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Service Learning in Medellín, Colombia: Navigating Challenges and Forging New Pathways for Sustainable Development

Abstract

This article explores the implementation of a Service Learning program at a Colombian university, emphasizing its potential to promote Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in the country. It outlines the origins of the initiative and highlights the challenges of scaling it up. After introducing the role of Service Learning in advancing ESD, the article examines how this pedagogical approach can help address critical issues in Colombia, such as inequality. The discussion concludes with an in-depth analysis of the implementation of the program at a private university, focusing on its successes, the obstacles to broader adoption, and potential strategies to overcome them.

Keywords: *Service Learning, Colombia, Action Competence, Real-world Pedagogies*

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel untersucht die Implementierung eines Service Learning-Programms an einer kolumbianischen Universität und hebt dessen Potenzial zur Förderung von Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung (BNE) im Land hervor. Er beschreibt die Ursprünge der Initiative und beleuchtet die Herausforderungen, das Programm auszuweiten. Ausgehend von der Bedeutung von Service Learning für die Förderung von BNE wird erörtert, wie dieser pädagogische Ansatz drängende Probleme in Kolumbien, wie beispielsweise Ungleichheit, angehen kann. Der Artikel schließt mit einer detaillierten Analyse der Umsetzung des Programms an einer privaten Universität, wobei der Fokus auf den Erfolgen, den Hürden für eine breitere Anwendung und den möglichen Strategien zu deren Überwindung liegt.

Schlüsselworte: *Service Learning, Kolumbien, Handlungskompetenz, lebensweltlich orientierte Pädagogik*

Service Learning: A Pathway to Advancing Education for Sustainable Development in Colombia

The illusion that development would bring wealth and abundance to all has long been dispelled. The “Great

Acceleration” of socio-economic and Earth System trends since the 1950s has revealed significant risks for the future, and the patterns of recent years have not brought sufficient clarity about the possibility of a *great decoupling* of development from environmental impacts, a crucial requirement for sustainability (Steffen et al., 2015). In light of this uncertainty, it becomes more important than ever to intensify the efforts to achieve sustainability, as has happened with the global push provided by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is based on the idea that achieving sustainable development depends on community-level social learning, where all sectors and agents of society are involved in exploring pathways to a more sustainable future (Barth & Michelsen, 2013). ESD is recognized in the SDGs, specifically in SDG4, target 4.7., which aims to ensure that in 2030 “all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including among others through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles” (United Nations, 2015, p. 17). ESD serves as a framework to promote the knowledge, skills, values, and behaviors necessary for sustainable development (UNESCO, 2020) and can thus be said to aim at cultivating sustainability competences. The global policy framework for ESD highlights the importance of tailoring educational approaches to address specific conditions, such as poverty. It also calls for a transformation in educational content and the exploration of diverse teaching methods to foster key competences for sustainability (UNESCO, 2016). In this context, Service Learning (SL) emerges as a powerful tool to advance ESD, as further discussed below, first in general terms and then specifically in relation to the Colombian case.

Service Learning and ESD

SL has been defined as a: “credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain a further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility” (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996, p. 222). As a pedagogical approach, SL immerses students in real-world experiences, enabling them to learn and grow while building empathy and contributing to positive

change within a community. In a study about SL as niche innovation for ESD in universities (Álvarez-Vanegas et al., 2024), it was found that this pedagogical strategy can play a crucial role in advancing ESD in universities through several pathways. On the one hand, SL connects students with their communities to drive positive change through interdisciplinary collaborations and partnerships with non-academic stakeholders (Helicke, 2014). SL also allows students to apply classroom knowledge in a real-world setting, developing leadership skills while earning academic credits for actively participating in community projects (Ferdiansyah et al., 2022; Preradović & Čalić, 2022; Tejedor et al., 2019). In addition, SL in universities can help promote an understanding of sustainability as a complex, value-based issue, fostering civic values, community engagement, and social change, while empowering students as equal partners in discussions and research (Deleye et al., 2019; O'Flaherty et al., 2011). Finally, SL can help transform campuses into living labs for sustainability experimentation, such as greening initiatives, which go beyond their traditional academic mandate (Barth et al., 2014).

