

Exploratory Study on The Use and Implementation of Service-Learning Methodology Among University Lecturers

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Abstract

Recent educational policies advocate the use of active and experiential methodologies, such as service-learning methodology, in which students serve a community while reflect and learn from the experience. The aim of this study was to describe the use of service-learning methodology in the institution's curriculum and, if it was the case, how it was being implemented. 48 university professors completed a questionnaire in a university in southern Spain. Results indicate that this methodology is still unknown by many lecturers, despite their interest to participate in eventual implementation of service-learning methodology and training. Additionally, results reveal that those lecturers already implementing service-learning methodology showed a high degree of satisfaction, suggesting, accordingly, the need of higher education institutions to deploy actions to allow students to carry out service-learning practices.

Keywords: Active methodology; satisfaction; service-learning; student teacher training.

1. Introduction

A new educational perspective has recently sprung in all contexts focused on the learners as active agents of their learning process. New students' generations, probably influenced by the use of technologies, demand a type of learning based on observation, manipulation, data gathering and production, showing less interest for uncontrolled sources of information, such as the traditional abuse of master-classes. While traditional methodologies are still being implemented in many contexts diverse educational policies worldwide advise the implementation of methodologies based on competence development that would eventually foster societal growth (see for instance

EUC, 2010). Additionally, there are evidences that point out that academic achievement in the context where this study has taken place is poor (c.f. ISCED6), despite the improvements that have occurred in recent years (Hernandez and Perez, 2017; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2010, 2018). And this is also the case in other international settings (e.g., Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2018; Van Stolk, Tiessen, Cliff, and Levitt, 2007; Vossensteyn, Kottmann, Jongbloed, Kaiser, and Cremonini, 2015; Woodfield, 2014), with successful graduation rates ranging from some countries to others only between 7% and 48% (Vossensteyn et al., 2015). In the case of Spain, the data provided by the Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte (2016) and the Sistema Integrado de Información Universitaria (2017) is even worst, only 3.6% of students pass all the courses in their first examination, or there is 34.5% of dropout rates. Furthermore, the report concludes that students complete their degree with a low competence level for employability because they do not meet the demands of the labor market. Consequently, the functional role of universities in order to provide competent workers and societal individuals might be questioned. Dolado (2010) estimates that this costs the government an amount close to 0.3% of the National Gross Domestic Product, let alone the subsidiary psychological and economic cost for families and students.

As a result, political leaders and stakeholders put forward diverse actions, in which innovation and actualization of educational trends came to the fore. For instance, the European Commission prepared Horizon 2020, the EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation [1], including one sector devoted to societal changes, including the development of inclusive, innovative and reflective societies. Here is where Service-Learning Methodology (SLM) may play a major role, described as an educational process based on experience, in which students compromise to participate in tasks that relate personal and community needs with strategically designed actions with the aim to promote students' learning and development (Jacoby, 1996, 5). SLM is also understood as an educational tool that provides a means of connection between the academic study of students with the community and society with the explicit intention of promoting active citizenship and responsibility (Furco and Holland, 2004).

In fact, profuse research (for instance, Hervás-Torres, Fernández, Arco and Miñaca, 2017; Westover, 2012; Wilczenski and Coomey, 2007) validates SLM's effectiveness and include a wide range of benefits for students particularly in higher education; namely: (a) increasing compromise and greater academic achievement (Maloney and Griffith, 2013; McIntyre and Sellnow, 2014); (b) an improvement of students' content acquisition (McIntyre and Sellnow, 2014; Vaknin and Bresciani, 2013); (c) personal and social growth (Gil, Moliner, Chiva and López, 2016; Hervás-Torres et al., 2017; Knapp, Fisher and Levesque-Bristol, 2010; McIntyre and Sellnow, 2014); (d) consolidation of competences (Gil et al., 2016; Rodríguez, 2014); (e) promotion of reflective and critical thinking (Author et al., 2017; Stanton, 2014; Vaknin and Bresciani, 2013); (f) reduction of risk behaviors (Tapia, 2006); (g) increase of school support by the community (Melchior, 1999); (h) promotion of a more positive school atmosphere (Hervás-Torres, Fernández, Arco and Miñaca, 2018); (i) increase of teachers' motivation, satisfaction, and change of attitudes towards teaching (Tapia, 2006); (j) facilitation of better relationships between schools and other institutions that serve communities, increase of teachers' commitment and creativity, and improvement of students' discipline (Jacoby, 1996; Wilczenski and Coomey, 2007); (k) higher connection of school curriculum with context needs (McIntyre and Sellnow, 2014); and (l) stronger social awareness of different societal groups and ages (Maloney, Myers and Bazyk, 2014; McIntyre and Sellnow, 2014).

