



SERVICE-LEARNING IN COMMUNITIES: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY EXPERIENCE FOR THE EFFECTIVE LINKAGE OF UNIVERSITIES IN THE TERRITORY

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***Abstract:** This article enlightens about the application of the service-learning methodology in communities as an interdisciplinary strategy to strengthen the relationship between universities and the territory. The aim was the university students apply their academic knowledge carrying out community service activities. The interventions were related with the English language and values reinforcement for children and adolescents in rural communities like San Antonio of Ibarra and the Salinas in Imbabura - Ecuador. The methodology adopted included diagnostic techniques, the planning of innovative educational activities and assessment through participant observation and surveys. The results show a positive impact on university students, who improved transversal competencies such as teamwork, leadership and civic responsibility. This project underlines the transformative potential of service-learning in the academic field*

Keywords: Service-learning; communities; interdisciplinarity; linkage; values training.

Resumen: Este artículo ilustra sobre la aplicación de la metodología de Aprendizaje-servicio en comunidades, como estrategia interdisciplinaria para fortalecer la relación entre las universidades y el territorio. El objetivo fue que los estudiantes universitarios apliquen sus conocimientos académicos realizando actividades de servicio comunitario. Las intervenciones estuvieron relacionadas con el idioma inglés y el refuerzo de valores para niños y adolescentes de comunidades rurales como San Antonio de Ibarra y Salinas, en Imbabura - Ecuador. La metodología adoptada incluyó técnicas de diagnóstico, planificación de actividades educativas innovadoras y evaluación a través de observación participante y encuestas. Los resultados muestran un impacto positivo en los estudiantes universitarios, quienes mejoraron competencias transversales: trabajo en equipo, liderazgo y responsabilidad cívica

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Palabras clave: Aprendizaje servicio; comunidades; interdisciplinariedad; vinculación; formación en valores

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Service-Learning (Aprendizaje Servicio) has emerged as a vital pedagogical approach in Ecuador, fostering not only academic growth but also social responsibility among students. According to Salam et alii (2019), Service-Learning integrates community service with academic instruction, allowing students to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world contexts while addressing community needs. This approach aligns with Ecuador's commitment to developing a more equitable society, where a positive and direct impact is achieved on different variables of interest to all countries: coverage, efficiency and equity (Aguerrondo et al, 2023).

Community Service Practices (Vinculación) have been pivotal in promoting this educational model, enabling students to engage with diverse communities and understand their complexities. Recent studies, such as those by Macas-Acosta and Vergara-Romero (2024), highlight that these practices cultivate a sense of civic responsibility and enhance community relationships. By participating in projects that address local issues, students contribute to the community, also gain invaluable insights into socio-cultural dynamics, which enrich their educational experience.

Furthermore, the significance of soft skills and transversal competencies cannot be overstated in the context of Service-Learning. Research by Culcasi and Venegas (2023) indicates that involvement in Service-Learning initiatives enhances students' communication, teamwork, and problem-solving abilities—skills essential for success in today's job market. As employers increasingly prioritize these competencies, educational institutions in Ecuador are recognizing the need to integrate them into curricula. This integration prepares students for professional challenges also fosters a holistic development that emphasizes ethical citizenship and social engagement.

In summary, Service-Learning projects in Ecuador represent a critical intersection of education and community engagement, contributing to the development of both individual competencies and collective societal welfare. The ongoing exploration of these initiatives will undoubtedly reveal further insights into their transformative potential for students and communities alike.



Therefore, it is important to remember how, on January 9, 2024, the President of the Republic declared, through Decree 111, a state of emergency due to “internal armed conflict” to address the situation of violence in which various criminal groups have plunged the country; at an educational level, this caused the suspension of face-to-face classes and the adoption of virtual didactic meetings, remote tasks, among others, for a short term. Yet, depending on the degree of conflict in the different sectors, this “Emergency Remote Education” (ERE) was extended for more than four weeks, which seemed to contribute to exacerbate the problem of school lag in children and adolescents that has been caused since the covid 19 pandemic.

