Service Learning

Service Learning or learning by engagement represents one of the most promising methods promoting Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) but also Entrepreneurial Education (EE). It is an alternative teaching approach where students are confronted with real-world problems and try to find solutions cooperating with partners such as communities, NGOs, and companies.

Students learn and develop through engaging in concrete projects by meeting the needs of communities and making personal experiences, embedded in an academic learning environment where they can reflect upon their actions.

Phase 1 – Planning

Involvement of communities, NGOs or companies demands a well-organized preparation process. Individual consultations to introduce the purpose and design of service learning to project partners are vital. **Getting to know concrete project examples**, tasks, and possible impact of service learning projects helps to better understand, plan, and implement projects in practice.

Most important is the **creation of an inclusive space**, based on trust and continuous feedback processes between all involved stakeholders: Be open about different organizational infrastructures, resources and time frames between practice partners and lecturers. Try to communicate transparently and link different involvement of capacities into the learning process.
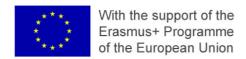
Phase 2 – Preparation

Invite students, practitioners and university partners for a kick-off event encouraging an inclusive, open atmosphere in the beginning of the course. Student groups (4-5 persons) and partners get to know each other personally and discuss their backgrounds as well as the partners' challenges. Plan such spaces for deliberation processes during all project phases and offer **coaching sessions** to foster critical dialogue between students and partners. In-class sessions should integrate scientific and non-scientific perspectives and foster co-creation processes of new knowledge.

The service learning approach often challenges students as they must **develop the project aim**, which collides with traditional educational concepts often oriented towards reproduction of knowledge. Ideally there is a reasonable balance between framing the project challenge, in terms of structuring, and leaving enough space for students' own experiences.

Phase 3 – Action

Innovative potential and creativity of project work is encouraged by interdisciplinary group settings in collaboration with reliable partners, supervised by lecturers. Meetings between students and stakeholders – ideally **at the partner's site** – are recommended on a regular basis and stimulate students' engagement during project work. This independent working atmosphere allows students to apply and test academic

knowledge in real life settings. Learning Diaries help to **promote continuous reflection** about project experiences.

Phase 4 – Reflection & Evaluation

To bring the projects to a close the implementation/learning process and the **results of the projects** should be presented. A **public event** format involving all stakeholders supports dissemination purposes and outreach in a broader context. Critical reflection and open discussions are central for the closing event.

Finally, students should submit project outputs as well as a **reflection paper** about their project. Evaluation of the process and development is recommended accordingly to participant needs and wishes, experiences of the organization team, lecturers and, especially important, the service learning partners. Particularly valuable is the continuous involvement of partners over a longer period as all stakeholders get more experienced and implementation of the format gets less complex.

"These projects are the ones that create value, not only within your studies, but also beyond. You can try out, test your skills, get introduced to working life and develop your own projects." Master student in Social Design, University of Applied Arts, Vienna

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Benefits	*Success factors*	*Challenges*
• *Creating impact with engagement* • *Joyful and creative working atmospheres* • *Promoting innovative potential via visionary thinking* • *Personal development by taking over responsibility* • *Critical reflection with community*	• *Design projects for real implementation* • *Ensure interactive and creative projects* • *Create projects with visibility* • *Offer coaching and feedback sessions* • *Be aware of peoples' needs*	• *Balance between service and learning* • *Lack of transparency and communication* • *Joint expectation management* • *Ability to deal with failures* • *Task assessment leaving enough room for creativity*