Moreover, SLM is progressively being used by social agencies in numerous projects around the world, such as the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, Campus Compact, the National Youth Leadership Council (NYLC), Social Service Program "UMAM-PERAJ: Acoge a un amig@", CLAYSS, the National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG), or Zebricas (Spain), just to name a few. All resulting experiences conclude that SLM fosters the acquisition of general competences (autonomous learning, leadership, interaction abilities, etc.), and the development of personal values of compromise and respect. As a result, the quality of the curriculum is enhanced and students develop general and specific competences that will likely match those required in their jobs.

While previous literature confirms the benefits of SLM in the educational sphere and the increase of quality assurance, not much literature has been produced to analyze specific contexts and the lecturers' opinions about SLM. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is threefold: first, to ascertain whether SLM is known by the university faculty and if they would be willing to participate; second, for those implementing SLM, to acknowledge how they found out about SLM; and third, their degree of implementation satisfaction.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

48 professors from the University of Huelva (southern Spain) voluntarily participated in the study. At this point, SLM was not integrated in this institution. A convenience sample was targeted to Departments and areas of specialization where SLM would be most feasible to be implemented. Accordingly, 33 professors worked at the School of Education (68.8%), 4 professors at the Nursing School (8.3%), and 11 professors at the Social and Labor Work School (22.9%). Sex distribution consisted of 27 women (56.3%) and 21 men (43.8%). The distribution of professional category was 3 Full Professors (6.3%), 10 Associate Professors (20.8%), 10 Adjunct Professors (20.8%), 7 Assistant Professors (14.6%), 5 Instructors (10.4%), and 13 Graduate Teaching Assistants (27.1%).

2.2. Instrument for data collection

Morales' (2007) SLM Questionnaire was adapted, digitalized and distributed via internet among the target population. Field testing of the original questionnaire yielded a Cronbach Alpha reliability score of 0.89. It consisted of 35 items organized according to the following subscales: (1) demographic data; (2) professional category; (3) SML acknowledgment; (4) SLM prior training; (5) SLM implementation experience; (6) SLM implementation satisfaction; and (7) other commentaries. Subscales 1, 2 and 7 were open-ended items (9 items), and the other parts were close-ended: 7 were Likert type with 5 different options according to the purpose (always-never; least beneficial-most beneficial), 6 items were yes/no alternative, and 5 items had the option to add commentaries. The aim was to gather relevant information about the degree of knowledge, participation and satisfaction of the use of SLM in their working endeavors.

2.3. Design and procedures

Cross-sectional descriptive non-experimental research has been used to document SLM use and to describe degrees of satisfaction. Triangulation was used to combine both quantitative and qualitative data. Survey research was conducted with the aim to systematically gather information of a target population throughout the distribution of a questionnaire that would collect data of a sample representing that population (Rossi and Freeman, 1993). The sampling procedure was non-probabilistic in the form of a convenience sample (Martínez, 2010), since it was of our interest to gather data from specific participants, concretely those who had expertise and tuition in schools more related to our study. After the target sample was chosen, emails were sent to different departments including the link for the digital questionnaire, which was prepared and processed using Google Forms technology. Once we received the questionnaires the final sample was composed.

2.4. Data Analysis

IBM SPSS Statistics 26.0 was used to analyze quantitative data. Two main operations were performed: (a) Statistical descriptions to get measures of central tendency of the data; (b) Statistical descriptions and frequencies to get measures of central tendency and the absolute and percentage variances; and (c) directional and symmetrical association measures for the variables considered in the objectives of the study.

Additionally, Microsoft Access was used to register qualitative data for categorical variables. Those variables were previously defined (Huber, 2003) with regard to the existing literature, and redefined codes and categories were set according to the participants' productions.