According to data from the Zonal Directorate of Education, dropouts and school lag reached a percentage of 2.27 in the 2021-2022 school year, in a scenario where the border provinces are having the highest incidence (Diario El Norte, sf). Indeed, on February 22, 2024, the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) and the National Institute for Educational Evaluation (INEVAL) presented the results of the application of the “Ser estudiante” test in the last school year, where a “worrying” level of development is evident. There is a lack of competencies and skills in learning areas specially in basic subjects, both in primary and high school (Primicias, 2024)

Aware of this reality, this project was proposed based on the active methodology called Service Learning, which had as its objective: to put into practice the knowledge and skills of PUCE Ibarra students, through didactic activities in real contexts, and pedagogical reinforcement in the English language and other subjects. On the one hand with children and adolescents of several communities belonging to the “Red Neural”, in San Antonio de Ibarra parish. On the other hand to teach values through workshops to children of the Ecclesiastical Parish of Salinas. To achieve this it was necessary to develop the process in stages, each one with their respective specific purpose:

a) Apply diagnostic evaluation techniques, identifying the main skills that need academic reinforcement.

b) Plan innovative educational activities to carry out with children and adolescents from the communities of Salinas and San Antonio de Ibarra parishes, taking into account the level of knowledge, context and environment.



c) Hold educational meetings in different areas of knowledge through interactive activities and academic leveling with playful methodologies with children and adolescents from the community.

d) Evaluate the impact of real practice on PUCE Ibarra students through the socialization of their impressions and experiences.

2. METHODOLOGY

This is a mixed pedagogical research study aimed at helping students from selected rural parish educational units learn while engaging in activities that involve action and coexistence with the community. The study was carried out in the following stages: identifying strategic allies; and conducting a situational technical diagnosis of the needs of the communities involved in this study. These stages, along with their methodological processes, aligned with the levels and competencies of university students engaged with the community, who were direct participants.

Another advanced stage was the planning, execution, and evaluation of the proposed “Service-Learning” project, which was developed through educational workshops utilizing resources and materials from the surrounding environment. The work was conducted through interactive mentorship and, specifically, classes designed with a playful method.

In order to directly assess the progress and acceptance of the students benefiting from this proposal, a participatory observation technique was designed, validated, and applied. This instrument and the procedures to follow were validated by experts in service-learning methodology.

Finally, in this project, a mixed-methods approach was applied (data collection and analysis). Additionally, it was deemed appropriate to carry out a focus group with the members of the group at the PUCEI. This was developed to understand the impacts achieved based on the results of service learning and teaching strategies, framed within curricular improvement informed by reflections arising from the systematization of lived experiences in the field.

3. RESULTS

3.1 RESULTS ON STUDENTS

At the end of the project, the university students were consulted about the positive and negative aspects of the Community Service Internship process, as well as the most important things learned while carrying out their activities. Likewise, they were consulted about the quality of their intervention in the community, considering the activities applied. Information was also obtained on how to improve the process and the difficulties encountered.

Also, a baseline is established of what was the most rewarding experience and it is considered whether these activities are believed to be helpful for professional life or even in the personal sphere. The responses were processed through the CAQDAS Atlas.ti program, which produced the following results in progressive coding:

Figure 1: Community service practice assessment variables



Source: own elaboration



The students indicated with their responses the clear correlation between the elements of improvement that the project implemented based on the diagnosis and the way in which said intervention favorably impacted their professional development, turning service learning into an experience where everyone wins.

Likewise, as established in the applied methodology, through the qualitative technique of thematic analysis, the patterns present in the conclusions written by the different teams of students who took the subject of Personal and Socio-Environmental Ethics were summarized and identified, which are part of the seven final reports of the Social Action Project delivered at the end of the academic period. The comments that have the most coincidences refer to the fulfillment of the stated goal, in the sense of promoting values, both among the beneficiary children and in themselves.

Figure 2: Sankey diagram of correlations



Source: own elaboration

These essential pillars promoted by Service Learning are expanded into a range that can be effectively deployed according to the map systematized by Martín - García et al (2023), where the classification brings together “three value horizons, altruism and cooperation; citizen participation; and transformative learning” (p.18).

Altruism and cooperation, since through the workshops carried out and the reinforcement classes with children of different ages, experiential learning of axiological topics and scientific content that needed to be better understood was verified. Citizen participation, because the Ethics students, by being in closer contact with community partners, were able to feel the needs of the families in the sector and provide a response to the extent of their possibilities. Transformative learning, evidenced in manifest attitudes of teamwork, contributions to the promotion of



educational equity and in a sincere recognition that they were the ones who learned more than their own students.