The Colombian context

Colombia presents an interesting case for the inclusion of SL within the framework of ESD. The nation's history has been marked by conflict and significant inequalities, but at the same time, it is rich in terms of its geographical, cultural, and biological diversity. With a diverse population that includes mestizos, Indigenous people, and Afro-Colombians, it is also recognized as one of the world's megadiverse (i.e., most biodiverse) countries in the world (Álvarez et al., 2021; Rodríguez-Zapata & Ruiz-Agudelo, 2021). As with other public services, education and universities in Colombia have fallen into a *public goods trap* (Cárdenas Campo et al., 2021). A public goods trap describes a systemic situation where individuals turn to private alternatives due to inadequate provision of public goods. As a result, the demand for government-provided goods is reduced, which in turn leads to a reduction in government provision of public goods due to increased reliance on private alternatives (Fergusson, 2019). In a highly unequal context (Chancel et al., 2022), the impact of this trap becomes more severe, as the concentration of economic power and political influence promotes private provision, further reducing interest in enhancing the availability and quality of education and other public goods. While about 30% of education is privately managed in OECD countries, in Colombia (also an OECD member), this percentage increases to 47% (OECD, 2016).

There have been significant efforts to reduce inequality and increase the quality of education in Colombia (including the goal of contributing to peacebuilding in the country) but there are still substantial challenges remain to be addressed (Díaz Monsalve et al., 2021). Despite being acknowledged for advancing citizens' rights and participation, and although considerable legislative strides in the socio-environmental sphere have been made, numerous elements of the Colombian Constitution and the National Policy for Environmental Education are ignored in practice. The nation grapples with ecological issues, including soil, water, air pollution, and deforestation. At the same time, it faces significant socio-economic challenges

related to violence, conflict, poverty, and inequality, including educational disparities, on the socioeconomic front. Furthermore, when considering the intersection of participation and ecology, it is crucial to highlight that Colombia is one of the most dangerous places in the world for environmentalists (Le Billon & Lujala, 2020).

Our experience with Service Learning at Universidad EAFIT

Universidad EAFIT (or simply, EAFIT), a private institution based in Medellín, Colombia, was established in 1960. It currently offers twenty-five undergraduate programs, around forty master's programs, and six doctoral programs. While the tensions between public and private education should not be ignored, it is also necessary to question whether private education is inherently opposed to equity. Can private universities help education escape the public goods trap mentioned in the previous section? If private education is oriented toward recognizing the diversity of social, ecological and economic realities within society, if it is inclusive of different social classes, and if it truly focuses on channeling resources to address the problems that burden society (including environmental issues), it can be argued that it has the potential to reduce inequalities and promote sustainability.

To achieve this, it is essential to strengthen socioeconomic diversity within private universities through full and partial scholarships (and other access tools) and to foster deep public-private synergies. But beyond scholarships, it is crucial to incorporate pedagogical strategies that bring students and faculty closer to the realities of the communities in which they live. Students (specially a privileged one) should not complete their university studies without having transformative learning experiences that expose them to different realities of their context. These are experiences where, in addition to learning the theoretical background about problems beyond their immediate environment, students can critically examine what those other challenging realities entail (to recognize their complexity), while at the same time experiencing them first hand (being present to build empathy) and discovering how contributing to solving societal problems is relevant to their own lives (i.e., finding compassion and empowerment).

As an action-oriented pedagogical approach, SL engages learners with real-life challenges faced by real individuals, enabling them to engage directly with both the people and the issues while working toward solutions. The promise of this dual benefit – addressing pressing problems while enhancing the relevance and impact of students' learning – was the driving force behind its implementation at EAFIT.

The origins and structure of the Service Learning initiative

The SL initiative at EAFIT began as a bottom-up project. Although the university aimed to promote innovation through new pedagogical strategies, none included SL or other real-world approaches. While methods like problem-based learning and case studies foster active learning, they did not guarantee direct student engagement with external communities or real-world challenges. In response, the author of this article, along

with the coordinator of the university's volunteer programs (under the EAFIT Social Department), sought ways to connect students with the communities of Medellín. This led to the partial implementation of the SL initiative in 2018, integrated into two elective courses (Sustainable Development and Ecology) attended by undergraduate students from different disciplines. The initial phase was exploratory, with students participating in volunteering programs organized in collaboration with EAFIT Social.

Following this pilot phase, the projects evolved into an option for completing the final assignment in the aforementioned elective courses, thus being explicitly integrated in their academic programs. All the projects followed the same instructions, and the same structure divided in three phases: preparation, action and reflection. In the preparation phase the details of each project were determined through discussions between the educators and community leaders considering the needs of the communities and the resources (in terms of possibilities and limitations) of the university. On the part of the students, this phase also included writing an essay about the specific topic of the project (its relevance in their region and globally, in the context of sustainability principles and the Agenda 2030). In the action phase, the students worked on-site together with the community leaders on issues such as organic waste management, increasing urban biodiversity and helping to control an invasive species, among others. Finally, in the reflection phase, the students prepared and shared with their classmates a reflection around their personal experience and the most important lessons they learned.