3. Results

Quantitative data results have been grouped into four parts: (1) Professors' knowledge of SLM; (2) SLM previous training; (3) Degree of participation; and (4) Degree of satisfaction.

Regarding professors' acknowledgment of SLM, it is surprising to observe that 62.5% of the sample had never heard about it. Those who knew SLM pointed out that they had learnt it from "other colleagues" (20%), "books, scientific publications, etc." (20%), "conferences, symposiums, etc." (16%), "mass media" (4%), and "social networks" (0%). In sum, despite knowing SLM, 76.9% had never used it, but 77.1% within that value would be willing to participate.

70.8% of the sample declared they would be interested to receive SLM training, 10.4% showed no interest, and 18.8% had not decided yet. Only 6.8% of those who used SLM said to have had training, leaving 86.4% with no

prior training. And training was performed by “personal research” (29.4%), “university training courses” (17.6%), “workshops” (11.8%), and “training courses in other universities” (5.9%).

In the category of results regarding the intentionality of the projects, 30% showed to “provide community service”, 15% to “undergo community research”, 10% to “foster students’ participation in community service”, and 1% for students to do “their practice placement”.

Specific tasks carried out by students are shown in Table 1:

Table 1. Field projects, activities and results carried out by students.

	N	%
Type of activities carried out by students in SL projects		
Teaching primary school students in their schools	2	10
Teaching university students	6	30
Analyzing community needs and offering recommendations	2	10
Working with community members	3	15
Others	10	50
Areas included in SL projects		
Sports	1	5
Health	1	5
Education	7	35
Intercultural relationships	1	5
Family	1	5
Drug addiction	1	5
Public policy development	1	5
Poverty	1	5
Immigration	1	5
Civic awareness	1	5
School failure and/or dropout	1	5
International cooperation	1	5
Others	9	45

Finally, as table 2 shows, the degree of satisfaction after using and being trained in SLM is regarded mainly as highly beneficial or beneficial.

Table 2. Degree of satisfaction after using SLM

	N	%
Degree of satisfaction of SLM training		
Not beneficial	-	-
Not much beneficial	-	-
Beneficial	5	55.6
Highly beneficial	1	11.1
N/A	3	33.3
Degree of satisfaction after using SLM		
Not beneficial	-	-
Not much beneficial	-	-
Beneficial	3	33.3
Highly beneficial	6	6.7
N/A	-	-

Since central tendency measures have limitations, as, for instance, they are not appropriate for skewed distribution, symmetrical association measures were performed, so that the interactions among the variables could be studied. 3 statistically significant differences ($T = 2.34$; $p < 0.05$) were found in the association measures between the professional category and their interest to include SLM in their syllabi, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Measures of directional and symmetrical Association for Professional category and Interest to include SLM in their syllabi.

	Value	Typical error	Approx. T	Approx. Sig.
D Somers				
Symmetrical	.289	.114	2.340	.019
Professional category	.474	.182	2.340	.019
Interest to include SLM	.208	.087	2.340	.019
Tau-b de Kendall	.314	.123	2.340	.019
Tau-c de Kendall	.335	.142	2.340	.019
Gamma	.526	.196	2.340	.019

Additionally, statistically significant differences ($T = 1.67$; $p < 0.05$) were obtained in the results of the measures of association of professional category and interest to receive training in SLM, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Measures of directional and symmetrical Association for Professional category and Interest to receive SLM training.

	Value	Typical error	Approx. T	Approx. Sig.
D Somers				
Symmetrical	.197	.113	1.669	.095
Professional category	.274	.154	1.669	.095
Interest to receive SLM training	.154	.092	1.669	.095
Tau-b de Kendall	.205	.118	1.669	.095
Tau-c de Kendall	.186	.112	1.669	.095
Gamma	.330	.185	1.669	.095

Moreover, statistically significant differences ($T = 2.20$; $p < 0.05$) were also observed in the measures of association of the sex variable and the interest to include SLM in their syllabi, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Measures of directional and symmetrical Association of sex and the interest to include SLM in their syllabi

	Value	Typical error	Approx. T	Approx. Sig.
D Somers				
Symmetrical	.314	.113	2.204	.027
Gender	.376	.156	2.204	.027
Interest to include SLM in syllabi	.270	.122	2.204	.027
Tau-b de Kendall	.318	.135	2.204	.027
Tau-c de Kendall	.266	.120	2.204	.027
Gamma	.662	.213	2.204	.027