At this point it is necessary to emphasize that to carry out this project there was an approach to the communities of both San Antonio de Ibarra and Salinas parishes. In this first meeting with the authorities of the communities taken into account for the study, it was possible to establish an engaging dialogue about the socio-educational needs of a certain sector of the population such as children and young people. This dialogue allowed the university students who were taking precisely those subjects to take the initiative to propose mentoring, English classes, assignments, and ethics classes. Thus, after a 12-week process, the project came to an end. For this, two closing programs were organized. The first in the communities of San Antonio de Ibarra and the second closing event took place with the children and young people from Salinas Parish Catechism.

As the community of Salinas is 20 minutes from the city of Ibarra, the university students, on the way there, expressed their joy at being able to complete the project, but at the same time, they also expressed a little nostalgia knowing that that day was going to be the last one on the project. While a group of students talked about the final details of what would be the last class, another group of students reviewed the song “If you are happy” they had prepared for the children of the parish. This was an exciting, fun, but also unforgettable moment for the young university students.

Once in the communal house where they had to wait for the tutors, then they got to work. A group of students were preparing the class, switching on a laptop for projecting a video while another group of students were cleaning the classroom and sweeping the floor full of dust and garbage. In just a few minutes everything was ready for the reception. Little by little the children began to arrive, the parish priest was also present with a welcome greeting. As that was the last day, the priest thanked them for the effort made and for all the knowledge imparted by the university students. The children, before entering the classrooms, lined up according to their educational level and age. They were also very happy to see the university students once again. Somehow, they had formed a bond of friendship and companionship with them.

Later, after the class was prepared by the university students, it was time to say goodbye. The children were happy and grateful after this time of learning and camaraderie. Once the children and young people left. The professors, together with the university students,



recapitulated what the last day of work had been like. Here they expressed their satisfaction of having fulfilled their duty. But perhaps the most relevant thing was that they understood that learning and service had a two-way path. It was not only the children who benefited, but they had also gained and grown in experience. They had given an important part of their lives to the Salinas community. They had discovered their humanistic side by putting their entire contingent at the service of others. They discovered that in the end, they had not done it out of obligation but out of vocation.

Based on the above, it can be stated that with this project the university students, on the one hand, worked on updating, learning and applying relevant innovative strategies in order to counteract the academic lag of boys, girls and adolescents of the NGO Red Neural, in various areas of knowledge. From the results, it was evident how these experiences in different real contexts allowed awakening the sense of social responsibility, awareness and above all sense of commitment to the common good, through the application of the service learning methodology, for the benefit of comprehensive professional training.

This result agrees with some of the data obtained from Corrales et al research (2021), where 75% of the parents surveyed, beneficiaries of academic reinforcement activities aimed at children in times of pandemic, state that the project generated changes or improvements (p.106).

When asked through an interview, in the case of the students who participated in the project, their opinion regarding the implemented methodology was that they were very satisfied with the Service-Learning methodology. They stated that it had been very fruitful to work with this methodology because their learning was significant by having put into practice their knowledge acquired in the classroom. Students are aware that this methodology was developed successfully and that it was suitable for them because it was concise and effective. In addition, they were grateful for all the planning carried out and for the materials that were prepared by them for their use and application. On the other hand, the students stated that the teacher in charge was clear in her instructions and that they felt accompanied and supported by her. They highlighted the work of the teacher for having accompanied them at all times to resolve their doubts and help them with whatever was necessary. At another point, the students expressed their joy and satisfaction for everything they had learned from the children and adolescents of the community and vice versa, as stated in one of the objectives of Win-Win Service-Learning.