The impact of Service Learning

The impact of SL in EAFIT was measured in 2021 against the Action Competence for Sustainability (Álvarez-Vanegas & Volante, 2024). This assessment framework was chosen due partly to the fact that the team of educators overseeing the courses was particularly interested in examining to which extent the courses contributed to strengthen the students as change agents. One instrument found in the literature was used to assess the self-perceived action competence for sustainability. Given that it included the "willingness to act" as one of the three clusters of analysis (the other two are "knowledge about action possibilities" and "confidence in one's own influence") (Olsson et al., 2020), this framework proved to be useful. The comparison of course performance when SL was selected as the final project versus when it was not, revealed that SL significantly enhances students' willingness to act for sustainability.

Additionally, students involved in SL projects were surveyed regarding their learning experiences across cognitive, socio-emotional, and attitudinal domains – referred to as their heads, hearts, and hands (Sipos et al., 2008; UNESCO, 2017). The responses to the statements "SL helped me strengthen the concepts of the course", "SL made me more sensible to the world's socio-ecological problems" and "SL motivated me to take action to help building a more sustainable world" indicate that they highly value SL as a means to achieve more comprehensive and meaningful learning experiences (Álvarez-Vanegas & Volante, 2024). While the outcomes of the SL initiative were positive and promising, its implementation remained confined to elective courses, with limited resources allocated for essential elements such as materials and transportation. A stronger push was necessary to elevate SL to the next level.

"Ups and downs" and the path forward

SL gained significant momentum during an institutional discussion on the need to update EAFIT's graduate attributes. These attributes represent an institutional commitment to seek to ensure that all graduates, regardless of their background, interests, or degree program, "will possess, and be able to live out in the wider world, such knowledge, skills and values through their work and through their lives" (Scott, 2016, p. 20). In other words, they serve as a commitment to society, employers, and students. As EAFIT's mission at that time was to contribute to the sustainable development of humanity, it was expected that *the students' commitment to sustainability* would be embedded within the graduate attributes. This became a reality and based on the successful outcomes of previous SL projects, a new course was designed as an innovation with SL as its foundational pillar. This course was designed to be mandatory, rather than elective, ensuring that every student at EAFIT would engage in a SL project, increasing their possibilities of enhancing their willingness to act for sustainability.

However, the innovation faltered during a change of leadership at the university. Despite the new rector's interest in sustainability, the carefully crafted graduate attributes – including a *commitment to the planet* – were discarded, and the courses and strategies intended to bring them to life (including SL) were replaced by other initiatives. A key lesson is that niche educational innovations such as the one presented here must be robust to changes in university leadership in order to mature over time. During leadership transitions, there is competition between different staff-promoted niche innovations, which may survive, grow or be rejected by the management in keeping with evolving visions of university leadership.

Action- and community-oriented practices such as SL are promising routes to provide students with insights into the realities of their context. By cooperating with community leaders, students can increase their willingness to act for sustainability, which can help address environmental issues and reduce inequalities in Colombia. SL has shown the potential to cultivate sustainability competences, and their incorporation should be included as a criterion for assessing the performance and quality of universities. It should be made imperative that different courses in each discipline incorporate learning experiences that involve meaningful interaction with local communities and the ecological environment.

Although the vision of making SL a universal experience for all EAFIT students was cut short, a dedicated group of committed professors ensured that the projects continued to thrive. We are now exploring alternatives not only to sustain the SL initiative but also to scale it up and enhance its overall impact. One promising opportunity is to foster collaboration with the private sector by integrating the corporate volunteering programs of companies with university-led SL projects. This would enable the design of joint initiatives where employees from various corporations could actively contribute to projects that have a direct positive impact on society and the planet.

Many private companies invest significant resources in their volunteering programs; however, these efforts often lack a strong theoretical foundation in sustainability. By partnering with the university, companies can enrich their programs by offering their employees access to the academic knowledge and

expertise on sustainability provided by the university. This collaboration could create a mutually beneficial scenario: companies improve the effectiveness of their volunteering programs, while students from the university can participate in these projects, supported by the funds allocated to corporate volunteering, thus the financial burden on the university for these programs.

Alongside this strategy, a plan is already underway to engage more educators from different disciplines in SL projects. These educators will receive academic support to document both the process and outcomes of SL in their specific area, with the goal of producing scholarly papers in the field of ESD. With economic incentives tied to research output, incorporating SL as an innovative approach to be investigated could become more appealing to professors, encouraging their active participation in these initiatives.

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