

Developing Civic Engagement in Distance Higher Education: A Case Study of Virtual Service-Learning (vSL) Programme in Spain

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Abstract

Higher Education is demanding the need of a greater connection between its academic offer and the necessary civic engagement of the graduates. This has given Spain the opportunity, for just over a decade, to develop the methodology of service-learning, which combines both the theoretical and practical aspect of university learning with the practical development of solidarity and civic commitment of the students. At the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED, Spain) we have designed an online service-learning proposal, based on the virtual exchange which occurs between the students from the UNED and the University of Porto-Novo (Benin), requiring practical classes of Spanish. The result favours continuing with this virtual service-learning project aimed at the exchange with other universities; strengthening the planning of the training proposal for the development of ethical competence and civic engagement; the design of solidarity service action that enhances global citizenship and intercultural dialogue, consolidates digital competence, etc., all in a virtual educational environment.

Keywords: Civic engagement; Virtual Service Learning; Higher Education; Open & Distance Learning; Global Citizenship; Intercultural Dialogue

Introduction

As a result of the Bologna Process, higher education is required not only to provide quality academic preparation but also to fully respond to the social, political and economic needs of its environment. The progressive complexity of human communities therefore entails constant reflection on the functions and purposes of higher education (García-Gutiérrez & Fuentes, 2016), and on how it is essential to integrate, in its founding pillars of research and teaching, the social, political and economic demands of its environment. This state of affairs has led to the development of another pillar in universities, namely university social responsibility (USR), which seeks to guide and deploy in teaching as well as in research and innovation a greater awareness of and connection with the sustainable development of society and its natural environments (Ruiz-Corbella & Bautista-Cerro, 2016).

This outlook raises the need for a greater connection between universities' academic offerings (in terms of teaching and research) and employability and the civic engagement required of graduates. Moreover, in many cases, it has also been noted that many students are removed from professional experience for a large proportion of their studies. With this objective, and in parallel to the need to link theoretical and practical knowledge and for professional development and civic engagement, universities are developing an approach to social responsibility that banks on social innovation

that is not centred on profit but rather on promoting individuals. This focus is being crystallized in teaching methodologies that are based on and committed to civic engagement and the democratic development of societies. Innovation, academic quality and research are thereby strengthened through retaining a focus on the development of the individual, and not only on the pursuit of mere economic development.

This scenario has made it possible for Spain to introduce into the university classroom supportive service-learning (SL) over the course of more than a decade, combining both the theory-practice axis of university learning with the development of students' civic engagement and support. This methodology, which has a long track record in the international context (like the USA or the Latin-American area), is undergoing a successful stage of consolidation and progressive institutionalization in Europe, and more specifically in Spain (Aramburuzabala, Opazo & García-Gutiérrez, 2016), above all thanks to the establishment of service-learning networks in various areas (related to both teaching and research). However, all these experiences—whether they have occurred internationally or closer to home—are taking place at universities with a face-to-face method of attendance and on-site projects, even if remote and technological resources are used on some occasions.

In this context, and based on a commitment to educational innovation, as a group of professors, most of whom are affiliated with the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED), we have been considering the possibility of designing online service-learning initiatives. The origin of this initiative is a series of issues related to the development of ethical and civic competence. Is it possible to develop ethical and civic competence through virtual education? How can ethical competence and civic engagement be formed through a virtual learning environment? Is it possible to teach global citizenship within distance higher education? Would an SL project delivered by distance universities be viable? As a response to these questions, this paper presents an innovative pedagogical virtual service-learning (vSL) experience implemented at the UNED that was supported by virtual learning environments and made use of 2.0 technologies.

Our aim is to give our backing to and argue in favour of the possibility of an authentic humanist education in virtual and distance settings—one that is committed to the values of human rights and the development of a global citizenship, and one that is therefore removed from the trends of higher-education marketization, an issue that the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education has warned against in his latest reports (Singh, 2015).

