

## **Service Learning: A Philosophy and Practice to Reframe Higher Education**

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In order to answer the call of Agenda 2030 (UN, 2015), higher education must assist in giving form to a new society in which democracy is cultivated in both the minds and practices of our society. A democratic education is the answer to the challenges of contemporary society, which is characterized by indifference and an unwillingness to engage for the common good. Educational practices are often aligned to this trend so that they are planned with the aim of developing competences useful for individual success and the economic improvement of society. It is necessary to envision a new design for higher education that promotes in people the disposition to engage in the construction of a society where everyone has an equal opportunity to live a good and fulfilling life. Useful for this purpose can be a rediscovery of the classical position of Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle that present virtue and ethics as a theoretical framework for education. This framework can be used as a foundation upon which to renew academic practices by planning and designing experiences able to translate theory into actions. Service learning is an interesting model that would allow for this and would guide practices that support a democratic education informed by virtue and ethics. If useful for redirecting higher education, service learning is particularly suitable for educating teachers, the practitioners who have a great responsibility for transforming society through education. In this paper, after developing the appropriate theoretical framework, we present, as an example of service learning, the Community Research Service Learning experience carried out at the University of Verona in the Primary Teacher Education master's degree program.

*Keywords:* higher education; service learning; civic engagement; ethics; pre-service teacher training.

### **Introduction**

In order to answer the call of Agenda 2030 (UN, 2015), higher education must assist in giving form to a new society in which democracy is cultivated in both the minds and practices of our society. This democratic education is needed to reverse the drift in our contemporary society that philosophers and sociologists describe as characterized by indifference (Baumann, 2004; Morin, 2007) and a lack of awareness of others, where few feel a sense of responsibility for their neighbors (Boella, 2006, 2018; Lévinas, 1961). As public debates and speeches become increasingly more violent, action for the common good becomes more

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dormant; indeed, observing the democratic rules of coexistence is no longer viewed as necessary and honorable (Pulcini, 2009).

This way of thinking is rooted in an individualistic ethic, in which the idea of a “good life” resides in self-affirmation (Baumann, 1999). This self-serving way of interpreting life’s purpose is one of the worst risks to democracy (Beck, 1998), and it is further exacerbated by our educational system. Aligned with current trends, educational programs are designed to develop competences useful for individual success and the economic improvement of society (Mortari, 2017, p. 15), resulting in an educational system that takes the form of a “banking model” (Marullo & Edwards, 2000, p. 746).

In order to give meaning to the globalized world we now live in and compensate for the loss of significance of the common life in the global village, it is necessary to envision a new education that offers a rich, meaningful experience, able to give form to a “good person” and a “good society.” The classical ethics teachings of Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle constitute a valid theoretical framework for this purpose. Since, as Aristotle stated, the human being is a political animal, a good and complete form of education should mainly cultivate the dispositions and the competences that are necessary to give our own contribution to the construction of a society where all people can live a life worth living (Plato, *Apology of Socrates*). However, education is a practice: that is why we need to plan and design educative experiences able to translate theory into actions. According to Dewey (1938), education arises from experience, that is, through contact with the real world (and its challenges and opportunities) and reflection (that gives sense to action). In particular, this experiential education should be aimed at teaching not only technical or cognitive skills, but also the competences that prepare people to become engaged citizens (Dewey, 1916).

Service learning is a very interesting model that provides these theoretical premises with a practical and educational implementation. Many studies, in fact, show how service learning can be considered both a philosophy of education and a didactic method that can be adopted in a wide range of academic courses (see the literature review by Ubbiali, 2017).

## Policy, Ethics, and Education

### Ethics and Education

As Aristotle stated, every being tends to the good (*Nichomachean Ethics*, Book I, 1, 1094a 2–3). In particular, for the human being the good assumes the form of *eudaimonia* (*Nichomachean Ethics*, Book I, 4, 1095a 18–19), which does not simply mean “happiness,” as it is very often translated, but suggests a “good quality of the life of the soul”: the word, in fact, is composed of the Greek terms *eu*, which means “good,” and *daimon*, which means “spirit” or “soul.”

The good is the object of the research of ethics. Ethics cannot be a science because human reason cannot define with evident certainty what good is. A definitive and complete answer to the question “what is the good?” is not possible

for human beings (Murdoch, 1970, p. 93); at the same time, it is a question that cannot be circumvented, because it deals with human beings' flourishing.

Educating people, and the young in particular, to research for the good (i.e., ethics) is necessary: in fact, if education means to help people to give form to their own existence, and the good form of existence is *eudaimonia*, research for the good cannot be avoided in scholarly pathways. In this vision, education assumes the form of the Socratic *epimeleia*, in other words, the care that makes human beings flourish in all their aspects and potentialities (Plato, *Alcibiades I<sup>st</sup>*, 130e; Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, 30b; Noddings, 1984, 1992; Mortari, 2015; Mortari & Saiani, 2014).

