost, 2015). In addition to discovering different social situations, the students developed respect and curiosity for the other culture, increasing their cultural humility, as reported by Trigos-Carrillo, Fonseca and Reinoso (2020), Harrop-Allin (2017) and Sabo et al. (2015).

In this study, it was observed how SL has promoted greater participation and a higher level of work in a group of students, by requiring them to associate with people different from themselves in a situation in which partnership, cooperation, negotiation and consensus are crucial in order to achieve the objective, which promotes fellowship and improves the ties among the students in the work group, as shown by the literature (Blanco-Cano & García-Martín, 2021; Johnson & Howell, 2017; Gil-Gómez, Moliner-García, Chiva-Bartoll & García López, 2016; Taylor & Leffers, 2016; Zayas, 2015). An improvement has also been perceived in student training, by requiring them to solve real problems in real contexts, contributing their theoretical knowledge to do so, which means they must first understand what is occurring in order to solve the problem (empathy). This actually confirms the findings of previous works, such as those by Horst, Schwartz, Fisher, Michels and Van Winkle (2019), Sin et al. (2019) and Lee, Harris, Mortensen, Long and Sugimoto-Matsuda (2016). Assuming that they are capable of helping others through professional learning related to their future labor activity favors a positive self-concept, which is a hypothesis also supported by Levkoe, Friendly and Danieri (2020), Trigos-Carrillo et al. (2020), Cotten and Thompson (2017) and Menéndez-Varela and Gregori-Giralt (2017). This is in addition to greater self-esteem, recognition and personal satisfaction, confirming the studies by Gerholz, Liszt and Klingsieck (2018), Saylor et al. (2018), Tee and Kalidas (2016) and Rondini (2015), thus promoting the professional growth of the students (Blanco-Cano & García-Martín, 2021; Miró-Miró et al., 2021; McClure Brenchley & Donahue, 2017; Kohlbry & Daugherty, 2015; Folgueiras, Luna & Puig, 2013; Fuertes, 2013; Celio, Durlak & Dymnicki, 2011). These positive effects lead to increased student motivation with regard to the course, as shown by the results of this case study, and corroborating the research by Rodríguez-Izquierdo (2019) and Li, Guo, Yao, Wang and Yan (2016).

It has also been demonstrated that SL activities promote and increase reflection and critical thinking processes, since as the literature states, reflection is crucial in order for the service-learning to produce results (Herrmann, 2020; Mackenzie et al., 2019; Daniel & Mishra, 2017; Schmidt & Brown, 2016). The students themselves admit that it is precisely these processes of reflection that help them become aware of what they have achieved by applying the course contents in a real-life situation, while at the same time helping others, which is in line with the analyzed literature (Blanco-Cano & García-Martín, 2021; Sevin et al., 2016). This conclusion is aligned with previous studies that indicate that SL helps increase critical thinking skills in students through the reflections made, stimulating their critical awareness (Fougère et al., 2020; Chiva-Bartoll et al., 2019; Horst et al., 2019; Sin et al., 2019; Asghar & Rowe, 2016; Rondini, 2015).

Finally, the assessment conducted throughout the service-learning project has been more complete, and this has meant a better quality of activities, which has led to better grades, and therefore it is concluded that SL has a positive impact on the assessment. This finding is in agreement with previous studies, which indicate that

service-learning has positive repercussions on the assessment of the quality of the projects (Miró-Miró et al., 2021; Puig et al., 2017; Campo, 2014).

This study has made it possible to understand the positive impact of service-learning on aspects related to each of the agents involved. In the case of the students, this was by acquiring the curricular and social competences, increasing motivation and satisfaction with their course; for the instructor-researcher, it was by discovering and learning about the strengths and weaknesses of the service-learning program and reflecting on the challenges that the application of these programs represents in higher education; for the university, it was by achieving part of its mission and one of the objectives of its strategic plan, through the support of activities that promote achieving the sustainable development objectives, social responsibility and civic commitment ("Plan Estratégico 2020-2025 de la Universidad Rey Juan Carlos", s. f.); in terms of the surrounding community, it was by having increased their awareness of the detected social problem; and with regard to the cooperating social entity, by fulfilling their mission and making the community aware of their existence. Furthermore, it can be stated that the SL program has helped, albeit to a lesser extent, to achieve goal 2 of Sustainable Development Objective 10, reducing inequalities and promoting the social inclusion of migrants and refugees in a specific neighborhood of Madrid.

Even though the assessment of the SL program has shown a great number of strengths in the performance and meaning of the service, certain weaknesses have been detected in terms of participation, team work, reflection and critical thinking, recognition, the assessment plan and community partners, which provide the opportunity for improvement and pose a challenge for the application of this methodology in higher education. With regard to the need detection, this should be discovered by the students themselves, without any help from the instructor, after performing group research and coming to a critical understanding of the environment. However, this process involves different periods of observation, exploration, reflection, critical thought and conversation that make it complicated to complete it in the single academic quarter allotted for this course, thus requiring this analysis to be abbreviated, turning this need into a consensual decision between the instructor and the students. Even though the curricular learning in this SL project is directly linked to community service, there is no exhaustive research activity for educational and training purposes; that is to say, the work is not project-based, which is an aspect that poses an important challenge in higher education. Furthermore, with regard to the social entity, the challenge for the instructors and students is to be able to find a cooperating entity that considers SL to be one of its identifying traits, and that provides sufficient resources to service-learning programs in order to consolidate its development. And if it is not possible, then it would be necessary to cooperate with at least one entity that has a program of service-learning activities, as well as the team and structure that are necessary in order to implement them. In addition, it is expected that as the SL methodology and cooperation with outside entities are consolidated, the latter will be able to integrate service-learning into their ideology, including projects in their programming and providing resources for them. Therefore, it is a medium-long term project, which will only be successfully achieved with the continuity of service-learning projects or programs.

In order to respond to the research objective, it has been necessary to intervene in a specific course and area of higher education. This fact by itself poses a limitation; however, its contributions can be transferred to similar contexts and are open to the entire academic community. Furthermore, it is considered appropriate to work towards the creation of an efficient, specific assessment procedure in order to quantify the results of the service-learning, which would make it possible to verify the benefits SL provides, in an attempt to extend the analysis over the long term. These limitations open the door to new lines of research to consider for subsequent service-learning programs. There is little doubt that analyzing ways to tackle the challenges detected in this study will also represent future lines of research.

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