Similarly, there are statistically significant differences in the measures of association of sex and involvement in a project of service-learning ($T = 2.10$; $p < 0.05$) (Table 6):

Table 6. Association of sex and involvement in a project of service-learning

	Value	Typical error	Approx. T	Approx. Sig.
D Somers				
Symmetrical	.281	.121	2.102	.036
Sex	.322	.138	2.102	.036
Previous participation	.249	.116	2.102	.036
Tau-b de Kendall	.283	.122	2.102	.036
Tau-c de Kendall	.229	.109	2.102	.036
Gamma	.719	.271	2.102	.036

Finally, qualitative data results were classified according to the following categories (collected in the “other commentaries” section in the questionnaire). Some instances of those categories have been also included:

- SLM implementation: Some of the most valuable observations were added by subject 14: “I usually include SLM sessions in public or private institutions, in both formal and non-formal education, and in community service”, and subject 30: “It is highly beneficial for students. Their degree of satisfaction is full and they see themselves connected to real enterprise. On the contrary, it is very time consuming and effort demanding and that merit is not acknowledged by institution managers”.
- SLM effectiveness: “I consider SLM very useful because participants are aware of the learning process” (subject 47), and subject 20: “I am grateful to the colleague who introduced SLM to me, since it is going to be of great help for university students participating in this project”.
- SLM interest: “I have not used SLM, but I have read about it and would like to use it in my sessions or in projects” (subject 19), and subject 27: “I barely know SLM, but it is appealing to me”.
- SLM difficulties: Subject 21: “Time to be trained in SLM is scarce for professors, since we dedicate most of our working time for teaching and management”, or subject 30: “The institution barely acknowledges the merit and effort professors put into this”, and subject 2: “The institution should give students more options to put theoretical content into practical one, as is realized throughout SLM”.
- SLM impact: Subject 30: “Students find SLM most beneficial, enriching and highly satisfactory, and they see themselves connected to reality. They usually regard this type of experience most valuable”, or subject 47: “SLM not only benefits students, but also the whole educational community”.

4. Discussion of the results

Three main objectives were set in this study: to ascertain whether SLM was known by the faculty and if they would be willing to participate, to acknowledge how they found out about SLM, and their degree of satisfaction after implementing SLM. Generally speaking, results indicate that there is a great number of professors that do not know SLM, but those that know SLM would be willing to participate. It is revealing to acknowledge that more than 60% of the sample had never heard about SLM, whilst worldwide trends clearly advocate the use of active or learner centered methodologies, as SLM is. Actually, it cannot be ignored that SLM literature has proven beneficial results for lecturers and students, such as motivation increasement, higher sense of compromise and creativity (Maloney y Griffith, 2013; McIntyre y Sellnow, 2014), or generation of positive attitudes to teaching and learning (Brown, 2001; Jacoby, 1996; Tapia, 2006; Wilczenski and Coomey, 2007). Moreover, Hervás-Torres et al. (2017) and Hervás-Torres and Pardo (2019) indicated positive results in academic achievement and competences development, and better reflective and critical thinking were also noted (Hervás-Torres, et al., 2017; Stanton, 2014; Vaknin y Bresciani, 2013). Participants’ qualitative commentaries in this study have also confirmed this plethora of benefits, which replicates the pedagogical usefulness of SLM.

Morales (2007) pointed out the need to make known SLM among lecturers, but more than a decade later, according to the results of this study, we still find out that its implementation is proceeding very slowly, and that not many training events are being held. We specifically found that adjunct professors did not show interest to participate, as they think SLM is time-consuming. As the rest of the participants showed interest, it is evident that institutions should include more training events focused on active methodologies, such as SLM.