### Policy and Education

Starting from Aristotle's famous expression that defines every human being, in his or her ontological essence, as a "political animal" (*zoonpolitikon*), Hannah Arendt affirmed that "to live an entirely private life means above all to be deprived of things essential to a truly human life" (1958, p. 58). In fact, it is only in the public realm that we can flourish as human beings because we can be enriched by the look of others and nurtured by an "objective" relationship with them "that comes from being related to and separated from them through the intermediary of a common world of things," and therefore, we can reach the "possibility of achieving something more permanent than life itself" (Arendt, 1958, p. 58).

According to Jean Luc Nancy (1996, p. 1), the human condition is a co-existence: that means that every human being is, in his or her ontological singularity, plural: the dynamics of a person's existence can occur only within a net of relationships that gives form to his or her *Lebenswelt*, i.e., his or her living environment. Every human being, in order to exist according to a human form, has to live together with others, giving form to a world that allows everybody to live a good life. At the basis of co-existence, there is the deep consciousness of a strong connection with others, which is a real dependence: the common life, or better the "res publica," comes from reciprocal dependency. The political dimension of existence not only deals with the personal realization of the single human being, but also takes the form of responsibility: if human beings become entirely private, "they are all imprisoned in the subjectivity of their own singular experience, which does not cease to be singular if the same experience is multiplied innumerable times," which also means the end of the common world because the world itself is "seen only under one aspect," representing a loss for all humankind (Arendt, 1958, p. 57).

It has been noted that human nature has an aptitude for the establishment of socio-semantic systems (see Niklas Luhmann, 1984), especially those called closed and autopoietic social subsystems, in light of the principles of Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (Maturana & Varela, 1980) and which are appropriated by Luhmann himself. The individual is understood as a psychic environment for the socio-semantic system that tends to be a constituent of the individuation process of the subjects.

To live is to coexist, but it is not only a status quo or an ontological condition. It is a fact that human beings are linked together in the world, but coexisting is an action that requires an intention, therefore becoming an ethical action. In order to orient coexistence ethically, a sort of director is necessary: this is the aim of policy. To give form to (singular or collective) life means to implement the action of care, the “factory of being,” an action that can be devoted to oneself, or to others and the world. When care is devoted to oneself, the human being gives form to his or her own uniqueness; when care is devoted to relationships, many people (in Greek, *polloi*) give form to the world, and it becomes policy.

The term *policy* simultaneously designates a practice and the wisdom that informs that practice. The principal actions that define the essence of policy are the ones Plato attributed to Zeus: the great commander in heaven, in fact, is the one who puts in order all things and cares for everything (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246e: personal translation from the original Greek version). The order is granted by justice, by the references that guarantee everyone the recognition of the measure of something; care, instead, is the condition that allows every citizen to flourish in his or her personal potentialities.

Following this vision, policy is necessary for humankind: in fact, it is a form of acting guided by the intention to create conditions for a good life, a life that allows everybody to inhabit the earth with others and live a good quality of life experienced within the soul (*eudaimonia*).

A good policy must be cultivated: it needs education, because without educated minds, there is no possibility to give form to a real human civilization. In the meantime, a good educational policy is necessary, which is a vision of education that serves as a reminder that the political aspect of every life (*bios politikos*) is essential in order to reach the good, both for every singular being and the whole of humankind. A good policy asks to cultivate minds that look for the good; it asks for an ethics and an education inspired to it.

### **A Community Vision, to Face the Crisis of Educational Policies**

Therefore, contemporary educational policy needs to be reconsidered and redesigned: in fact, educational institutions are crossing into a deep crisis. Institutional agencies have a complex status, because they should be designed following both u-topic and a-topic lines, tending to a vision of life and of the world that does not stay flattened on the present, but aims towards an ideal that can guide educators.

Instead, we are experiencing a real crisis in educational policies and politics,<sup>1</sup> because they often reflect and reinforce the (non) ethical feeling of our times. Philosophers and sociologists define our society as liberal, based on competition, where the concept of “good life” is intended as self-affirmation (Bauman, 1999); we often feel a sense of indifference towards the other’s condition (Bauman, 2001; Morin, 1994). Following this social tendency, even educative pathways tend to

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<sup>1</sup>We use the term *policy* as the vision adopted and the plan prospected in order to govern a community or an organization; we use the term *politics* to refer to the activities performed in order to give form to the policy-vision.

present an individualistic approach to learning and, in general, to life. These pathways are very often competitive, thereby nurturing that individualistic view of life that affirms that a good existence is one that does not care for others or for a common destiny. Therefore, education encourages and cultivates those skills that are useful and functional for a society that adopts an economic evaluation of the meaning of things and the search for self-affirmation.

