Practices guides

How to improve Service Learning projects

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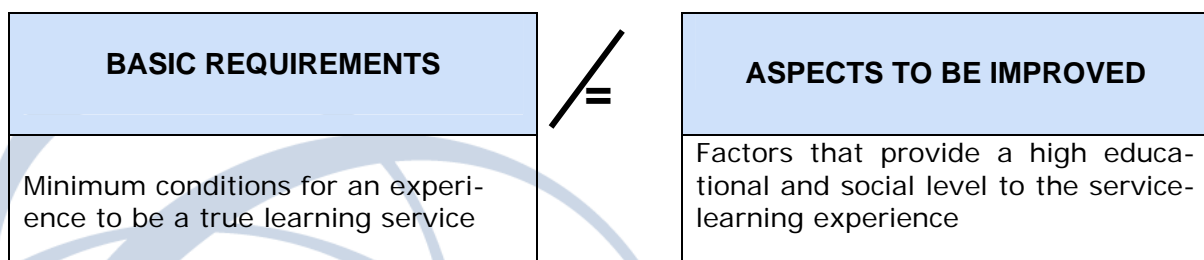
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Introduction

1. There is always room for improvement

When we undertake a project, there is a normal process of finding our feet, we may not always get our priorities right first time, we make mistakes, or simply overlook aspects which, if we had the experience, we would already know and address systematically. One legitimate concern of non-formal teachers and trainers is maximizing the quality level of educational experiences. Nevertheless, we know that it is impossible to reach the highest levels of quality at all times.

So, being realistic, we believe that it is a good idea to distinguish between **the basic requirements** of a service learning project and what might be termed the **Aspects to be improved**, which would afford it the greatest satisfaction.

However, the fact that an SL project is not "excellent" does not mean that it is not an SL project, since the process of achieving the utmost quality requires time, experience and real possibilities of changing the variables.

BASIC REQUIREMENTS	ASPECTS TO BE IMPROVED
Minimum conditions for an experience to be a true learning service	Factors that provide a high educational and social level to the service-learning experience

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2. The basic requirements: the point of departure

For a project to be regarded as a veritable SL experience, we need only address the 5 components present in the definition of this methodology:

LEARNING	+	SERVICE	+	PROJECT	+	PARTICIPATION	+	REFLECTION
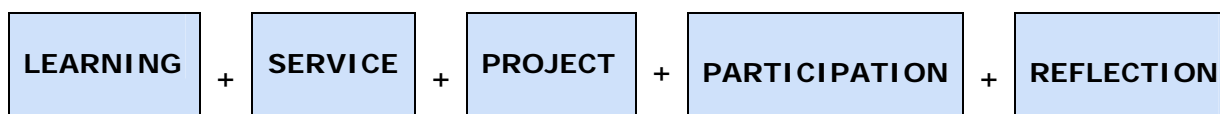
Using these few ingredients would allow us to identify service learning projects. So let us go over these five basic requirements:

Learning

There must be a clear learning associated with or related to the service, i.e., what the boys and girls can learn with the project must be evident. The educational objectives must be explicit, even if they only refer to one area of the personality (for example, values).

If the learning is only implicit (it is impossible not to learn something in a service project), we might have a good volunteer-driven project, but it would not be an SL project.

Service

There must be a service "to others" (otherness). The project must have a real impact on the immediate environment (the actual school or organization), the surrounding environment (the neighborhood, city, town) or the more global or removed environment.

A project that is of internal utility or use for the actual group, even when it is an interesting and suitable educational experience, would not exactly constitute a service learning project.

Project

It should not happen "by chance". There has to be a real "formal" educational project in the sense that it is intended to be so by the educator (planning, assessment).

Many normal situations of spontaneous learning in everyday life, those that do not have a planned training intent, are not service learning projects.

Active participation

It must entail the engagement and active participation of the boys and girls, who should be given a leading role, albeit with a degree of intensity and level pitched to suit their maturity and skills.

If there is not a high degree of participation, obligatory or forced service experiences could be called service learning.

Reflection

The boys and girls must be aware of the project, of its social utility or usefulness. They must reflect upon the learning, the process followed, the impact of the service and the personal experiences.

Reflection and awareness guarantee the learning and the real engagement of the boys and girls in the project, and facilitates the feeling of reciprocity, without which we might lapse into paternalism.