The Programme for Developing Civic Engagement in the Virtual Education Environment: An Overview

Virtual Service Learning, a new proposal

We will now briefly explain the meaning of “virtual Service Learning (vSL)” in order to explain the objectives of it that are most relevant to our project. First of all, conceptually, it has been pointed out that within research on SL there is no common and universally accepted definition of it. According to Furco (2012), there is a wide variety of contexts in which SL can be developed, as well as a wide range of subjects involved. The duration of activities is also a differentiating variable. However, the lack of an express reference to virtual educational environments does not mean that they are excluded from the scope of SL. Rather, it would be more appropriate to explain why it makes sense to talk about vSL, and why it is necessary to integrate virtual elements into the development of these projects.

This conceptual opening up that allows us to talk about vSL does not mean, however, that we would accept as SL any type of practice or learning that was community based or experiential. That is why, at this point, it is essential to indicate our understanding of SL. Our departure point is the approach taken by Tapia (2005), who understands it as “a support service that is actively led by students and deliberately connected to learning content”. Our conception of vSL is also oriented toward this perspective. Indeed, we do not believe that it is necessary to establish a different definition. Instead, it is important to understand it as a different modality, in which the participation of subjects and the development of the project are technologically mediated (Waldern, McGorry & Widener, 2012). This technological mediation accompanies both learning and provision of the support service. Therefore, the definition of a “methodology that combines in a single activity the learning of content, skills and values with the realization of tasks that serve the community” (Puig Rovira, 2009, p. 9) is also perfectly acceptable for distance higher education institutions and shows that both distance and online universities can also offer SL projects using all kind of information and communication technologies available.

vSL at universities in Spain

Despite the variety of SL initiatives and programmes from Spanish universities (figure 1), there has still been none that specifically caters to students enrolled in distance higher education¹. In response to this situation, our work focused on ascertaining how virtual learning scenarios could also promote such experiences. We emphasize that in many SL programmes 2.0 technologies are used, but none of these projects are planned as a service learning project in a virtual environment and with an international view.

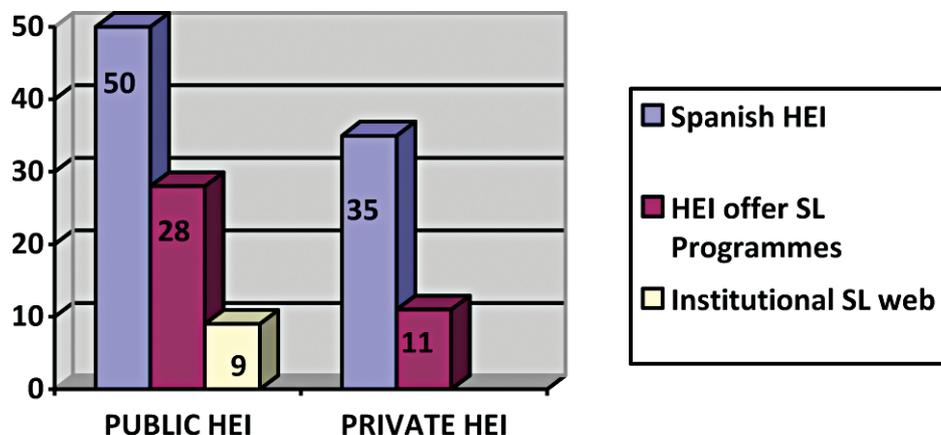


Figure 1: Presence of SL Programmes at Spanish Higher Education Institutions (HEI)

Note: Data collected in Spanish Ministry of Education & the University Network of Service Learning (2017)

We did so on the basis of our conviction that, as educators at HEI, these virtual environments should also be capable of promoting ethical and civic competence as well as methodologies for their development. Based on this perspective, and taking into account the particularities of distance education as well as the technological resources available to UNED, we created a project that contributed to the development of ethical and civic competence following SL methodology. The development of this competence was set, following the university’s

¹ There is only one distance university offering service-learning programmes out of the five Spanish online higher education institutions.

competences framework, according to two objectives: the development of global citizenship and intercultural dialogue.

