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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.

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