3. Aspects to be improved: another step forward

If our SL experience fulfils the basic requirements, then we can begin to think about improving it and making it more satisfactory. This is why it will be useful to take some factors or aspects that can be improved into account.

We have selected **15 aspects:**

- They are given to guide us on what direction we may take, but should not to be regarded as unmovable barriers that have to be overcome.

- They are general criteria. For certain situations, groups, territories, spheres of action, etc. they might need to be nuanced, extended, or others might need to be added.

- They may serve as pointers to draw up the list of criteria of the actual school, organization or institution.
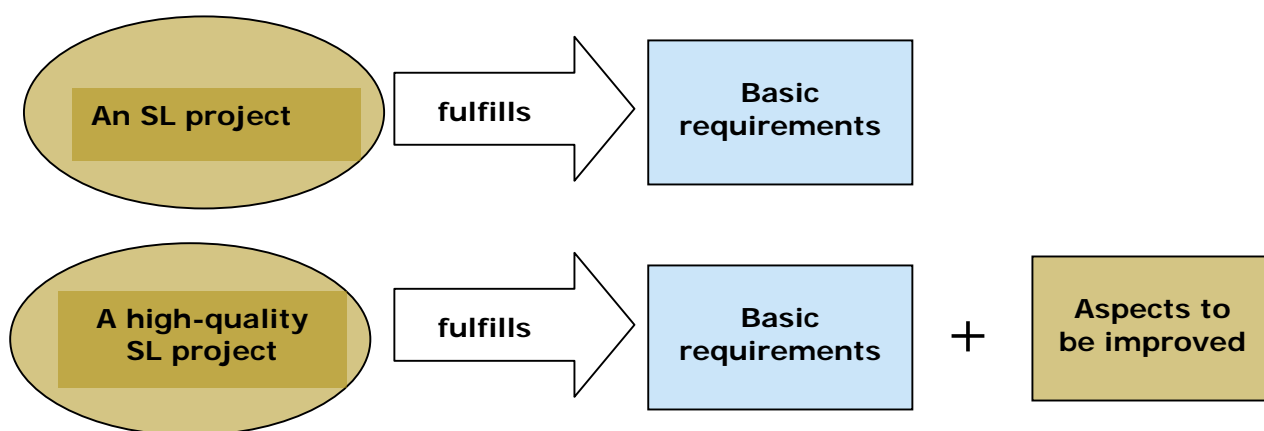
Aspects to be improved in the service learning project

1. Very close link between the learning and the service.

2. Comprehensive learning.

3. Critical thinking.

4. Pedagogical and methodological coherency and consistency.

5. Justification and social acceptance of the service.

6. Suitability, protection and safety/security.7. Networking.

1. 8. Reciprocity and respect for dignity.

9. Engagement of the Public administration.

10. Family support.

11. Balance between individual and group participation.

12. Qualified and trained educators and leaders.

13. Dissemination and communication.

14. Participative and comprehensive assessment.

15. Sustainability and continuity.

16. …

Very important: In order to choose the aspects for improvement that are best suited to your project, you must nuance, refine, deploy and add any other aspects you regard as significant.

1. Very close link between the learning and the service

The learning part and the service part of the project must be closely-knit: a good synthesis.

Try not to place learning elements "next to" service activities; we must extract the significant aspects of learning from the service.

2. Comprehensive learning

The learning pursued in the project must encompass all the education dimensions of the person: intellectual, emotional, physical, moral, taking into account the acquisition of knowledge, skills development and training in attitudes and values.

All projects, even those focused on a single type of content, skill or ability, provide the possibility of developing a wide range of different and overall training aspects.

3. Critical thinking

he project should stimulate the boys and girls to reflect critically on the inequalities, injustices and imbalances in our society.

We may tend to see the project as something isolated and anecdotal, limited to a self-enclosed "good deed". The reflection should try to go beyond the limits of the specific action being developed, always according to the group's level of maturity.

4. Pedagogical and methodological coherency and consistency

The project should be framed within or subscribe to the ideals, pedagogical focus and educational methodology of the promoting institution (school or organization).

If the project is experienced as something separate, an isolated "mushroom", or if it is very far removed from the institution's educational philosophy and style, it will never become solid or stable, no matter how interesting it may be.