We cannot forget that our ontological substance is relational, and every singular affirmation is related to the flourish of the others to whom we are related. This is the real wisdom of life, a wisdom that should be put at the center of political attention and, consequently, of educational policies as well. How is it possible to translate these philosophical assumptions into educational practice? This is the task of pedagogy.

In fact, pedagogy is a practical wisdom, because its epistemological foundation is rooted in looking for strategies that facilitate educational processes (Mortari, 2007): a learning through experience that starts from the daily challenges that occur in educational or cultural or community contexts and looks for answers able to orient educative actions. Following the philosophical premises just presented, we can affirm that the teleological aim of education is to cultivate the good for learners (the flourishing of everybody's potentialities) but also for the community they live in (the common good).

If curricular projects are designed following this inspiration, they become real *“laboratories of the things in life”*: places and times where it is possible to imagine new practices for a better life and a better common world; places and times where it is possible to analyze common practices, identify and support good ones, deconstruct ineffective practices, and propose new ways to improve them, while also struggling for the good.

Projects designed according to this vision cannot be confined to school classrooms and textbooks or disciplines, but must be *“community engaged,”* proposing learning that is more complex than simply knowledge or skills—learning that also facilitates care about both the individual's and the community's needs.

Moreover, as explained by Keith (2016), this vision also has important consequences for academic research that can *“go further than descriptions, although this is an essential starting point”* (p. 23) towards an *“approach that supports critical policy analysis and the ability to induce significant change”* (p. 24). An important task for pedagogy is to design, plan and evaluate practices able to give form to this philosophical vision of education and answer the challenges of our times. The practice of service learning represents a significant proposal for achieving this, as supported by the literature and by practices taking place throughout the world.

## The Proposal of Service Learning

### A Call for Educational Institutions

At all levels of education, we assist in the hyper-specialization of technology and hard sciences that develop knowledge in an exponential way but, at the same time, cultivate an analphabetism of civic competences. This is not what the educational system was designed to achieve.

The aim of educational institutions, instead, is to plan and offer quality learning experiences that enable students to develop all aspects of their personalities and to enhance their capacity to think, to feel, and to act with others in the world.

Even J. Dewey underlined that schools and universities are often artificial, where learning objectives are not in sync with real life. Therefore, in order to give form to personal life, it is necessary to design and realize learning contexts that are guided by the “learning by doing” principle (Dewey, 1938) which we can think of as “laboratories of things in life.”

Experiential learning methodologies (Kolb, 1984) define an approach that responds to this educational necessity. In his theory, Kolb affirmed that knowledge is generated through the transformation of experience: according to this vision, ideas are not merely fixed objects to be learned; they are concepts that can be formulated and reformulated through contact and engagement with real life.

There is, however, a risk involved in such activities: schools and universities could adopt such practices as an instrument to approach reality (with its challenges and problems) as a “test bench,” in other words, in an utilitarian way, aimed only at improving competences and disciplinary abilities, carrying with it the risk of nurturing the competitive and individualistic sensibility they hope to subside. As a solution, there is an approach that links schools and universities to the real world, that goes beyond this instrumental style: it is the service learning (SL) or community service learning (CSL) approach.

Service experiences, that in literature are documented at all educational levels, from kindergarten to higher education (Furco & Root, 2010; Kielsmeier, 2010; Hart & King, 2007), consider the community, where the practice is carried out, not only as a place to test skills or grasp data for research, but also as a recipient, a place where students can contribute to improving society, thanks to the mediation of disciplinary knowledge.

According to this vision, learning becomes a form of service, and service a form of learning.

Similar to problem-based learning practices, SL engages students in work that begins with the identification of problems, but instead of academic or hypothetical problems identified by teachers, the problems are real and are identified by communities (Connor-Greene, 2002); similar to the research-based learning approach, SL can be conducted like a scientific research experiment, but it can be designed to answer a relevant question proposed within the community, rather than being proposed in a textbook (Harkavy & Hartley, 2010; DePrince, Priebe, & Newton, 2011). According to this vision, the community is not considered as a

laboratory for experiments, but as a partner to help and an opportunity, for students, to learn. Moreover, Eyster and Giles (1999) stress that “using the community as a laboratory rather than working with the community on jointly useful projects” is not only not an ethical action, but it can also have negative didactical consequences, as it “may stunt the development of partnerships that offer continuous benefits to both parties. It may also ironically make it more difficult to create situations for learners that facilitate learning, critical thinking, and perspective transformation” (p. 179).

Nevertheless, SL or CSL practices share with the experiential learning theory the idea that contact with communities exposes students to problems from real life that they could never have experienced in the classroom: this reality calls upon and challenges students’ preconceptions, helping them to deconstruct and re-construct new visions about people, communities, and values, thanks to the virtuous circle between service and learning that can be built through research and reflection (Fleck, Hussey, & Rutledge-Ellison, 2017, p. 232).

