

Service-learning - an effective pedagogy for Communication Science

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ABSTRACT. Service-learning has been proven to be one of the high-impact educational practices in higher education. Over the last decade, service-learning has gained momentum in colleges and universities across the globe, reflecting its demonstrated benefits for faculty, students, and partnering organizations. For communication science students in particular, service-learning represents a valuable pedagogy, contributing to skills development, and providing structured opportunities for reflection. Drawing on a qualitative case study exploring the integration of service-learning into a communication science curriculum, this paper seeks to present the main institutional and pedagogical challenges associated with this process for faculty and proposes evidence-based strategies to address them effectively.

Keywords: service-learning; communication; higher education; faculty development; pedagogical challenges.

1. SERVICE-LEARNING – ONE OF THE HIGH-IMPACT EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

High-impact practices usually refer to educational practices with unusually positive benefits, such as increased participation in educationally meaningful activities, improvements in in-depth learning, positive outcomes for students from historically underrepresented groups, and increased graduation rates (Bray et al., 2018).

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Service-learning (SL) has been acknowledged by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2007; Kuh, 2008) as an innovative and high-impact practice gaining attention in higher education, along with first-year seminars and experiences, internships, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, common intellectual experiences, collaborative assignments and projects, diversity/global learning, undergraduate research, and capstone courses and projects. It is well established that high-impact practices promote four major learning outcomes, namely “knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world, intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility, and integrative learning” (Schneider, 2007, p. 3). Engaging in high-impact practices benefits students and encourages gains in knowledge, skills, values, capacities, and competences, allowing students to engage locally and globally, to understand, evaluate and solve significant problems, and to interact with diverse others, therefore “getting the most out of college” (Kilgo et al., 2015). Bringle (2017) shows that integrating service-learning with other high-impact practices, such as research, study away, and internships and pre-professional courses, can produce more extensive, robust, distinctive and transformational outcomes for students than compared to traditional pedagogies. He talks about eleven different combinations, ranging from first-order high-impact practices, such as immersive service-learning, to third-order participatory community action research immersive civic internship/pre-professional, and offers relevant examples from previous research for most of them. When compared to other high-impact practices, SL has been proven to have the greatest impact on student outcomes, regardless of the bachelor student’s year of study (Finley, 2011). Where lies the added value of service-learning? Bringle (2017) considers that SL is valuable due to reflection, partnerships and focus on diversity. SL allows students to gain a deeper understanding of class content transferred into experiential learning activities outside the classroom, in different real-life settings, where they can interact directly with community partners (Brand et al., 2019). Reflection is a crucial component of high-quality service-learning projects (Lorenzo Moledo et al., 2021). Well-designed reflection activities help students connect theory with practice, integrate their own personal learning objectives into service activities, and link their contribution in SL projects to future career pursuits (Mitchell & Rost-Banik, 2019).

Service-learning is based on experiential learning, as students are required to go into their communities, identify relevant issues and community needs, partner with different organizations to tackle major problems, and connect their direct experience with course content. By applying what they learn in a real-life setting, students move from the basis of Bloom’s taxonomy of learning to the top levels. Working with and for the community allows students to gain valuable experience that represents “good preparation for citizenship, work, and life” (Kuh, 2008, p. 1).

As a form of civic engagement, service-learning is defined as “a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in mutually identified and organized service activities that benefit the community, and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility” (Bringle & Clayton, 2012, p. 105, adapted from Bringle & Hatcher, 1996, p. 222). SL can take the form of direct service, indirect service, research, or advocacy (Bringle et al, 2016). The European Association of Service-Learning in Higher Education (EASLHE) mirrors this definition by describing Service-Learning (SL) as “an experiential educational method in which students engage in community service, reflect critically on this experience, and learn from it personally, socially and academically” (www.easlhe.eu, 2021).

While Robert Bringle (2009) insists on the importance of implementing credited SL activities in higher education, as they increase students motivation and reflect the institutional commitment to integrating these high-impact practices into curricula, Furco and Norvell (2019) stress upon the fact that SL tends to be value-laden, therefore we should pay attention to how authors from different backgrounds have defined this term, as it reflects the position and the research priorities of each country and region where it has emerged.