From this perspective, we consider the university to be the most appropriate teaching scenario for developing in students civic engagement (McIlrath, Lyon & Munck, 2012) linked to global citizenship and intercultural dialogue. Specifically, global citizenship is obviously not considered to be a legal status. It is rather a moral practice linked to the idea of the unity of the human family, and it is therefore linked to the idea of responsibility as members of the same humanity. According to UNESCO (2015), a realization of this common membership is the first element of global citizenship. We intend to make use of 2.0 technologies to bring people and communities closer, with an awareness of the personal responsibility that we assume also in relation to geographically more distant realities. Civic engagement, following the philosophy of our time, thus extends in a cosmopolitan manner (Hansen, 2013). Moreover, the capacity for intercultural dialogue expresses a vision of the necessary internationalization of universities and their social responsibility based on a supportive approach and not only a commercial one. According to the Council of Europe (2008), intercultural dialogue allows ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural divisions to be avoided and, furthermore, allows us to advance together and recognize our different identities in a constructive and democratic manner in accordance with common universal values.

vLS project UNED – ENS

This project was designed as a modality of a SL project based on virtual exchange involving, primarily, Spanish students from UNED's Faculty of Education enrolled in fourth-year Social Education Degree and African students from the Ecole Normale Supérieure (ENS) of Porto Novo (Benin) who were enrolled in second- and third-year teacher-training courses for Spanish-language teachers. The design of the project sought to strengthen the oral proficiency of the Spanish-language students from Benin. Also, this project responds to the collaboration with the improvement of the Spanish oral expression that the students of Benin are learning, since they do not have options (scholarships and grants) to travel to Spanish speaking countries.

At the same time, the Spanish students gained a deeper understanding of other educational cultures and learnt first hand about their educational reality, pedagogical styles, methodologies, and so forth. This interaction enriched both academic communities, providing each with significant elements that supported their specific learning (Table 1).

Table 1: vSL Project Description and Methodology

	UNED	ENS
Pedagogical intention	Deeper understanding of their career's subjects as well as development of ethical and civic competences	
Service goal		Improving oral proficiency for students who have less opportunities to student mobility
Learning goal	Develop global citizenship Develop intercultural dialogue Develop communicative competence Develop technological competence Learn about other pedagogical cultures	
Community Partner		ENS (Benin) Department of Spanish Languages
Scenario	Cyberspace. Internet (use 2.0 technologies to solve partner's needs)	
Participants	4 professors 5 students (Faculty of Education)	1 professor 30 students (ENS)
Term and Year	1 st semester academic year	
Preparation	Designing a web site project. Explain and promote this project among the students Develop specific learning and service objectives for the students Prepare the content of the interviews	Explain and promote this project among the students Prepare the video presentations
Performance	Develop semi-structured interviews (1 UNED's student with 4 / 5 ENS's students) via Skype Solve technological problems, schedules ...	
Evaluation	Collect information and prepare field notes Analysis of results (professors)	
Dissemination	Certificate delivery (celebration) Preparation of reports. Video and photo for the web site.	

The project was conducted on this basis over the course of a semester (in this case, October 2015 to April 2016). Personal and group work were undertaken through a series of online interviews and meetings, in which the African students from the ENS practised their use of oral and writing Spanish with native speakers, and in which the Spanish students gained a deeper understanding based on an intercultural perspective of the content of the subjects that they were studying. Each group of students (a total of thirty-five from the two institutions) produced interviews outlines on an autonomous basis and guided by a coordinator, and they planned and agreed upon a schedule for sessions, as well as upon the technological means to be used (essentially the messaging programs Skype and Whatsapp, as well as email (Table 2).