Therefore, we can affirm that SL experiences are forms of “laboratory of things in life” where the complexity of life is not forgotten in all its aspects: cognitive, social, emotional, relational, ethical, and political.

### **Service Learning and Community Engagement Practices**

Service learning and community engagement practices have gradually transformed schools and universities in both North and South America, although with different connotations and philosophical references. They have also gradually been introduced throughout the rest of the world, including in Italy (Ubbiali, 2017).

The term *service learning* was first introduced in the literature by Robert Sigmon and William Ramsey to describe a project of the Oak Ridge Associated University in Tennessee in 1966; it then became more established in the 1980s (Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999).

While pedagogical attention to a possible link between service and learning began in the 1970s, political consideration of this theme found its public acknowledgement in the 1990s, when SL was quoted and sustained by federal laws, such as the *National and Community Service Act* (1990) and the *National Service Trust Act* (1993).

In Southern America, “aprendizaje-servicio solidario,” as SL is called, was born in school practice and was later theoretically developed and institutionalized in political acts (Tapia, 2010).

### **How to Define Service Learning**

The value of SL was quickly recognized and consequently spread throughout many contexts that produced many practices and theorizations, making it difficult to find a unique definition of the concept (Furco, 2003). The multiplicity of definitions, if on one hand gives value to the richness of those practices that

address different needs, on the other hand determines the scientific weakness of SL that, as an over-defined practice, is not a definite object.

Already by 1990, Kendall and Associates (1990), through a systematic literature review, counted 147 definitions of SL, prompting them to propose a “clustering” of the collection into two macro-categories: SL as a pedagogy and SL as a philosophy. The definitions that present SL as a pedagogy underline its methodological aspects: SL as a teaching and learning method that has specific intentions, requires careful organization, and involves related instruments. The definitions that speak to SL as a philosophy propose it as a style, or a way of thinking about and orienting the practices of teaching and learning, without codifying practical aspects.

In the literature, the paper by Sigmon (1979), *Service-Learning: Three Principles*, is recognized as foundational. It is considered the first publication to define and systematize SL practices. The author presented the three principles that, as a framework, define SL pedagogy in his article as follows:

*Principle one:* Those being served control the service(s) provided.

*Principle two:* Those being served become better able to serve and be served by their own actions.

*Principle three:* Those who serve also are learners and have significant control over what is expected to be learned.” (Sigmon, 1979, p. 10)

Following the publication of Sigmon’s paper, several subsequent definitions emerged. A good and influential one was cited in the United States public federal law *National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993* (p. 59) (hereinafter referred to as *Act*) as follows:

“The term “service-learning” means a method

- A. under which students or participants learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service that
  - i. is conducted in and meets the needs of a community;
  - ii. is coordinated with an elementary school, secondary school, institution of higher education, or community service program, and with the community; and
  - iii. helps foster civic responsibility; and
- B. that
  - i. is integrated into and enhances the academic curriculum of the students, or the educational components of the community service program in which the participants are enrolled; and
  - ii. provides structured time for the students or participants to reflect on the service experience.”

In general, SL is defined as a method or a way to reach academic goals linked to the service (A) and learning (B) dimensions. From the service perspective, SL is characterized as adherent to real community needs and is coordinated by an educational institution that has a specific pedagogical mission, but always in connection to and cooperation with the community. The service has an educative



aim, because it promotes civic engagement and a sense of responsibility in the students. Nevertheless, SL also represents an academic experience because it is part of a structured curriculum within schools and universities: it is an integrant part of the scholarly pathway, in that it contributes to reaching disciplinary and interdisciplinary aims typical of various curricula. As such, SL experiences enable students to put into action curricular content, knowledge, and abilities learned in their formal activities; moreover, they can learn by doing through the reflective activities that should occur after the actions in the field.

The *Act* underlines that the service has to be “thoughtfully organized”; it must be designed according to an explicit pedagogical intention and with a unitary vision of intent (mission, aims, and learning outcomes) within the curricula in which it is integrated.

Moreover, according to the *Act*, SL can also take place in community service programs, and not only in the formal ones. In fact, in the literature we can find research on such SL programs (Kackar-Cam & Schmidt, 2014); most of the papers present projects developed in kindergartens, schools, colleges, universities, or post-graduate programs.

Different authors try to define SL in a more precise way, every one deepening different aspects of its practice or philosophy. Ehrilch (1996) observed the wide variety in SL practices but noted that all were rooted in the experiential learning concept presented by Dewey. “Service-learning is the various pedagogies that link community service and academic study so that each strengthens the other. The basic theory of service-learning is Dewey’s: the interaction of knowledge and skills with experience is key to learning” (Ehrilch, 1996, p. xi).