In the US, where both researchers have activated for most of their careers, SL has a longstanding tradition, and most universities have embraced a scholarship of engagement (Boyer, 1990). The movement started around the 1980s, when universities were concerned with the quality of education and educational reforms advocating for social changes and volunteering, student disengagement from their communities, and lack of preparedness towards participation in the civic life of their communities (Ehrlich, 1999; Hepburn, 1997). Service-learning was promoted as an answer to these concerns and proved to be an inspired decision as more than 1100 institutions have become members of the Campus Compact initiative (Campus Compact, 2016), and the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement was established. It soon became the most valuable acknowledgment and ranking of university efforts in this area. Regional accreditation standards and research grant criteria are considering SL practices and other forms of engaged research and teaching, and these practices are recognized even by popular rating systems, like US News and World Report (Gelmon et al., 2006). In South America, due to its roots in the catholic tradition infused with Paolo Freire’s pedagogy (Freire, 1970), the SL methodology spread organically and was frequently associated with the idea of philanthropy and volunteerism. In the African context, SL has evolved in close

connection with the social reconstruction of the state, as a community development, where universities are key actors in addressing inequality through civic engagement and collaborative partnerships (Stanton & Erasmus, 2013). In many Asian countries, SL is similarly considered as a mechanism for civic formation and nation and democratic-building (Ma, 2024).

Unlike North and South America where SL has been developed for the last four decades, in Europe, SL emerged later, starting with the beginning of the twenty-first century (Compare et al., 2024). In 2019, the European SL association (EASLHE) was created, with the intention to facilitate and stimulate the SL institutionalization process and to generate national networks while increasing the interconnectedness among European scholars (Aramburuzabala et al., 2019). The Central and Southeastern European Network, a collaborative informal platform was established with the support of CLAYSS in 2016, which advanced the SL agenda in the region through training and development, technical assistance, publications, and academic events (Avruj & Batista, 2022, in Gregorova et al., 2024).

Much of the work in the European area has been influenced by the American tradition of SL. In Eastern Europe, SL has become an awareness tool for promoting understanding of the role of education in democracy (Gelmon et al., 2006). Separately or together with other educational practices, such as first-year seminars, learning communities, and undergraduate research, SL results in increased faculty and peer interaction, enhanced critical thinking and writing skills, and higher levels of engagement (Brownell & Swanner, 2009). SL is considered a transformative methodology (Mezirow, 2000; Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2021), and study abroad SL has produced impressive feedback from students who consider these types of educational experiences as life-changing (Kiely, 2004). The multiple benefits of SL will be presented in detail in the second section of this article.

Still, few studies have investigated the benefits of SL for Communication, Public Relations and Advertising students (Akpabio, 2012; Corbett & Kendall, 1998; Grow & Wolburg, 2005; Hettche & Clayton, 2013; Oster-Aaland, 2004; Silverman, 2007; Stevens, 2001; Zwarun, 2007). There is a general lack of studies that examine the challenges associated with the implementation of SL methodology in Romania (Rusu et al., 2014; Chiorean, 2025; Tripon & Drăghici, 2024; Pavelea & Culic, 2022), where “service-learning pedagogy still presents a novelty for many academics and students” (Ilic et al., 2021), a country that does not have a strong tradition of SL scholarship in HEI. The present study seeks to address these gaps and broaden the understanding of the challenges associated with the implementation of a SL course within one of Romania’s largest North-Western universities. We aim to bridge the knowledge gap on SL in communication-related programs, and contribute to the understanding of SL institutionalization in countries with limited SL tradition in higher education.

1.1. The value of SL for universities, instructors, community partners and students

The value of SL has been extensively documented, and several criteria have been used to assess the quality of a SL course. Most researchers have looked into course design, learning outcomes, students, instructor, and community partners (Bingle et al., 2013; Furco, 2003). Reflection is an essential part of the SL experience (Jacoby, 2015). But it would be foolish to believe that by just following these guidelines, students' outcomes will be reached equally (Steinke et al., 2002). Service-learning practice differs significantly from one course to another, depending on course design and philosophy, student experience and feedback, relationships with partners and their engagement, instructor experience and expertise, and institutional settings (Matthews et al, 2023). The requirements of SL experiences related to students' preparation for the service activities, percentage of course units dedicated to SL, the type of service, the amount of service provided, duration and intensity of service experiences are important factors to take into consideration when starting a SL course.