5. Justification and social acceptance of the service

The project must cater to a real need, not be a substitute for the obligations of the welfare State, cause conflicts in the neighborhood, and it should be well accepted by the surrounding environment.

Without the approval and involvement of the environment (neighbors, municipal authorities, etc.) many projects will not only fail to prosper, but will actually end up generating conflicts. Care should be taken with projects that may create confrontations between or among opposing sectors of the population.

6. Suitability, protection and safety/security

The project must sit well with the intellectual, physical and emotional maturity of the boys and girls, who should be able to understand it, the emotional impact should be in tune with their maturity, their protection and security should be guaranteed, and the risks duly controlled.

Some projects that might appeal greatly to the boys and girls (for example, certain direct actions in case of fires) are out of their reach and it would not be reasonable to kindle their enthusiasm or involvement in something that is beyond their possibilities.

7. Networking

The project, promoted by the school or a social organization, should be developed in collaboration with other local organizations, associations or public institutions.

Although it is perfectly possible to develop a service project without the cooperation of other educational agents, having such support provides extra social and educational quality.

8. Reciprocity and respect for dignity

The project must be based on reciprocity and respect for the target audience, who should be treated as active subjects and not merely as the "recipients" of the altruistic deeds of the boys and girls. We should never be patronizing. We should seek to ensure that the boys and girls perceive the value the experience can bring them, so that they can feel thankful.

9. Engagement of the Public administration

The project should be supported by the public administrations and be part of the educational, social or cultural policies of the territory. The more complex and ambitious the project is, the greater will be the need to secure the cooperation of the Public administration, otherwise we may contradict or overlap or be inconsistent with public actions.

10. Family support

The project must enjoy the explicit approval of the families. And whenever possible, the families should also be involved in some way in the project, thus reinforcing the community dimension of the SL.

Although it is technically feasible to go ahead with a project without the family's being very aware of it, having them understand its value and playing a role in the motivation and perseverance of their children affords the undertaking an added value.

11. Balance between individual and group participation

The project should provide for a two-fold individual and group dimension of effort and involvement, in both the learning and service factors.

Although group projects are better, neither should the individual commitment and development of each one of the group members be allowed to pale into insignificance.

12. Qualified and trained educators and leaders

Both the educators and the people in charge of the social organizations promoting the services should have the experience and training needed to guide the project.

Many projects, particularly the more complex ones implemented by adolescents, call for very precise technical skills, nothing can be overlooked, and neither is there room for improvisation, as this could cause the project to fail.

13. Dissemination and communication

The project must be publicized and disseminated, it should not be "enclosed", there must be real opportunities of making it visibility and appreciated in the area. A good project may end up in total anonymity, which would detract from the value of the experience, reduce the possibilities of multiplying it and the positive reinforcement in the boys and girls that had participated.

14. Participative and comprehensive assessment

The assessment of the experience must take into account the assessment made of it by the target population and/or the social organization or collaborating institution, as well as the impact in and on the actual school or promoting organization.

The educator's pedagogical assessment of the levels of learning achieved by the boys and girls would not suffice; a more holistic and participation-driven approach is called for.

15. Sustainability and continuity

The project must persist over time, be diversified, multiplied or scaled up, and should not be limited to a fantastic but passing experience. An over-expensive project requiring many human resources or an over-complex organization would be impossible to maintain and would rapidly engender disenchantment.

Self-assessment and improvement

In order to improve our projects we can build a guideline or pattern to allow us to take into account aspects that can be improved, assess these factors and then address specific measures that would herald a step forward.

Below we present a very simple proposal of an assessment guideline based on the **degree of satisfaction i**n the accomplishment of the aspects that can be improved.

We propose four steps: VS (very satisfactory), QS (quite satisfactory), RU (rather unsatisfactory), VU (very unsatisfactory).

- *Very satisfactory* means that the factor has been successfully accomplished.

- *Quite satisfactory* means that the factor, albeit quite acceptable, could be improved, because the preparation or the implementation were not quite right.

- *Rather unsatisfied* means that the factor was accomplished in a mediocre or insufficient way as a result of negligent preparation or implementation.

- *Very unsatisfactory* means that the factor was not taken into account or else gave rise to specific problems in the project.