Operational definitions of SL are also offered by some authors, such as Bringle, Hatcher, and McIntosh (2006), who are perhaps the most quoted:

“Service-learning is a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs 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.” (p. 12)

Service-learning experiences vary in typology and, according to Felten and Clayton (2011, p. 77) can “include short-term modules, semester-long activities, and multiyear as well as multicourse projects.” The authors further noted that service action can be conceived as “direct or indirect, may involve low or high levels of responsibility, and may have a research component” (2011, p. 77). Even the term *community* can identify different contexts: the university campus, the local neighborhood, the nearby municipality, another state or country, or the online environment. “The term may refer to one or more partners, from small grassroots initiatives to large nonprofit or for-profit organizations” (Felten & Clayton, 2011, p. 77).

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A brief retrospective looks at the story of SL can converge on some elements common to all visions and definitions. Service-learning experiences have to achieve the following:

"advance learning goals (academic and civic) and community purposes; involve reciprocal collaboration among students, faculty/staff, community members, community organizations, and educational institutions to fulfill shared objectives and build capacity among all partners; include critical reflection and assessment processes that are intentionally designed and facilitated to produce and document meaningful learning and service outcomes." (Felten & Clayton, 2011, p. 76)

### **A Balance between Service and Learning**

The curriculum of a formal academic institution is enriched and student learning is reinforced through the connection between academic and community aspects facilitated by service learning (Furco, 1996, p. 1); however, it is only when service and learning are designed and carried out as two dimensions in perfect equilibrium and reciprocal reinforcement that real SL is possible (Sigmon, 1994). Sigmon (1979) defined SL as a “reciprocal learning,” including the idea that there is a balance between learning goals and service outcomes. This statement represents a critical instrument for evaluating SL projects. In fact, if the projects defined as SL are many, only those in which the two dimensions are balanced and reciprocally enhancing can be defined as proper SL activities. “Many programs do not fit this balanced model; instead the service may dwarf the learning, or the academic focus dominates” (Eyler & Giles, 1999, p. 4).

The specificity of SL is its integration into the curriculum: different from other form of practice-based learning (such as cooperative learning, placement, education in the field, internship, and practical courses), SL is an educative experience that allows learning specific competences, typical of a course of study, together with civic and service engagement. Different from the extracurricular or after-school community service programs that are often proposed, SL has its power in being the framework of the curriculum: service actions in the community constitute real fieldwork that provokes learning processes.

Bringle and Hatcher (2009) proposed that the dimension of civic learning that is, more specifically, a civic engagement within a community characterizes SL.

Mendel-Reyes (1998) talked about the dimension of civic learning, referring to it as “democratic”:

"Service learning as a pedagogy for citizenship integrates the academic study of democracy and the experience of democratic community service. The guiding principle behind the Democracy Project is that ~~the~~ only truly effective education system for democracy is democracy—democratic action itself" (Mendel-Reyes, 1998, p. 38)

Multiple authors have asserted that SL activates growth in students' personal attributes (Jacoby, 1996; Lake & Jones, 2008). In particular, it contributes to the development of attitudes and values in a more efficient way than other methodologies (Delve, Mintz, & Stewart, 1990; Holsapple, 2012).

### **Educational Aims**

Many studies have been carried out on the academic aims of SL (Conner & Erickson, 2017). Authors point to various objectives, such as an increase in the sensitivity and empathic competence of participants (Bernacki & Jaeger, 2008; Wilson, 2011), engagement in challenges dealing with social justice (Eppler, Ironsmith, Dingle, & Erickson, 2011; Fenzel & Dean, 2011; Simons et al., 2011), cultural and multicultural competences (Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Meaney et al., 2008), and invalidating stereotypes (Conner, 2010; Meaney et al., 2008; Wright, Calabrese, & Henry, 2009).

These goals are not generally achieved naturally; they are attained only by acting in a community or improvising SL activities. Research affirms that practices that are not carefully prepared and carried out with attention and an ongoing supervision, being occasional or too short in time, can result in outcomes that are opposite to the teachers' intentions. Indeed, if processes are not thoughtfully planned and supervised, stereotypes about groups or the community where the SL action is carried out can be reinforced (Erickson & O'Connor, 2000; Erickson & Santmire, 2001; Hollis, 2004; Jones, 2002; Kendall & Ass., 1990; Sperling, 2007), or the will to engage in the common good can be weakened (Erickson & O'Connor, 2000; Erickson & Santmier, 2001; Houshmand et al., 2014).

### **Kinds of Service Activities**

The practices of engagement in the community can be different; therefore, the kind of services that can be carried out and, consequently, the kind of learning achieved (curricular, personal, and civic) likewise are different.

Berger (2003) grouped SL practices into four categories of service: *direct service*, *indirect service*, *advocacy*, and *research*.