For **universities**, SL is a tool for attaining institutional objectives, such as social responsibility, civic engagement, outreach, assistance to local communities, crowdsourcing and fundraising (Gelmon et al., 2006). Universities adopt SL either top-down, as a reaction to educational reforms, or as part of a long-term strategy of a new managerial team, or bottom-up, initiated by champion faculty, "early adopters ("first-generation faculty"), predominantly risk-taking "visionary instructors" willing to experiment on limited resources with SL's possibilities" (Abes et al., 2002). What are the advantages for both institutions and individuals who would like to embark in these initiatives? For universities, the benefits are multiple, starting with fulfilling their triple mission and reducing the "town gown" division. Isaacson et al. (2005) argue that SL helps universities overcome perceptions of being distant or paternalistic by creating more reciprocal relationships with local communities. It enables institutions to contribute directly to community needs while still fulfilling their core educational mission.

For **instructors**, this transformative methodology can increase motivation and satisfaction, self-efficacy and sense of competence (O'Meara, 2023; Kinloch et al., 2015; Compare et al., 2024). It provides them with rich opportunities to teach in a real-world manner that has the potential to link educational content with everyday life (Watkins & Braun, 2005; Carrington et al., 2015), deeper learning and retention, more in-depth class discussion due to the increased knowledge of real contexts, transformed attitudes towards learning, and an enhanced sense of responsibility for personal development and empowerment

(Isaacson et al, 2005). Instructors usually choose one of three formats for SL courses: discipline based, problem based or project based (Tijmsma et al., 2020). SL courses enhance collaborative relationships between instructors, students and community partners who learn from each other (Compare et al, 2022). SL is a versatile methodology that can be used within a variety of disciplines, and in a diverse manner, employing students' multiple intelligence and learning strategies. It provides instructors new research opportunities, methods, and teaching activities (Soukup, 1999; Darby & Newman, 2014). But instructors' experience in SL is relevant in designing and implementing this type of high-impact practice. As Matthews et al. (2023, p. 172) show, "teaching and developing a service-learning course is an iterative and ongoing process that evolves with each implementation". Therefore, most research on instructors' motivation to engage in SL experiences present both the benefits and the challenges associated with SL methodology, usually mentioning additional time, logistics and efforts needed to implement SL projects (Abes et al., 2002; Darby & Willingham, 2022; Hou, 2010; Mayer, 2022).

For **community partners**, the success of university-community partnerships can be attributed to the four Rs described by Butin (2003): mutual respect, relevant activities for all the partners, critical reflection, and reciprocity of exchange, influence and generative transformations. Community organizations cherish the net value of service, the continuity of programs, students' and their families' support and interest, the accomplishment of their mission and the increased visibility (Isaacson et al, 2005). Community partners gain access to students' skills and knowledge (Geringer et al, 2009), which tend to be extremely important in the face of resource constraints, and contribute to students' high-quality learning experiences by fulfilling a mentoring and co-teaching role (Chika-James, Salem & Oyet, 2022; Rinaldo, Davis & Borunda, 2022).

Several meta-analyses and systematic literature reviews have documented the contribution of SL to **student** a) academic outcomes, such as increased motivation, positive attitude towards school, ability to apply knowledge in real-life settings, b) social outcomes, such as social capital development, social awareness, a deeper understanding of diversity, equity and inclusion, reduced stereotypes, c) personal outcomes, such as self-awareness, increased self-esteem, career choices, skill development in areas related to communication, conflict management, teamwork, analytical skills, and problem-solving, and d) citizenship outcomes, such as civic responsibility, participation, social justice attitudes, social responsibility (Bonastre et al., 2021; Celio et al., 2011; Compare & Albanesi, 2023; Conway, et al., 2009; Farmer & Perry, 2016; Novak et al., 2007; Salam et al, 2017; Salam et al., 2019; Warren, 2012; Yorio & Ye, 2012). Others have analyzed the positive effects of SL on students' social-emotional gains (Shapiro, 2021; York &

