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Who learns from whom? Building up intergenerational bridges through service learning

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Abstract

One of the challenges faced by university today is how to develop in students the necessary attitudes and competences to become those leaders who will transform their social environment in the short future. An efficient professional qualification is required as well as providing them with scenarios suitable for the acquisition of social and service competences. This paper analyses the results of a project carried out by a group of engineering undergraduate students from the Catholic University of Avila in the University of Experience in Arevalo, a town in the north of Avila (Spain). The interest of this experience lies in its piloting character in our University, together with the multiple learning strategies practiced. The fact that it is the university students that teach the senior citizens offers a valuable pedagogical potential. Besides, it turned out to be a powerful bridge-building experience, strengthening intergenerational relations. Both groups benefited from this service learning project, as it is shown by the results from the surveys, open questions and students' final personal reports.

1. Introduction

The idea of designing a project to relate academic learning with social compromise comes from the desire to respond to our Institution's identity principles and mission (Catholic University of Avila, 2015) in a creative way. The challenge was how to achieve learning objectives in the subject of English and, at the same time, provide a

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specific service to a community of Spanish senior students attending classes at the so called "University of Experience". The dilemma was solved by means of a service learning (SL) project which perfectly bridged theory and practice and was pedagogically in line with the intended purpose of sharing our knowledge, serving others and also achieving learning goals. We were aware of the risks this involved. On one hand, letting university students be professors for a day and, on the other, promoting mutual empathy in both generations to benefit from the experience, learn and grow.

2. Objectives of the project

2.1. Strengthen intergenerational bounds

The rapid changes and technological development in western societies makes it difficult to bring the youth and the elderly together so as to understand one another and build a peaceful and constructive convivence. Individualism and materialism foster a "throwaway culture" where the weak, and specially senior citizens, are ignored and, very often, despised as useless. We must regain the conviction that we need one another, that we have a shared responsibility for others and the world, and that being good and decent are worth it. We should not miss out on a kind word, a smile or any small gesture which sows peace and friendship (Francis I, 2015). Intergenerational education programs that bring young people together with older adults to learn from and with one another have been receiving greater attention (Dupuis, 2002). Our SL project turned out to be a powerful means to enhance empathy and sharing between generations.

2.2. Promote Long Life Learning

Due to the extension of life expectancy and the easier access to education, an increasing number of adults and senior citizens demand the participation in programs and courses that keep them intellectually active and let them socialize and continue their personal growth. Apart from the therapeutic potential that intellectual activity has for the prevention of cognitive impairment, Alzheimer, dementia and other disorders associated to aging (Lojo Seoane et al, 2012), the willingness to continue learning and adapting to new changes attracts many retired people. By serving a community of senior citizens, university students also wished to make a contribution to the older adults' long life learning.

2.3. Offer undergraduate students the opportunity of sharing their knowledge on the English speaking countries' lifestyle and culture

One of the objectives of English in the area of attitudes is to promote respect and closeness to traditions, lifestyle and culture in the English speaking countries. The university students taking part in the project faced the challenge of teaching different aspects of this culture together with some basic vocabulary and expressions in English.

2.4. Develop speaking competence both in English and Spanish

Presentation of contents in front of an adult audience is a big challenge for young undergraduate students. Even though such presentations were made in Spanish, the fact that teams were also teaching some vocabulary and basic expressions connected to the topics, enhanced the practice of oral English as well.

2.5. Develop team work competence

Working in teams at college is a necessary requirement for students to develop teamwork competence, such an essential part of cooperative learning, which prepares future professionals for their optimal performance at work in the short term. The own nature of service learning involves cooperation, or common work with a group of colleagues and collaboration with the targeted community which receive their help (Puig Rovira et al., 2006). Specifically,

Engineering students require to be trained in the skills linked to teamwork competence so as to develop a much higher effectiveness in their future professional projects (Viles et al., 2012).

3. Methodology

The service learning project will be described in its constituent elements, in order to better understand the experience, its scope and results. It is in any case a mixed study, as it is based on quantitative and qualitative data gathered from surveys and written compositions.

3.1. Focus groups

Two focus groups were equally protagonists of the experience: College students and older adult students. The first one consisted of 22 students, coming from five different degrees of the Faculty of Sciences and Arts: Environmental Science, Agricultural Engineering, Forestry Engineering, Computer systems Engineering and Mechanical engineering. The composition by sex was mostly male (21 males and 1 female), and their ages ranged from 18 to 26 years. All of them were enrolled in a common compulsory subject: English, during the semester of fall 2015. The second group consisted of 45 students from the University of Experience in Arevalo (Ávila). They were 22 men and 23 women, aged between 55 and 75 years.