Direct service activities are those practices where the students and the community are engaged in a direct relationship. Examples include tutoring for younger children and service in senior centers or homeless shelters.

Indirect service takes place when the students are not engaged in a personal relationship, but in a service to the community considered as a whole. Taking care of a park and restoring public spaces are examples of indirect service activities.

Advocacy is the term that defines activities for which service consists of informational or awareness actions about a problem of public interest. Such activities include writing letters to citizens or politicians, participating in public conferences, and organizing committees.

Service intended as research involves students in real research projects aimed at collecting and analyzing information related to problems of general interest, such as participating in studies or tests that will have an impact or disseminating such materials in the community.

## **SL for Pre-service Teachers**

### **Education of Educators: SL and Teacher Training**

If we want the ethics of service and civic engagement to spread throughout society and to facilitate the spirit of common living, we must invest in our schools. The education of educators, or teachers' training, is central to providing a good ethical experience to future generations. In fact, it is necessary that the teachers are also community engaged, able to act for a community and take on the role of actors of transformation and of social justice. Teachers, in fact, are practitioners, specifically, people who are asked to care about nourishing others in all their capabilities and to contribute to the care of the community they live in. Working with people who put care in action requires action of care, too. To educate teachers in SL involves ensuring that they become good caregivers.

Keith (2016) presented a vision of training for practitioners that she called "cultivation": a practice that is an action of care for people, "an organic process that involves a collaboration with nature – here, the gifts and qualities of practitioners" (p. 1), where the focus is not on a "transformative learning", but on a "transformative practice" (p. 15). Practice deals with contextual factors, such as "language and forms of speaking, tools, and material objects (including bodies), as well as ways of relating and exercising power, solidarity, authority, and privilege" (Keith, 2016, p. 2). Kemmis and colleagues (2014) referred to those concepts as "sayings, doings, and relating." Starting from this idea, "the actions of practitioners emerge from the interrelatedness of all aspects – present and historical, experiential and structural, individual and group-based – that enter into a given situation in which they are involved" (Keith, 2016, p. 2). Practice is not only acting, but it is also building a common language able to give voice to the sense of action, of relationships between people and the context, between people and their learning, and between different kinds of learning and of personal aspects that are involved in action.

Good practitioners look for the good, acting with wisdom. Good didactic practitioners are able to design and carry out educational pathways starting from their analysis of the context and its history, of the elements and people involved, and of their future intentions and directions. Using their wisdom, academic practitioners are able to identify challenges in contexts and, through their virtuous

habits, act with learners to orient them in looking for the good, actually for the common good.

Therefore, a serious and deep rethinking is even more important for the university that aims to educate practitioners, in particular, through pre-service teacher courses. Since the 1990s, SL has been a pedagogical model that has been applied in teacher education courses: in fact, in the literature we can find many guides offering examples of programs that combine courses and fieldwork according to the SL perspective (Erickson & Anderson, 1997; Meidi & Dowell, 2018), as well as scientific papers presenting them (Hallman & Burdick, 2011; Hart & King, 2007; He & Prater, 2014; Root, 1997; Ryan & Healy, 2009; Seban, 2013). By 2003, Anderson and Erickson (2003) counted more than 300 teacher training programs integrating SL in the curriculum.

In his literature review, Anderson (1998, p. 3) noted that the most often cited reasons argued by teacher educators for integrating SL into their courses are the following:

1. "To prepare new teachers to use service-learning as a teaching method with their K-12 students;
2. To help socialize teachers in the essential moral and civic obligations of teaching, including teaching with "care", fostering life-long civic engagement, adapting to the needs of learners with diverse and special needs, and having a commitment to advocate for social justice for children and families;
3. To enhance preservice teachers' ability to reflect critically on current educational practices and their own teaching;
4. To develop in preservice teachers the dispositions and abilities needed to easily and fully adopt other educational reforms such as authentic assessment, teaching with integrated thematic units, focusing on higher order thinking skills, and making improvements in school schedules and climate;
5. To accelerate the process of learning how to perform a variety of roles needed to meet the needs of students such as counselor, community liaison, advocate, and moral leader; and
6. To develop human service-oriented teachers who can work effectively in schools with integrated services or other social service settings."

It is interesting to point out that since this SL project is set in a course for future teachers, it has a double responsibility, one for pre-service teachers and the other for their future pupils: a sort of "education to education" to ethics and civic engagement.