Figure 3: Impact on students (1/2)

Carrera a la que pertenece	Asignatura en la que desarrolló el proyecto:	Aplicación nuevas metodologías	Grado de disfrute	Aporte personal	Aumento de confianza	Toma de decisiones
Pedagogía de los idiomas	Prácticas de Vinculación	5	5	5	5	5
Comunicación	Análisis del discurso	5	5	5	5	5
Pedagogía de los idiomas	Prácticas socio comunitarias	1	1	1	1	1
Pedagogía de los idiomas	Prácticas de servicio comunitario	5	4	5	4	4
Comunicación	Prácticas de vinculación	3	2	2	4	3
Pedagogía de los idiomas	Prácticas de servicio comunitario	5	5	5	5	5
Pedagogía de los idiomas	Prácticas de servicio comunitario	1	2	1	1	1
Pedagogía de los idiomas	Prácticas de Servicio Comunitario	5	5	5	5	5
Pedagogía de los idiomas	Prácticas de Servicio Comunitario	5	5	5	5	5
Pedagogía de los idiomas	Prácticas de Servicio Comunitario	5	5	5	5	5
Pedagogía de los idiomas	Prácticas de servicio comunitario	4	5	5	4	5
Pedagogía de los idiomas	Prácticas de servicio comunitario	5	5	5	5	5
Pedagogía de los idiomas	Prácticas de Servicio Comunitario	5	4	4	4	5
Arquitectura	Ética	5	5	5	5	5
Derecho	Ética personal y socio ambiental	5	5	5	5	5
Derecho	Ética Socioambiental	5	5	5	5	4
Pedagogía de los idiomas	Prácticas	4	4	4	4	4
Pedagogía de los idiomas	Prácticas Servicio Comunitario	5	5	5	5	5
Derecho	Ética Personal Socioambiental	5	5	5	5	5
Pedagogía de los idiomas	Ética Personal y Socioambiental	5	5	5	5	5
Pedagogía de los idiomas	Ética personal y socioambiental	5	5	5	4	4
Derecho	Ética personal socioambiental	5	5	5	5	5

Source: own elaboration

Figure 4: Impact on students (2/2)

Carrera a la que pertenece	Asignatura en la que desarrolló el proyecto:	Percepción y sensaciones	Adquisición nuevos conocimientos	Utilización de técnicas y herramientas	Impacto propositivo	Habilidad de trabajo en equipo	Grado de satisfacción general
Pedagogía de los idiomas	Prácticas de Vinculación	5	5	5	5	5	5
Comunicación	Análisis del discurso	5	5	5	5	4	4
Pedagogía de los idiomas	Prácticas socio comunitarias	1	1	1	1	1	1
Pedagogía de los idiomas	Prácticas de servicio comunitario	5	5	4	5	4	5
Comunicación	Prácticas de vinculación	3	3	3	4	3	4
Pedagogía de los idiomas	Prácticas de servicio comunitario	5	5	5	5	5	5
Pedagogía de los idiomas	Prácticas de servicio comunitario	1	1	1	1	1	1
Pedagogía de los idiomas	Prácticas de Servicio Comunitario	5	5	5	5	5	5
Pedagogía de los idiomas	Prácticas de Servicio Comunitario	4	5	5	5	5	5
Pedagogía de los idiomas	Prácticas de Servicio Comunitario	5	5	5	5	5	5
Pedagogía de los idiomas	Prácticas de servicio comunitario	4	4	4	5	5	5
Pedagogía de los idiomas	Prácticas de servicio comunitario	5	5	5	5	5	5
Pedagogía de los idiomas	Prácticas de Servicio Comunitario	5	5	5	5	5	4
Arquitectura	Ética	5	5	5	5	5	5
Derecho	Ética personal y socio ambiental	5	5	5	5	5	5
Derecho	Ética Socioambiental	5	4	5	5	4	5
Pedagogía de los idiomas	Prácticas	4	4	4	4	4	4
Pedagogía de los idiomas	Prácticas Servicio Comunitario	5	5	5	5	5	5
Derecho	Ética Personal Socioambiental	5	5	5	5	5	5
Pedagogía de los idiomas	Ética Personal y Socioambiental	5	5	5	5	5	5
Pedagogía de los idiomas	Ética personal y socioambiental	4	5	2	5	5	5
Derecho	Ética personal socioambiental	5	5	5	5	5	5

Source: own elaboration



3.2. RESULTS ON TEACHERS

According to the teachers involved, in their interviews, the objective of the project was to improve student learning, that is, going from theory to practice and establishing the differences, taking into account that the best way to learn is to teach. Enrich the university with this type of projects, to fulfill one of the campus objectives, which is to be more to serve better. The university grows when its students are closely linked to the community, attending to its most urgent and relevant needs. The idea is also to incorporate new learning methodologies in the teaching-learning process. These kinds of projects motivate teachers to be better every day by taking on new challenges.

