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Service-learning and higher education: evaluating students learning process form their own percpective

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Abstract

This paper presents a description and evaluation of an innovative teaching experience carried out through a service-learning methodology within the university Degree in Social Education at the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU). It compiles data collected from 62 students from 3rd year, who were attending the subject “Socio-educational intervention with adults, elders and people with special needs” in the year 2011-2012 and 2012-2013. The international theoretical basis related to the development and impact of this methodology within higher education, a description of the design and the development of the case of study and a quantitative evaluation are presented in this paper. The results have been analyzed through a questionnaire that seeks the opinion of the students about their teachers. We conclude providing evidences about the impact this learning process has had over the students, mainly in aspects such as involvement, motivation and reflexive attitude.

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1. Introduction

Universities have in the present two main educational goals. In the one hand, they try to encourage a deep and wide knowledge that will allow students to develop themselves as professionals and as persons, in a far more complex world than in previous generations. In the other hand, they seek to ensure an ethical and civic education of their students, so it will have a deep influence in the transformation of society. The service-learning methodology (SL) has a direct impact on this two aspects, as it combines both in a single learning activity based on contents, competences and values when doing tasks oriented to community service.

SL represents in the present a movement towards innovation in education at every level of the learning process, and it can be found all around the world in countries such as Australia, South Africa, North and South America and Europe. Studies on its impact (Keen and Hall, 2008) emphasize the benefits of this methodology for students, teachers and community members. Rovinson and Torres (2007) affirm that this methodology improves the teaching process as it encourages academic involvement and motivation towards curricula. It also helps developing new perspectives and experiences, contributing to a wider participation and involvement of students when learning. Bringle and Hatcher (1996) think that SL can improve students' gaps comparing it to the traditional assessments based on the content, and it can also enhance their interest towards a subject as it provides the needed resources and skills to solve problems, concurrently transforming education into a more pleasant process to the teachers using this approach. The impact of this methodology on the critical thinking of the students, has also been verified (Robinson, 2010).

Some authors (Folgueiras, Luna & Puig, 2013; Gezuraga & Malik, 2015) affirm this methodology helps students improve their personal, social and civic skills, but also helps increasing their self-esteem and deeper knowledge of oneself. Robinson and Torres (2007) suggest the best teaching techniques of specific contents are usually those based on SL. Kuh (2008) defines service-learning as one of the ten best teaching methodologies within higher education systems in the United States.

Besides the students' improvement in a professional context, SL is also beneficial for the rest of the people taking part in this teaching process: teachers, community members, the whole community and the Administration. It is also relevant the influence service-learning can have over the Administration (Furco, 2011), as it allows university to become a community who learns, who orients research towards aspects socially relevant and also wants to be at the disposal of society.

One of the main fields within higher education this methodology is used, would be the one oriented to train teachers (Martinez & Martinez, 2015). Some studies affirm that the aforementioned experiences have enabled the development of competences related to communication and planning, as well as reinforcing positive attitudes towards teamwork and commitment to society (Anderson, 2000).

SL also emphasizes the importance of awareness about diversity and commitment to education (Root, Callagan & Sepansky, 2002). These aspects are central in the training of the future teachers and community workers. That's why this methodology should be one of the main basis within the curricula of this discipline (Alonso et al., 2014).

2. Description of a service-learning experience at university

In 2012-2013 the subject of third year "Socio-educational intervention with adults, elders and people with special needs" taught in Basque and part of the university Degree in Social Education at the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU), was carried out using the service learning methodology with two different organizations working with young and elders: "Centro de Educación de Personas Adultas de Galdakao" and "Palanka Elkartea". The main goal of this methodology is to develop the students' competences compiled within curricula, through a design and start-up of a socio-educational intervention for elders, that should also consider the necessities contemplated by those organizations.

To carry out this teaching experience the following stages were proposed: a) Diagnosis of the organizations and groups which are object of the intervention; b) searching bibliography about experiences carried out in similar context; c) designing a socio-educational intervention; d) implementation of this socio-educational intervention among these organizations and e) evaluation of the socio-educational intervention.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample

30 students enrolled at the Degree in Social Education within the University of the Basque Country, took part in the present study. These students were attending the subject “Socio-educational intervention with adults, elders and people with special needs” in the year 2013-2014. 32 other students previously attending the same lessons with the same teacher were also part of the sample. 66.7% of the participants were women and 33.3% were men. 83.3% of the students usually attended the lessons, and 44.4% of them would spend 2-3 extra hours studying after leaving the college. 5.6% spent between 4 and 5 extra hours and 38.9% between 0 and 1.

3.2. Tools

An opinion questionnaire about the professors’ teaching was organized by the University of the Basque Country (University of the Basque Country, 2007). The questionnaire was based on the model “European Higher Education Area” (EHEA). The didactic approaches derived from EHEA that were compiled in this questionnaire are the following: make the students the centre of attention, encourage collaborative and teamwork, organize education according to the objectives of the learning process, strengthen the acquisition of tools for a permanent and autonomous learning process.