It may also occur that certain factors were unexpectedly accomplished, although this would point to a lack of perception that would have to be addressed in the next project.

To guarantee maximum objectivity in the assessment, the indicators should be cited, in other words, the specific and visible aspects which lead us to think that the factor was accomplished, thereby justifying our assessment of it. The indicators answer the question of why we are so happy or unsatisfied in each factor.

For example, if we positively rate (very satisfactory) the engagement of the Public administration, it may be because (examples): we informed the city council about our project and talked about the possibility of implementing it in the municipality with them; the councilor gave us support from the outset and furnished us with very useful tools; they publicized our project in the council newspaper and helped us to disseminate it in the Municipal School Board; the mayor participated in the end-of-project celebration, etc.

4. Quality criteria self-assessment data card

1. Very close link between the learning and the service	VS	QS	RU	VU
Indicators:				

2. Comprehensive learning	VS	QS	RU	VU
Indicators:				

3. Critical thinking	VS	QS	RU	VU
Indicators:				

4. Pedagogical and methodological coherency & consistency	VS	QS	RU	VU
Indicators:				

5. Justification and social acceptance of the service	VS	QS	RU	VU
Indicators:				

6. Suitability, protection and safety/security	VS	QS	RU	VU
Indicators:				

7. Networking	VS	QS	RU	VU
Indicators:				

8. Reciprocity and respect for dignity	VS	QS	RU	VU
Indicators:				

9. Engagement of the Public administration	VS	QS	RU	VU
Indicators:				

10. Family support	VS	QS	RU	VU
Indicators:				

11. Balance between individual and group participation	VS	QS	RU	VU
Indicators:				

12. Qualified and trained educators and leaders	VS	QS	RU	VU
Indicators:				

13. Dissemination and communication	VS	QS	RU	VU
Indicators:				

14. Participative and comprehensive assessment	VS	QS	RU	VU
Indicators:				

15. Sustainability and continuity	VS	QS	RU	VU
Indicators:				

5. Quality improvement measures data card

The results allow us to establish basically four types of measures:

- pedagogical
- organizational and management
- relational

Pedagogical improvement measures

Examples: measures for improving project design, for planning learning, assessment, tutorial relationship, group dynamics, for scheduling educational activities, educator training, etc.

Proposal:

Organizational and management improvement measures

Examples: measures for improving the project calendar, timetables, the distribution of groups and tasks, infrastructure, material, project funding, human resources, etc.

Proposal:

Relational improvement measures

Examples: measures for improving work with the social organizations, dealing with families, relationship with neighbors, with the public administrations, communication and dissemination of the project in the environment, etc.

Proposal:

Measures for improving the service

Examples: adapting the service work better to the possibilities of the children, defining tasks better, better verification of the acceptance of the services by the environment, etc.

Proposal:

Resources

6. Further reading

Basic bibliography on improvement and quality in service learning projects

THE CORPORATION FOR NATIONAL AND COMMUNITY SERVICE, THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND THE POINTS OF LIGHT FOUNDATION, THE VOLUNTEER CENTER NATIONAL. NETWORK, USA FREEDOM CORPS. *Students in Service to America Guidebook,* 2002.

PORTER HONNET, E., POULSON, S.J. *Wingspread Principles of Good Practice for Combining Service and Learning.* The Johnson Foundation, 1989.

Jeffrey Howard, (ed.). *A Faculty Casebook on Community Service Learning* University of Michigan, 1993.

ALLIANCE FOR SERVICE-LEARNING IN EDUCATIONAL REFORM. *Standards of Quality for School-Based and Community-Based Service Learning.* 1995.

YOUTH SERVICE CALIFORNIA'S. *After School Service-Learning: Four Profiles of Youth Engagement.*

TOOLE, P. *Essential Elements of Service Learning.* National Youth Leadership Council, 1998.

Websites for information and resources on quality in the service learning projects

CLAYSS Centro Latinoamericano de Aprendizaje y Servicio Solidario:

www.clayss.org

NYLC National Youth Leadership Council:

www.nylc.org

Service Learning Research and Development Center:

www.gse.berkeley.edu

National Service Learning Partnership:

www.service-learningpartnership.org

National Service Learning Clearinghouse:

www.servicelearning.org

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