Holland (2005) also highlighted the fact that SLM is the cornerstone that holds, on one side, the academic pillar, and, on the other side, the societal, cultural, economic and human ones. This is precisely one of the most important missions that higher education should accomplish: to connect all human spheres. Drug addiction, public health, school failure, international cooperation, etc., should be dealt with integratedly in order to observe all angles and reflect upon them in a more global manner. That would give students empowerment and leadership, and lecturers would have a stronger sense of commitment and reality in their lessons and practice sessions. Furthermore, it would also increase the commitment of students and improve academic learning (Civic Literacy Project, 2000; Melchior, 1999; Scales, Blyth, Berkas, and Kielsmeier, 2000; Schumer, 1994; Stephens, 1995; Youniss, McLellan, and Yates, 1997), and would encourage the personal and social development of students as seen in the experiences of Brown (2001), Jacoby (1996), Melchior (1999), and Switzer, Simmons, Dew, Regalski, and Wang (1995).

Moreover, in the context where this study was realized, as in the European Union, a strong indicator for quality assurance in higher education is the development of key competences to foster life-long learning (Consejo Económico y Social de España, 2014), and also the students' personal development throughout active participation in society. All this would be achieved by SLM, which provides field experience, problem solving capacity (from analysis and execution), creativity and communicative abilities (Mourshed, Patel, and Suder, 2014).

As results yield 77,1% of lecturers willing to use SLM, it is justified the need to introduce new methodologies in their teaching development route. Although the sample is short and the results should not be generalized, it seems that female lecturers are more fond of using SLM.

Lecturers' satisfaction on the implementation of SLM has been most beneficial, mainly related to awareness of students' competence development (Hervás-Torres and Miñaca-Laprida, 2015; Morales, 2007), better academic achievement (Maloney and Griffith, 2013; McIntyre and Sellnow, 2014), and a higher sense of teaching abilities (Wilczenski and Coomey, 2007).

In sum, this study has revealed that higher education institutions and their training units should consider a change of pedagogical philosophy (Edwards, 2002), so that SLM and other active methodologies are known, trained and implemented. Needless to say, that institutions still need to develop procedures for the proper difficulties for organization, implementation and security that this type of field practice entails.

5. Limitations of the study

Results should be considered cautiously, since the sample (N=48) is small and limited to just one context, and therefore the generalization of results should not proceed. More research is needed in other contexts to ascertain whether SLM use is being implemented and how universities are developing pedagogical trainings. Also, the questionnaire should need further insights for validation. Although Cronbach Alpha was 0.89, we have used an adaptation for contextual reasons, which could substantially change reliability coefficients. In this sense, and although this study serves to corroborate previous findings in the use of SLM (Brown, 2001; Westover, 2012; Wilczenski and Coomey, 2007), we are aware that internal and external validity coefficients could improve if the register process would have included more quantitative and qualitative data (with the risk of completion withdrawal because of excessive length), or if the sample number would be higher. Finally, the on-line questionnaire offered some advantages related to velocity and reached all possible respondents, but also left completion to the lecturers' willingness to participate. On-site delivery of the questionnaire might have taken more time but could have increased the sample.

Therefore, improving and debugging the questionnaire in many extremes could improve the representativeness of the sample to get sample subjects from handily all areas of knowledge, as Morales' (2007) study. This would effectively allow for an authentic map of the service-learning in the context of this study.

6. Proposal for future research

Longitudinal studies should be conducted in order to find evidences of change during the process of SLM implementation (Arco and Fernández, 2002). This would also provide other insights, such as students' competence development, use of resources, etc.

Also, procedures and actions to disseminate the benefits of SLM to disseminate would be advisable, and would motivate stakeholders to introduce SLM in the curriculum and training agenda (Vossensteyn et al., 2015). In addition, research could also be made to know the impact in the faculty, such as a reduction of class ratio (Crisol, 2012), or a greater academic recognition (Vossensteyn et al., 2015). Also, as more training and technical support to centers, departments and teachers were suggested (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace and Thomas, 2006), more research is needed about the incentives for participation. Finally, more studies should be carried out to have more insights of the students' personal and academic experience, in order to replicate other studies, such as Martínez, Rodríguez, Marco and Macías' (2020), in which the participants improved their interpersonal relationship skills, their ability to manage cultural diversity or improve teamwork skills.

In essence, this study has confirmed and revealed some aspects that are derived from the use of SLM. It adds further evidence of the academic and professional benefits that this particular type of methodology entails, with the hope that researchers, faculty, trainers and other stakeholders consider SLM to broaden its dissemination and implementation.

7. Notes [1] Please, see <https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/horizon2020/en>

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