Different authors (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Arriba, Sáiz & Perez, 2013) suggest that surveys of opinion done with university students about the quality of higher education, are valid and reliable methods to obtain results related to a self-perception of the students about their own teaching-learning process. Arriba, Sáiz and Perez (2013) consider the consistency of the scale, and extract two factors to explain the variance of 65.5%: the self-perception of motivation towards the subjects and the self-perception of workload. In other words, the motivation towards the subjects and the results of the learning process. Therefore, the data results relevant, as the results of the enquiry turn into the source of information to know if the professor is able to motivate his/her students using the service-learning methodology. The perception the students can have about the teaching-learning process is also relevant as it is a key factor within the results of the learning process (Arriba et al, 2011). Even though these enquiries are internationally used to evaluate the teaching process of university professors (Muñoz et al, 2011), and although they are usually used as feedback for the professors to reorientate their teaching methodology (Lawall, 1998), they have also been used as a source of information to measure the satisfaction of a subject in his/her teaching-learning process (Perez, Pers, Alonso & Ferrero, 2012), and the evaluation of innovation utilized by university professors (Cruz, Benito, Cáceres & Alba, 2007) or by faculties (Yarmohammadi et al., 2013).

This tool has 25 items (1 to 5 Likert type) arranged in three different blocks: data to contextualize the group of students, students self-assessments and opinion about professors’ teaching. Within this last block different aspects have been compiled: the teaching planning, the teaching methodology, the teaching expound on, the interaction with students, evaluation of the learning process and the general satisfaction. The items are Likert type with 5 different values (1=in total disagreement, 2=disagree, 3=agree, 4=quite agree, 5=totally agree) and another box for NA (Not applicable).

In this study only items related to data compiled from the contextualization of the group of students and the opinion about the professor’s teaching have been considered. Within the last block, data related to the teaching planning, the teaching methodology and the evaluation of the learning process and the general satisfaction, has also been considered.

3.3. Design and procedures

The present study uses a descriptive methodology. The students filled this questionnaire the last day of class in about 15/20 minutes. The data analysis was performed using the statistical program SPSS 20.0.

4. Results

In chart 1, averages of the planning of the subject taught in to different classes are displayed: those students who attended the lessons using a SL methodology, and those who did not.

Chart 1. Students Opinion about the teaching planning

	Subject with SL Methodology	Subject without SL Methodology
	M	M
The teaching-learning methods adapt to; the characteristics of the group of students	3.5	3.8
The teaching-learning methods adapt to; the subject	3.5	4.0
The teaching-learning methods adapt to; our learning necessities	3.3	3.7
The practical activities proposed by the professor make easier the learning of the theoretical contents and vice-versa	3.7	4.1

Regarding the different elements used to evaluate the teaching planning, we observe that the averages were higher when the subject was taught through SL methodology. We can affirm therefore that the teaching learning methods adapt better to the characteristics of the students (M=3.8), to the subject (M=4.0) and to the learning necessities of the students (3.7), when service-learning is used.

What's more, when we use this methodology, the students consider the professor's practical activities make the learning process of the theoretical content and vice-versa easier (M=4.1).

Chart 2 displays the opinion of the students about the methodology used in the subject.

Chart 2. Students' opinion about the methodology

	Subject with SL Methodology	Subject without SL Methodology
	M	M
It favours teamwork (if conditions in the classroom allow it)	4.0	4.2
It creates links between this subject and other subjects within the Degree	3.5	3.8
It guides the student' work inside and outside the classroom (tutoring, e-mail...)	3.6	3.9
It motivates students to take part in the learning process	3.4	3.8
It favours a reflexive attitude	3.6	3.8
It stimulates participation	3.6	3.9

Regarding the different elements used to evaluate the students' opinion about the teaching methodology, we can observe that when SL methodology is used the averages are also higher. Thus, we can affirm that the methodology we have used favours teamwork (M=4.2) and it also helps creating links between this subject and other subjects (M=3.8).

The use of this methodology encourages the students to have a reflexive attitude (M=3.8), and it makes them feel interested in the learning process. It also motivates the students to take part in this process (M=3.9).

The evaluation of the learning process is displayed in Chart 3.

Chart 3. Evaluation of the learning process

	Subject with SL Methodology M	Subject without SL Methodology M
In general I think he/she is a good professor	3.9	4.3

Additionally, we observe that in general when SL is used, the opinion about the professor is also better than when SL isn't used (M=4.3 vs M=3.9).

5. Conclusions

In the present paper we have studied the influence of service learning over some aspect of students' learning process –planning, methodology and evaluation-. The study was carried out by the University of the Basque Country through a survey oriented to find out the level of satisfaction of the students.

The results make us think about the existence of an improvement in the students' evaluation when this methodology is used, as the perception the students' have about the planning of the subject, the used methodologies and the evaluation of the learning process is also higher. Previous studies also suggest there is an improvement when this methodology is used (Keen & Hall). Along the same lines, different studies point out that the use of this methodology has a positive impact: in the development of critical thinking among students (Prentice & Robinson, 2010), in the motivation (Anderson, 2000; Robinson & Torres, 2007) and in the involvement (Robinson & Torres, 2007).

Regarding the limitations of this study, we should highlight the importance and need to broaden the research to other groups and subject with similar characteristics in future studies. It will also be recommended to do the same task with other subjects taking part in this process (teachers, etc.).

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