Fernandez, 2018), character development (Brandenberger, 2023), graduation and retention rates (Keup, 2005; Lockeman & Pelco, 2013; Matthews et al., 2015; Swail et al., 2003; Wyels & Martinez, 2024), career readiness and smoother transitions into new careers (Farmer et al., 2016), or other employment-related benefits, due to gained valuable skills that are usually not acquired in classroom (Carrington et al., 2015; Taylor & Raykov, 2014). Matthews et al. (2015, p.14) have investigated the job-related benefits of service-learning activities in college for graduates representing a sample of more than 20 majors and have shown that compared to students who have not taken the opportunity of engaging in SL activities, those who have, report receiving higher starting salaries (on average by \$6,500), receiving raises more quickly (two and a half month faster), and being more likely to have gained full-time employment in their first job (two months sooner). Therefore, Matthews and his colleagues (2015, p. 14) conclude that “although education—and SL and community engagement in particular—cannot and should not be reduced to a “dollars and cents” equation that overlooks the myriad human and personal development benefits of higher learning”, SL has some quantifiable benefits for universities and graduates.

1.2. SL in Communication science curricula

For communication science students especially, SL represents a valuable pedagogy, contributing to skills development, and providing structured opportunities for reflection. It is “a natural fit” (Isaacson et al, 2005). However, when we say communication science, we refer to the Romanian higher education institutions (HEI), where areas such as communication, journalism, advertising, and public relations are being included. We do not relate to speech communication and disorders students, who are usually assimilated to psychology or educational science in our national context, or to communications which resides in IT.

The SL methodology is incredibly adaptable and has been incorporated into a wide range of academic fields all around the world. Previous research has documented the integration of service-learning methodology into various communication programs. It has been used in Public Speaking courses (Weintroub, 1999), Communication Campaigns (Kinneck, 1999), Small Group Communication (Yelsma, 1999), Organizational Communication (O’Hara, 2001), Media Production (Keller, 1999), Mass Communication (Bachen, 1999; Crabtree, 1999), Interpersonal Communication (Culic & Pavelea, 2022; Souza, 1999; Steimel, 2013), Intercultural Communication (Blithe, 2016), Public Relations (Muturi et al., 2013; Texter & Smith, 2023), New Media (Moody & Burleston, 2013), or Journalism (Bryant et al., 2011; Clark, 2013; du Toit, 2022; Flournoy, 2007; Novek, 2023). Most faculty think of Campaign courses as suitable areas for SL. Today, several generations of graduates “are alumni of SL classes, and new variations of campaigns courses — from health

communication campaigns to fundraising campaigns and integrated marketing campaigns classes — are expanding the opportunities for SL to specialized arenas” (Kinnick, 1999). Valuable insight comes as well to communication scholars from marketing (Martin, 2015; Petkus, 2000; Hollenbeck, 2024) and business courses using SL (Pless et al, 2011, Snell et al., 2015, Grotrian-Ryan et al., 2016), as these subjects tend to be included into curricula of Communication science departments.

2. CASE STUDY – SL IN AN INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION CLASS

The application of SL in an undergraduate Interpersonal Communication course taught to first-year Communication and Advertising students at one of Romania’s largest and oldest universities is documented in this paper to provide an example of its use in the Romanian context and to present the findings from this trial. Similarly to other communication departments, the service-learning methodology was introduced to students as a new methodology aimed at boosting their employability skills by providing examples of valuable learning in real-life settings. Just like Oster-Aaland (2004) says, this initiative “had typically included but a single aficionado of service learning who served as an early adopter demonstrating to others that communication students could relate to community organizations in ways other than internships” (p. 348). The course was designed as a first-year bachelor’s degree class, mandatory for more than 300 students coming from two different majors (Communication and Advertising), and two study-tracks, regular and long-distance.