This confirms what is indicated by various investigations about the teaching role in pedagogical reinforcement. As Calucho (2018, p. 64) states: "Pedagogical reinforcement is an alternative to attention to diversity, to respond to the difficulties and needs of a group of students or an individual student; "It should always be a constant to be used and previously planned by the teacher."

On the other hand, teachers had to face different difficulties during the development of the project, such as the lack of budget as it was not a type "A" project. Other complications such as access to specific physical areas such as laboratories and field trips. In addition, mishaps were experienced with the project collaborators, especially with the leaders of the San Antonio community, who showed disagreements and fights among themselves regarding the political issue. For example, when, in an attempt to do a better job and take advantage of time, space and resources, they wanted to invite participants from both communities to take classes in one place, and one of the communities refused. parties claiming that they could not move from one place to another due to lack of budget and agreement between the parties.

Thus, the teachers, for their part, believe that another of the difficulties in carrying out this project is better training, preparation and guidance to carry out good work.



4. DISCUSSION

Undergraduate students in Pedagogy of national and foreign languages have many chances to develop their personal and social skills during their studies at the university through the internship I and II, and also through the Community Service. This technical background and Educational Experiences have helped them to develop a sense of responsibility and professional skills such as leadership, team-building and, sense of civic responsibility. (María Queiruga-Dios et al, 2021). They put leadership into practice when they direct each of the activities, whether they are classes or talks to children and young people. They carry out teamwork when they take responsibility for the proposed activities and finally develop a sense of civic responsibility knowing that as Ecuadorians they are contributing a grain of sand for the progress of the most vulnerable groups in society.

According to the article presented by the Education magazine “Alteridad” called “The map of service-learning values, the service-learning methodology socially activates the realization of values and makes it easier for each participant to convert them into their way of being and to act habitually” even more so when the group of students belongs to an educational institution that promotes values and principles as does the Pontifical Catholic University of Ecuador. In this sense, learning, in addition to putting into practice the knowledge acquired in the classroom, promotes the implementation of values such as “altruism, cooperation, commitment, solidarity and critical spirit, among others. Which encourages the student who is immersed in this project to come out of this confinement, his self-absorption, and possible depression by making other people happy. Furthermore, the joy that students experience when preparing their classes and the material necessary for interaction is more than evident.

On the other hand, the article presented by Castle and Osman (2003) from University of Witwatersrand suggests integrating service learning with traditional school experiences in teacher education by combining the existing “school experience” component of teacher training with service learning opportunities”. In other words, this integration has been useful to prepare student teachers in the case of Pedagogy students for the professional demands outlined in national policy for teacher education. They also mention the key strategies for this integration such as: identifying Appropriate Partnership, Developing Quality Mentoring and Supervision, Pilot Projects and Community Education Courses, and Resource Allocation. By following these strategies, the article argues that service learning can enhance the educational experience of



student teachers while also addressing community needs, thereby fulfilling the social purpose of higher education.

Talking about the impact of Service learning projects, Cristine I Celio et al, in their article mentioned that there are some implications for educators considering SL in their curriculum for example: Positive outcomes cause it enhance overall student development.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The university students could understand better the socioeconomic and educational reality of the communities in Salinas and San Antonio of Ibarra. Local needs were then met to some extent through educational and academic reinforcement activities. However, they also faced challenges, such as a lack of resources and certain logistical difficulties.

The project work greatly benefited the children and adolescents in the communities. In addition, it enriches the experience of the university students. They have a feeling of satisfaction for their educational social work. Service-learning helps the shared construction of knowledge and values, since it transforms both the beneficiaries and the agents involved.

The intervention activities of the service-learning project positively influenced the student interns. They put into practice fundamental skills such as effective communication, teamwork, and problem solving. So, they can strengthen their abilities to face social and professional challenges with an ethical and cooperative perspective.

The practice of service-learning in rural communities is an effective strategy to promote academic learning and the development of social and civic skills. Student practitioners also develop civic responsibility and community commitment, since the integration of theory and practice strengthens their professional training and sense of social belonging.

In the service-learning project, teacher support is essential to ensure that university students perform well under guidance and supervision. In this way, a lasting impact on education and the benefit of disadvantaged communities is guaranteed.



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