3.2. Procedure

This project was carried out during the first semester of the academic year 2015-16, and three distinct stages can be distinguished: 1) preparation 2) accomplishment 3) final assessment. The idea of designing a SL project was launched to the group of university students. It was presented as a completely voluntary project, but participation would entail up to a 1 extra point in the course final grade. It was considered as a personal challenge as well as a stimulus to improve the final grade. In the preparation work, students should be grouped into teams of 2 or 3 people, and they should do research on a topic related to English language and culture to be presented before a group of senior people at a basic level. Once students volunteered and signed up for the SL project, they were grouped in 8 teams and a list of possible topics was provided, in order to ensure a wide enough range of topics was covered and to avoid overlaps or repetitions. The Coordinator of the adult program provided some important data about the target group that was going to receive the service (number of students enrolled, age, level of studies, origin, social level). In any project learning service, it is essential to know the community in advance, so that the project is designed to respond to their real expectations and needs. Taking into account these characteristics of the target group, teams started to work on the project in small seminars after class, always with the English professor's guidance and advice. University students could ask their doubts, have their presentations and activities reviewed and receive help to develop teaching materials that were to be used in each of the sessions.

The effective realization of the project took place over four weeks, from October 13 to November 10, 2015. The eight groups chose the date and shift of their presentations, on which they could spend a maximum time of an hour. Two groups per session would participate. It was established as a requirement that, within the assigned time, the slideshow should not exceed 20 minutes, in order to spend the rest of the time in activities in which the older students could participate and show evidence of their learning. Since the University of Experience was located in Arévalo, a town 45 km away from Ávila (Spain), students travelled by train accompanied by their English professor. She would supervise the sessions, assess the groups' presentations and support with the basic infrastructure. Travelling together using public transport turned out to be highly rewarding and valuable. As all teams recognized, this was one of the keys for success, since it promoted interpersonal relations and strengthened the unity and cohesion of such an heterogeneous group of students.

Assessment was carried out in different ways, by different participants, using different tools and at different moments during the project. In table 1 all these assessment aspects are shown.

Table 1. Assessment description

Features evaluated	Subjects	Assessment Tools	Time
Teams' presentation and performance	Older adults	Questionnaire and likert scale	After every team's presentation
	University students	rubric	At the end of the SL project
	English professor	rubric	After every team's presentation
Older adults' learning	University students	Quizzes and games	During the sessions
University students' English writing	English professor	Final essay on student's personal impressions	At the end of the SL project
University students' subjective perception of their learning	English professor	Final questionnaire and likert scale	At the end of the SL project

Without this multidimensional assessment, performed diachronically by the different participants in the teaching-learning process, neither the scope nor the impact of this SL project could have been estimated. The final report in the form of written essay in English that the university students did was an essential part of the SL project. It let students reflect on their personal impressions and the impact it had on their lives. This reflective component, as all SL experts claim, is one of service learning keys (Bryant et al., 2011). On the other hand, the fact that the final report was written in the target language –English- offered the professor evidence of students' development of the written competence in the foreign language.

4. Results

In order to quantitatively measure results of the project, we will rely on the questionnaires applied both to the older adults at the end of each session and university students at the end of the project. The professor's assessment of teams' presentations and the teams' self-assessment will be also contrasted. The average grades (on a scale from 0 to 10) provided by older students to university students are shown in Fig.1. Even though there seems to be an ample difference between the scores in the graph, actually the variance is 0.03 and the population standard deviation $\sigma = 0.173$, which suggests a narrow difference in the grades provided to the 8 teams. Other influencing factor might be the variable number of senior participants in each of the four sessions ($n_1=45$, $n_2=26$, $n_3=38$, $n_4=44$).
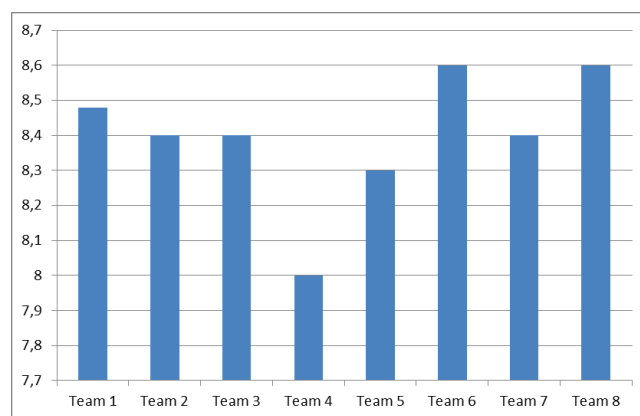