The objective of the class was to familiarize students with basic theoretical concepts and models that explain human behavior in social interaction through service-learning projects. We aimed to connect the theory of human interaction with community-based application, therefore throughout the second semester of their first-year, students have learned in class about the social self, social perception and cognition, interpersonal relationships, prosocial behavior and aggression, intimate relationships, social influence, stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination. During by-monthly seminars, they learned about service-learning methodology, met with community partners and previous students who presented their own projects as best cases, then were assigned to teams of four or five, where they have designed, discussed, implemented and evaluated a service-learning project reaching at least 30 beneficiaries. The class was based on the mixed model of SL implementation (Culcasi & Venegas, 2023), which combined the top-down pre-structured project (in collaboration with a short list of community partners, mainly alumni-led organizations), with the bottom-up perspective (allowing students to choose the social needs, activities and/or their own choice of community partners to carry out their projects).

For the vast majority of students this was their first-ever experience with SL. The Communication Department focuses mainly on research and project-based learning. Students have three semesters of practicum and are usually encouraged to undertake both individual and group research projects, to participate in conferences, to do internships, study abroad and engage in extracurricular activities. Their curriculum incorporates classes on media effects, advertising, communication, ethics, corporate social responsibility, event planning, public relations and public health campaigns.

For the semestrial projects, students followed the CLAYSS service-learning five-stage model (Sosa Rolon, 2020), including: motivation, diagnosis, project design and planning, implementation, and closure and multiplication. Students worked in teams of four or five, placed alphabetically (for regular students), and free choice for the ones enrolled in the long-distance track. The reason behind placing students in alphabetical order is that it helps in terms of logistics, it encourages them to make good use of the school semester schedule, and it replicates real-world settings of workplace environments where one does not get the opportunity to select co-workers, but rather works in preset teams. For long-distance students, as they do not have the opportunity to meet in person, flexibility of choosing teams is an advantage, since it is more difficult for them to organize in teams due to the fact that most of them fall into the non-traditional students category (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998), being typically older, independent from parents and working full time while enrolled, having dependents, raising children as single parents, or having graduated a previous major. Especially for long-distance programs, these nontraditional students are now “the exception that becomes the norm in higher education” (Dunn, 2025, January 16).

2.1. Challenges for faculty implementing SL methodology

Implementing service-learning projects is difficult not just for students, but faculty as well, as it requires time, effort and logistics. Even though it is not difficult to conceptualize “the notion of adding community service to academic courses, the practice of integrating service and learning is anything but simple” (Howard, 1998, p. 21). The experience we have had with the Interpersonal course mirrors Culcasi & Venegas’s (2023) meta-analysis findings. Based on 88 articles analyzing SL’s impact on soft-skills development in HEI, published between 2013 and 2022, the meta-analysis indicates seven main challenges of SL for faculty. We will follow these seven categories of challenges to illustrate our experience with SL methodology and to propose a series of strategies to overcome them.

1. Changing the course structure

As previously stated, the integration of SL into course work requires a series of changes to course structure. A thorough examination of similar initiatives in US institutions has guided our approach, as the university does not have a SL center or support staff for such endeavours. We had to use flexibility in course design, so we organized the seminar around SL, and dedicated the first two class meetings to introducing students to this methodology, presenting previous successful projects and inviting second-year students and partners to present their SL initiatives, answer questions and indicate resources to current students enrolled in the class. Clear articulation of SL requirements in course syllabus, including recommended readings, references, assessment criteria, and class requirements were presented to students during the first two meetings. Given the fact that this is a class on Interpersonal Communication, a number of weekly hours of interacting with the partnering organization and beneficiaries of the SL project was recommended to students.

2. Maintaining a close connection between learning and service goals

Class discussions helped students reinforce connections between course content and service experiences. But maintaining a close connection between learning and service objectives is extremely challenging with large groups of students, who have varying motivation levels, engagement and learning objectives. As the course has two instructors, one for the teaching section and another one for seminar activities, good collaboration and communication between the instructors became a priority. The previous long-term collaboration between faculty was a plus, and it became a psychological support system during the implementation phase, when tasks diversified and students' needs became prominent. To reinforce the connection between course content and service experiences, the instructors used class discussion, periodic check-ins with the student teams, and structured-reflection prompts at the seminar to track student progress. Tackling challenges encountered by students and addressing them during seminars helped faculty monitor the varying degrees of student engagement, and class discussions deepen student understanding of how theory applies to real life.