Table 2: Media used by the Project participants

Social Media					
Communication paths		Students		Professor	
		UNED 5	ENS 30	UNED 4	ENS 1
Communication	Skype	x	x		
	WhatsApp	x	x		
	Email	x		x	x
Presentation	Video by smartphone		x	x	
Dissemination	Web site			x	

Specifically, the Spanish students prepared the content of the interviews, which focused on the educational issues of their course units. Beforehand, the African students had recorded a brief video presentation in which they indicated their interests with respect to the Spanish language. These videos and more relevant project information were made available on the project's website (www.uned.es/aps). Both groups analysed and solved problems that arose during the semester. The problems were above all technical ones (lack of Internet access, lack of devices from which to establish a connection, and so forth), which indicates the digital divide between different regions of the globe. The teaching staff involved in the project limited itself to facilitating and organizing contact between the different groups of students, and to explaining the purpose of this methodology and online meetings and interviews. We must emphasize that, as is understood in SL, students are the real protagonists of this educational activity.

First learning outcomes from this vSL project

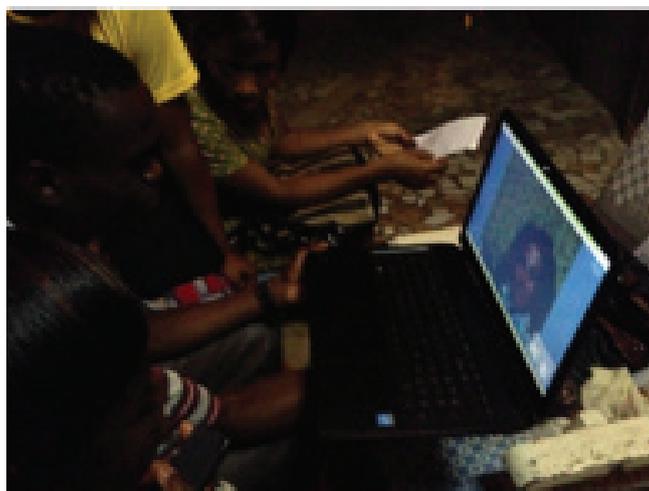
One of the most problematic aspects that we encountered (and that we have not yet solved) in the development of the project has been how to measure and/or evaluate acquired learning outcomes when they are of a moral and civic nature. Approaching the evaluation of ethical and civic competence is an unresolved issue: Is it measurable, and if so, how? First of all, it would be necessary to clarify the specific nature of the ethical-civic learning (virtues, abilities and competences) and, second, it would be necessary to identify the best way to measure them (García Amilburu, 2015; Curren & Kotzee, 2014). Specifically, in this edition of the project we took the view that the best way to access this learning experience would be a narrative method—that is, the students themselves would tell us, through a semi-structured report, about their own experiences. In this way, the students collected the information and their experience in a descriptive and reflective way in their field notes.

In terms of learning outcomes, three areas can be identified from the reports received: (1) learning related to different educational cultures, (2) learning related to the development of global citizenship and intercultural dialogue and, finally, (3) learning related to the development of communicative competence (which had not been expressly contemplated as part of the project for Spanish students). An unexpected learning outcome was related to technological competence (Table 3).

Table 3: Learning goals and outcomes in vLS project

Learning goals	Learning outcomes
Related to different educational cultures	Recognize different educational cultures Compare different educational practices
Related to the development of global citizenship and intercultural dialogue	Assess global citizenship Promote intercultural dialogue Differentiate different cultural practices
Related to the development of communicative competence	Implement the communicative competence in an intercultural scenario Demonstrate ability to dialogue
Related to technological competence	Implement the technological competence Solve problems arising from the failures of virtual communication

In the first place, and although the central terms of SL are learning and service to the community, we thought that we should also attach importance to the educational relationship (a link that is both important and intangible) established. This is the link between the learners, the service “providers” and the “receivers”. We took particular care when it came to this aspect, and we tried not to create an asymmetric relationship but rather one of reciprocity. As one report indicated, “They expressed their gratitude for the familiarity and equality that we treated them with, thinking that it could be due to the prejudices that we Westerners may have towards them (FN.1, p. 12).” Moreover, the students also revealed their capacity to solve problems caused by technical difficulties. As they themselves stated: “Only private schools have technological facilities and capabilities (FN.3, p. 7)” (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: A moment of interviews: Spanish student talking with Benin’s students**