Research on SL shows how it is useful to achieve multiple educational goals addressing several dimensions: cognitive, social, emotional, professional, and civic engagement (Baldwin, Buchanan, & Rudisill, 2007; Carson & Domangue, 2013; Conner, 2010; Cooper, 2007; Hale, 2008; Jones & Hill, 2001; Lake & Jones, 2008; Myers-Lipton, 1996; Theriot, 2006). In particular, SL aims at important learning outcomes for teachers: a deeper comprehension of society (Kahne &

Westheimer, 1996), the deconstruction of stereotypes and stigmas (Baldwin et al., 2007; Barton, 2000), attention towards students with different cultural backgrounds or coming from disadvantaged areas (Hunt, 2007; Carrington & Sagers, 2008), the education of pupils with special needs (Russell, 2007), the building of learning communities between pre-service and in-service teachers and the community (Swick, 2001), and awareness of social justice problems in society (Donahue, 1998; Stamopoulos, 2006). Wade (1997, p. 185–186) argued that SL is particularly suitable in teachers training because: it provides pre-service teachers with opportunities to practice reflection, therefore being able to educate their pupils to do the same; it fosters a student-centered and caring approach to teaching (in fact, also the service experience is beneficiary-centered); it develops a more complex vision of the teaching and learning practice enhancing creativity and the searching for resources in communities to develop educational projects (in fact, SL has to face the complexity of reality that cannot be learned in textbooks); and it provides pre-service teachers with the skills to develop autonomy in their teaching.

### **The University of Verona Project: A Community Research Service Learning for Pre-service Teachers**

At the University of Verona (Italy), in the combined bachelor's and master's degree program for primary school education, for the past five years we have been proposing a community service learning project as a curricular training program that pre-service teachers have to carry out in their curriculum (Mortari, 2017; Mortari, Silva, Girelli, & Ubbiali, 2017). Our choice is motivated by a philosophical view of education, as previously described, as well as by a desire to respond to the call coming from educational (academic and school) contexts of the Italian community we live in. In particular, it is urgent to orient the students' educational processes in order to prepare them to meet the complexity of the real school world; to welcome the distress signals from the school that has to face new educational challenges and where teachers often feel alone and weaponless; and to re-think the University role, as an actor able to be engaged in serving the community (Mortari & Ubbiali, 2017).

To face these urgencies, we designed and are carrying out a training model in which the needs, requests, sources, and competences of every actor interact, in order to give form to a "common good" that represents an answer for the benefit of students, faculties, schoolteachers and, eventually, schoolchildren. In this vision, student learning occurs within a service activity (towards the school, i.e., teachers' requests, and, as a consequence, children's learning) thanks to the reflective mediation of the community of practitioners (school teachers) and the supervision of the university (the faculties) that accompany them in the research process, activating a reflective posture towards their service experience.

The project of the Laboratory LeCoSe (Learning Community Service) is a Community Service Learning experience in which pre-service teachers are engaged in helping in-service teachers in their everyday educational job: this action represents curricular training for the university students and is the place

where they design and improve research that represents the basis for their dissertation.

At a political level, the University assumes the SL project as the peculiarity for the pre-service obligatory training in schools. When students engage in schools, they meet the teachers who will become their mentors in order to identify the mentors' specific needs (or desires) related to the problems or challenges of everyday life at school. This action is a real form of research because students have to interview their mentors, analyze their words, and observe their class dynamics using qualitative instruments.

After defining the educative need/desire together, and with the supervision of the academic team, students plan the interview in agreement with teachers and then perform their service in the schools. Moreover, students are invited to carry out qualitative research on their service action: this is one of the unique aspects of our project that authenticates it as community research service learning. From the point of view of *service*, students help in-service teachers in their professional lives. From the point of view of *learning*, students learn the job from an "elder" and more expert teacher, and learn to become a "practical researcher": in accordance with the European Union indications (2013, 2014) we are convinced that the research competence is fundamental for a good teacher.

All these dimensions are lived within a *community* context, made of children, in-service teachers, pre-service teachers, and academic teams.

Our project consists of six phases:

1. Period for *class observation*, familiarization with the context, and *identification of the needs of the class and teacher*: using a qualitative approach, students observe the class dynamics and interview teachers in order to identify and describe a need or a desire with which they would like to be helped. The analysis of this request is then discussed and shared with the university team, so that the problem/desire can be analyzed from different perspectives;
2. *Literature review*: students look for contributions in the literature about the identified need and the project to design;
3. *Design of an educational project*: in order to address the identified need, teachers and students plan an intervention and define both actions and roles;
4. *Service action*: after an appropriate preparation and sharing with the teachers, the students perform their project together with the teachers;
5. *Realization of research* related to their educational project: during the service actions in the class, students carry out educative research (Mortari, 2009), useful for the practice (Rorty, 1993), collecting qualitative data and analyzing them within a methodological framework built together with the academic team;
6. *Writing of the dissertation* that collects the documentation of the SL project with the analysis of the need and of the school context, the research report and the reflection on the SL experience useful for orienting the future teaching practice.

During the whole process, students are asked to nurture their reflective competence. In order to transform their action into a real educative training, students are supervised by the University team that involves them in common group reflections and asks them to keep a reflective journal in which they are required to write about not only what is happening in the pedagogical relationship, but also about their thoughts and feelings (reflective journal).