3. Structuring or accompanying partners

Instructor and community partners' connection is challenging, since when one is working with large groups of students such as in this case, it is extremely difficult to manage the relationship with various community partners, and it requires a consistent amount of time and energy. Cyclical partnerships greatly lessen the amount of time and effort faculty spend overseeing SL courses (Hollenbeck, 2024). Based on instructors' personal network, we have established

connections before the beginning of the semester activity mainly with alumni, who are accustomed to communication curricula, program requirements, students' skills level and expectations. They acted as mentors for students and have guided their steps into the SL projects, thus also reducing instructor workload. Continuing previous partnerships with more than half of the previous partners has allowed us to provide diverse partnerships for almost two-thirds of the students' body. The remaining 35% were given a list of community organizations from which they could choose to contact for their project, according to team members' own interests and selected topic. One particular challenge was related to competing teams of students choosing the same partnering organizations. Continuous debriefs during seminars helped normalize student expectations and provided opportunities to include topics like social comparison, fear of missing out and self-esteem to the conversation. Communication with partners enabled faculty to keep track of students' progress and anticipate potential problems. Ongoing communication has been maintained either face-to-face or through Zoom meetings, phone calls or emails. However, developing a dedicated institutional infrastructure for SL for coordinating partnerships, supporting faculty and ensuring equitable distribution of students across organizations would greatly facilitate the process and will contribute to more consistent and high-quality SL experiences for students.

4. Employing different assessment strategies

Diverse assessment strategies have been employed. Attendance and active participation in class was encouraged and constituted a bonus. Half of the final grade was a written multiple-questions exam, assessing the learning part, and half was the service-learning project. Details and specific expectations for the service activities were planned and articulated. As mentioned before, students had three monthly assignments during the semester: one individual, and two team assignments. Also, three different points of data collection were used for a research project that students were encouraged to complete, of which the last one dealt entirely with reflection prompts. The DEAL model of reflection (Ash & Clayton, 2009) guided class conversations with students throughout the entire semester. Diversifying the assessment criteria and designing a clear rubric allowed faculty to split workload and also to have a detailed image of students' participation, engagement and outcomes.

5. Managing students' uncertainty

Students' uncertainty was a result of a series of factors. The most notable ones were team structure, lack of knowledge and experience with SL methodology, approaching deadlines, communication with partnering organizations, and logistics.

Although grading criteria were clearly outlined in the course syllabus and reinforced during seminar sessions, students with irregular attendance often faced information overload, which intensified their stress levels.

Team structure was a constant challenge. Even though we have organized students alphabetically into teams of five, flexibility and adaptability were required, as dropout rates and final lists of students were to be updated at the end of the school year, so we did not have any means of identifying students who were not actively involved in the projects. Therefore, after the first two seminars, we checked the composition of each team and in some cases reassigned students to other groups. Offering students' previous projects as best practice examples made the SL project tangible, gave them a boost of confidence and reduced the overwhelming feeling that they had too much to handle, too much information to consult. Also, by encouraging second-year students to share their honest opinion about the benefits and challenges of implementing SL projects made the whole experience more relatable.

The Q&A session at the end of each meeting has been proven to represent a good strategy for dealing with students' uncertainty. We have provided evaluation grids for the entire project and accurate instructions for all three assignments, dealing with motivation and diagnosis, planification of activities, and implementation and evaluation. As noted in earlier, implementing SL projects can be challenging for first-year students, especially if this is their first meeting with the methodology (Pavelea & Culic, 2022). For most students, the lack of knowledge regarding SL in general is an important barrier, but for those who have been involved in volunteering projects, the process might have seemed familiar. This is the reason why a short needs assessment aiming to identify students' previous experiences in either volunteering or service-learning activities has proved to be highly informative.