Some students brought to light how positive the exchange had been for understanding educational realities different to their own. The Spanish students were surprised that physical punishments are widely accepted in schools and that some diseases—autism or hyperactivity, for example—do not receive attention, with sufferers of them being described as “a bit crazy” (FN.1, p. 11). In addition, there were a number of issues such as unequal access to education for girls that the government has been trying to solve by funding tuition for girls but not for boys (FN.2, p. 6). Students also came up against the “digital divide,” since the students from Benin did not have computers or the Internet. Moreover, the students from Benin had the chance to find out about issues related to multiple intelligences and mindfulness as they are applied to the classroom (FN.4, p. 1). One student from Benin decided to continue investigating this subject, and she has proposed to complete her thesis on this topic (FN. Benin, p. 2). A more personal relationship emerged among students as they tried to get to know the culture and customs of each of the countries (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Moments of exchange during the online interviews

Another type of learning was related to intercultural dialogue and global citizenship. The most relevant thing for everyone involved was the dropping of prejudices, including “looking beyond” and experiencing the need to work from an intercultural perspective (FN.2, p. 13). In relation to global citizenship, we were able to identify the way in which it was defined in terms of equality: “They are citizens just as we are, and the improvement of their lives is our responsibility (...) This experience makes you responsible (FN.2, p. 14).” Another defined it as “the active participation of everyone when we get involved in jointly solving the problems affecting us (FN.3, p. 15).”

Finally, there were learning aspects related to the development of communication competences. The project aimed to offer participants from Benin interviews and dialogue in order to practice Spanish with native speakers. The students from Benin considered “classes” of this kind and hearing the “native accent” directly to be very rewarding, and they stated that they would like to continue to learn in this way (FN. Benin, p. 1). In addition, the project also helped them to understand Spanish and express themselves in it better, having attuned themselves to the different Spanish accents. One of the students wrote to his teacher, “Thank you for this experience. I was unsure about participating because I didn’t feel confident about my fluency... but Marta [a Spanish student] was a real ‘facilitator’ (FN. Benin, p. 2)”. In this regard, the project also cultivated other important elements for learning such as self-esteem and motivation. The Spanish students were also able to develop their communicative competence, though this aspect not had been contemplated as part of the project. One of the highlighted “active listening and feedback, allowing a fluent conversation with lots of participation. Objectivity in the intervention without prioritizing or imposing preferences and

interests (...), taking advantage of spontaneous interests and themes arising in communication; getting the conversation back on track, etc. (FN.3, p. 5).”

Conclusion

The main idea of a project like the one presented here is to explore its feasibility. It was not easy to create out of so many and such varied ingredients. These included: contact with a foreign university; students from two different continents; a planning of the educational offering to develop ethical competence and civic engagement; and a design of supporting service activity that took into account global citizenship and intercultural dialogue. All this had to be achieved, moreover, in a virtual and distance educational environment. For this reason, once the project was completed, we thought it would be necessary to both expand the number of participants in the experience (students and universities) and consider in more depth the elements of measurement and evaluation of results in relation to the learning and development of the supporting service.

In parallel to the educational potential that we have seen for this methodology in institutions that provide distance education, we also encountered communication-related difficulties. Hence there is a need to draw up different guides, documents and protocols that facilitate the monitoring and the development of the objectives of the project, in terms of both the students and coordination among teachers. In addition, a major constraint for the development of this type of project is the digital divide that can exist between countries. This relates not only to the availability of technical devices and media but, above all, to the speed and conditions under which the Web is accessed.

Despite the difficulties mentioned, this Project supports the possibility of promoting vSL programme, using 2.0 technologies to meet the needs of other groups, many of these located in other regions of our planet. In this new virtual scenario, distance and virtual universities have a very interesting field of action, as well as offering new learning possibilities to their students. In this way, SL methodology opens new ways of participation and formation which are unsuspected to virtual HEI.

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