Since every class is different and has its own characteristics, and every teacher has his or her own sensibility, every expressed need is different. In consequence, every educational path is different. Students are, consequently, involved in different actions: *operational projects*, where students are asked to concretely help their mentor with a specific project during the class lessons; *indirect service*, where students are asked to make a critical analysis of the teacher's practice through accurate documentation about it or through research focusing on the teacher's pedagogical actions; *design project*, where teachers ask students and faculties to help in identifying new educative strategies in order to face very complex situations.

Our SL is also designed as a research experience, an empirical pedagogical research (Mortari, 2003, 2009) that we call *service research* (Mortari, 2003, 2017), which is research useful for teachers to improve their competences and capacity to read (and try to solve) their classes' needs and challenges. All pre-service teachers during their training carry out qualitative research, collecting and analyzing data from the class with which they are involved. Every situation has its own need and, consequently, a related research question that allows the student to understand something more of the class, the efficacy of the project carried out, and the learning of pupils. All the research reports are addressed to in-service teachers (mentors), who can use the findings in order to re-plan their educative activities or to reframe relationships with pupils.

In summary, the Community Research Service Learning experience at the University of Verona is a practice where service, learning, research, and creation of the community are strictly related and circularly involved and strengthened. As depicted in Figure 1, we can summarize the dimensions of the project as follows:

- a. *Service*: students perform a service to address a real school need or teacher's desire;
- b. *Learning*: students learn from their expert mentor;
- c. *Research*: students collect and analyze data during the service learning experience;
- d. *Learning*: students develop a research competence;
- e. *Further service*: the school receives the results and reflections of the "service research" that can be used for further improvement of future actions.

All these dimensions are nurtured by reflection and, step by step, build a real *community* between school and university, giving form to an effective political vision of education as depicted in Figure 1.



Figure 1. A Schematic Synthesis of Laboratory LeCoSe



### Conclusions

As a result of empirical and theoretical research, we can affirm that SL is a practice that has the strength to reframe higher education, orienting its practice to educate to a habit that represents a revolutionary democratic education able to give form to a new society, based on the principle of solidarity.

The SL project of the University of Verona (Italy) is constantly subject to research. In order to collect the point of view of pre-service teachers involved, we asked a sample of 45 students to write a reflective text explicating what they believed they learned through their SL experience. A qualitative analysis, carried out through a “phenomenological-grounded” method (Mortari, 2007), which is a method that interconnects the empirical phenomenological method (Giorgi, 1985) and grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), indicated that pre-service teachers believed they gained professional knowledge and skills (completion of professional profile; reflective skills; research skills; development of a service perspective), “transversal” or “personal” skills (how to learn from mistakes and manage a crisis; how to handle the unexpected; self-critical skills; supporting motivation), and inter-relational skills (collaborative skills; empathic listening; a child-centered approach) (Mortari, Silva, & Ubbiali, 2019). These findings show that SL is significant for the cultivation of teachers as good practitioners, but also as good persons and good members of community.

We are carrying out other studies, in particular, one examining the capacity of reflection growing out of the SL experience through the analysis of students’ reflective journals. Other interesting data collected and subject to another

upcoming study are the voices of in-service teachers that, as mentors, help and are helped by our students. From these stakeholders' own words, we can clearly collect satisfaction and feelings of real help and improvement of the pupils' experiences. Pre-service teachers are able to improve their academic practices, and their research helps in-service teachers to better understand their pupils and design new activities.

Data show the efficacy of the SL project in developing university students as practitioners (developing their professional competences), as people (helping them to "flourish" in important personal and interpersonal aspects), and as citizens (developing their community consciousness). Data also show the efficacy of students' activities in the educational context, that is, in the community that receives the SL experience, where people and community grow together. This demonstrates the political valence of SL: the community is strengthened, and also the mission of the University and its relationship with the community are strengthened. The University becomes an actor in the community, and the school feels co-responsible for educating pre-service teachers. Together we are putting in action the principle of care, which involves not only individuals, but institutions as well. As Ricoeur (1992, p. 172) stated, people and institutions are linked together in realizing an ethical life, since ethics is "aiming at a good life lived with and for others in just institutions." This "aiming" is not only a form of desire, but it becomes a real action that assumes the form of care: for the self, for the other, and for institutions (Ricoeur, 1990).

Care, in fact, is essential for every human being, because without care no one can flourish in his or her own existential potentialities and directions, in relationships with others, or in common research for the common good.

In fact, when care goes beyond the face-to-face relationship and reaches a world dimension and a feeling for the ethical necessity to care for a good institution able to govern it, policy takes form. Policy is a service to the world that is nurtured by continuous learning and transforms knowledge in action in order to give form to a better coexistence: a real service that becomes learning and a learning that becomes service.

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