Fig. 1. Average grades given by older students to teams

The English professor and university students assessed their performance by using the same rubric. Slight differences can be found when both are compared (Fig.2). Additional intervening criteria in the university students' self-assessment and the professor's assessment such as the involvement of the whole team in the preparation of the presentation may respond for the differences in the scores when contrasted with the senior students'.
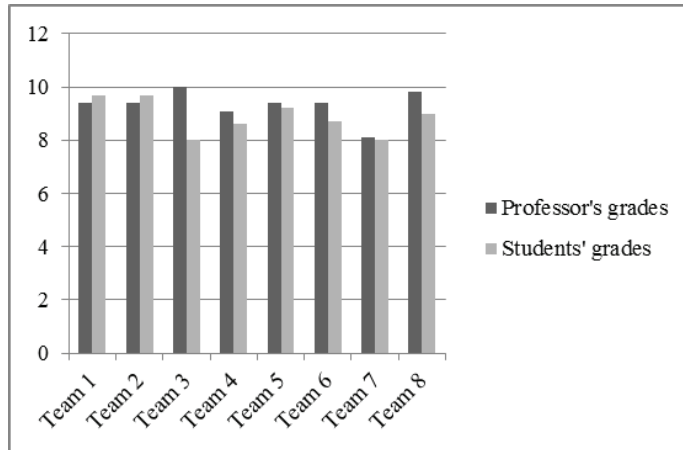

Fig. 2. Professor's assessment versus teams' self-assessment of teams' presentations

All teams except for two underscored their performances. Those who overestimated their grade was in a range ⩽ 0,3. This proves that, in general, students tend to be highly strict to themselves and undervalue their productions. By means of feedback, the professor can help them assess their performances in a more objective way, making a balance between their strengths and weaknesses.

University students' responses show a high level of satisfaction with the experience. In fact, from them a change in attitude can be inferred. If many of the Engineering students' first motivation to participate in the SL project was to improve their final mark, after the experience most of them state that they would repeat the experience even though it did not mean an extra credit. Thus, a change from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation has occurred.

Table 2. Students' responses to yes/no questions in the final survey

	YES	NO
I would repeat this experience of learning service	22 (100%)	0
I would recommend it to other students	22 (100%)	0
It would repeat it even though it did not grade for the subject	21 (95,5%)	1 (4,5%)
Letting older students and university students contribute their assessment of the SL Project is more objective and fair	22 (100%)	0

In the questions where an assessment of the competences developed in the project was required, students ranked teamwork, learning through teaching, oral expression and presentation of contents before an audience with the highest scores.

Finally, when students were asked which the values they could live with this SL project were, the most highly ranked were empathy to the elderly, generosity and mutual respect.

5. Conclusions

After the completion of this pilot experience in our University, and according to the data analyzed and the results obtained, we can conclude that the proposed objectives for this project have been achieved. Intergenerational bonds have been strengthened, and true affection and compassion that encouraged learning and mutual understanding were enhanced. Both the older adults and the University students' written comments without exception reveal not only the high degree of satisfaction and mutual benefits achieved with this SL experience, but its great educational and socializing potential. In the personal comments and final reports there are gratitude for sharing time and knowledge. Young University students agree in stating that the experience has helped them to live the values of closeness and empathy towards the elderly. It has contributed to older adults' lifelong learning in a rural area of scarce resources and cultural centers.

Young people have shared their learning with senior citizens, awakening their interest and, at the same time, reinforcing what they had already learned. "Being teachers for a day" gave college students the opportunity to put themselves into others' shoes, seeing the class "from the other side". This experience which let young and old students interact, know each other and share their time also sprang undergraduate students' creativity to make themselves be understood and to present the topics and vocabulary in an attractive and even ludic manner. Different competences have been developed, especially teamwork, and they have experienced the satisfaction and joy of sharing their knowledge with adult students willing to learn. In addition, as university students claimed, they could live values such as friendship, respect, generosity and friendship. In fact, in a very heterogeneous class group, the SL project promoted its internal cohesion.

Finally, a change has occurred in the college students' attitude towards service-learning: from being motivated almost exclusively by getting a better grade at the beginning of the experience, they turned to be motivated –as the final survey revealed- only by the satisfaction and joy of serving and making others happy. They even offered to repeat the experience even if a mark improvement did not occur.

Acknowledgements

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