Communication with partners is mentioned by students as one of their main challenges, and one possible explanation could be that they tend to rely more on virtual communication and text than interpersonal communication (Hollenbeck, 2024). Even though mediated communication is more time-effective, consistent with previous studies (Schroth, 2019), we have observed that students' preferred mode of communication tends to influence their skillset, especially the adeptness in listening, questioning, intercepting conversations, problem-solving and resolving conflict, their use of language in real-workplace settings, and consequently their inability to socialize spirals into anxiety and stress. Inevitably, we have observed that current gen Z requires significant effort and time on the side of the instructors for stress management, validation, and mental health support. Faculty have to put on multiple hats when dealing with these sensitivities, to ensure students are provided the necessary support.

6. Balancing the community partners' expectations with students' skills

Team composition was extremely important for the outcome of the SL project. We encouraged students to start working on the project as soon as possible, to contact their colleagues, establish team rules and principles, assign individual roles, identify personal and group learning objectives, and normalize expectations. Time management and teamwork are usually important predictors of SL projects' success. Working in teams posed important challenges for both students and faculty, but also encouraged self-awareness and self-discovery. Students soon realized that they possess different skillsets, knowledge and values. They cannot be proficient in all areas of the SL project, therefore oftentimes faculty addressed grievances, stressed the importance of academic engagement, long-term goals and personal responsibility for managing one's own academic experience in university. The faculty encouraged students to connect this experience not just with future training in event planning, SNS management, communication strategies and other similar electives at their choice, but also with career interests, career plans and objectives.

Community partners' expectations tended to be realistic, since most of them were alumni, with a fair knowledge of communication curricula, assessment criteria, school to work transitions and gen Z profile. Still, partners' expectations tended to depend on the size of the partnering organization they represented. Most of them were NGOs, other small or medium enterprises, and few - large companies. Involving partners in students' assessment, similar to previous practicum initiatives, was challenging, but their feedback regarding students' skills, engagement level, motivation and accomplishments became a useful component of the final grades.

7. Maintaining the balance between student initiative and faculty leadership.

Faculty leadership is important as it sets the tone of the SL projects. Ideally, faculty would take part in most of the SL activities together with students, as their guidance and engagement has been proven to be a strong predictor for students' met objectives and for the quality of reflection. Given the fact that our class consisted of more than 300 students, it would have been almost impossible to join all their initiatives, due to time constraints. Students' initiatives were encouraged and faculty monitoring was implemented mostly during seminar activities and online check-in meetings. Student-led learning and collaboration between SL stakeholders was underlined. For the dissemination phase, students were encouraged to use hashtags, so that anyone could have access to the resources and outputs of their projects. Special emphasis has been put on students' empowerment and self-determination in the current academic context, guided by principles of andragogy and heutagogy.

3. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

SL is both transformative and complex—it requires thoughtful design, consistent mentoring, and adaptive logistics, significantly more workload and more risk-taking than traditional college courses (Smith-Paríolá & Gòkè-Paríolá, 2006). It is not an easy task, as it is usually designed to meet the needs of four constituents: faculty, administration, students and community partners. The benefits for all these stakeholders are noteworthy and previous literature has extensively documented them. It is not surprising that recent studies place SL among the top ten high-impact practices in HEI and the institutionalization practices of SL in academia have increased during the last decades.

Integrating SL into the curricula is easy to conceptualize, but the actual implementation of the methodology raises several challenges for faculty especially. Culcasi & Venegas's (2023) meta-analysis organizes these challenges for faculty in seven distinct categories, dealing with: changing the course structure, maintaining the connection between service and learning, working with partnering organizations, designing assessment strategies, managing students's uncertainty, balancing community partners' expectations with students' skills, and managing tension between student initiative and faculty leadership.

For each of these challenges, our experience with SL within an Interpersonal Communication course designed for Communication and Advertising students revealed several strategies for successfully grappling with them. First, changing the course structure requires faculty knowledge, experience and vision, strong intercollegiate collaboration and support from management. Other documented experiences and best practices become valuable resources, but adapting their input to local specificities is a must. For universities who have institutionalized SL practices, support teams come into place and their expertise lessens the implementation of SL methodology. Clear articulation of SL requirements in course syllabus, including recommended readings, references, assessment criteria, and class requirements are mandatory. Second, as most academics recommend, academic credit is for learning, not for service, but faculty has the autonomy to design assessment criteria that would suit best the class objectives and student outcomes. Class discussions encourage critical reflection on student learning, normalize expectations, and help faculty save time when addressing common student concerns. Third, recruiting alumni-led partnering organizations proves to be a smart decision, as they have previous experience with program requirements, curricula and students' profile, are easy to find through personal or professional networks, and are eager to give back to their alma mater. Fourth, SL might be difficult to introduce to undergraduate students, but it is an extremely versatile methodology that can be employed equally by faculty from diverse backgrounds,

and thus it is flexible and easily adaptable, even in terms of assessment criteria. Consecrated models of reflection, such as the DEAL model (Ash & Clayton, 2009), support faculty's assessment philosophy and can be incorporated into mixed assessment criteria in SL courses. Fifth, especially in an academic environment, where students compete for scholarships, internships, and jobs, faculty have to put on multiple hats, fulfill diverse roles and strive to address students' needs while lowering the uncertainty levels. They provide teaching, research, counselling, mentoring, career guidance, and several other support activities, accompanying students in their academic experience. Sixth, community partners' expectations tend to be accurate when they are alumni, but initial conversations with them before the beginning of the school semester can set the tone for the relationships with students, for the level of engagement and the magnitude of tasks required. Last, but not least, students' level of experience with SL and with university requirements in general can become a serious obstacle for designing and implementing high-quality SL projects, especially within the context of university short-term semestrial format. But introducing students to SL from freshmen level can be beneficial for institutions, as more faculty are able to relate to students previous experiences and design more meaningful project-based, experiential, or place-based learning opportunities, to name just a few.

For Communication students, SL represents a good fit, as so many other studies have shown, and we can only hope that more universities and Communication programs will embrace this methodology. We are looking forward to developing a national alliance for SL in HEI and to align our objectives to the worldwide activity of such organizations, so that more students and faculty can benefit from the experience of such initiatives.

SL is not for everyone, as it presents a series of noteworthy challenges, but the rewards for implementing such a methodology at any level of education have been documented extensively for the last five decades. Especially for HEI who make it their mission to contribute to society through education, research and community outreach, SL is here to stay. With the constant tension between two types of mindsets opposing the idealistic champions of SL to the pragmatic ranking-focused neoliberal academics of Fleming's (2021) Dark Academia, faculty have to decide which category they choose. More and more, the early-adopters, predominantly risk-taking visionary instructors willing to experiment on limited resources with service-learning possibilities (Abes, Jackson & Jones, 2002) are being replaced by less idealistic, more focused second-generation faculty, who guide their career on guaranteed outcomes and pragmatic gains, who seek tangible rewards and instant gratification. Still, SL institutionalization takes time. There are no recipes, just guidelines, and management support is crucial for faculty motivation, continuing partnerships and student engagement.

Institutionalizing SL in higher academia could encourage those who seek to employ such methodologies to make room for them and implement community outreach initiatives in their personal career plans for the benefit of universities, students, and communities.

Given all these arguments for implementing SL projects with communication science students, we agree with George Kuh (2008), Chancellor's Professor Emeritus of Higher Education Emeritus at Indiana University, when he says “When I am asked, what one thing we can do to enhance student engagement and increase student success? I now have an answer: make it possible for every student to participate in at least two high-impact activities during his or her undergraduate program, one in the first year, and one taken later in relation to the major field. The obvious choices for incoming students are first-year seminars, learning communities, and service learning” (p. 21). In today’s increasingly polarized societies, marked by fake news, misinformation and disinformation, anxiety and shifting realities, communicators' role becomes crucial. Educating caring communicators as critical reflective practitioners who work with and for their communities through SL courses incorporated in their initial training has proved to be a good decision. Institutionalizing SL and designing large scale communication departments or university strategies supported by SL centers can open the road to high-quality educational practices, designed to increase students' civic engagement in the long run and to strengthen high-impact collaborations in our communities.

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