

## Creating a Culture of Service through Collaborations

The true success of the educational system consists of forming citizens that can improve society, and not just their own résumé.

To improve society, the educational centre (primary, secondary school, university...) must collaborate actively with the social agents in the community: NGOs, town or city council, the neighborhood's social and educational organizations, foundations...

In a few words, it should replace a culture of working in isolation with a networking-driven approach, and service learning affords the educational centre a great many opportunities of doing so.

Service learning is not just an educational methodology, it is also tool for community development, for the cohesion of the community. A service learning project is both educational and social, a project that requires the collaboration of all the actors involved.

However, it often occurs that the educational centre is not used to networking. Working in isolation may seem easier and productive. But service learning projects that focus directly on the community need a minimum degree of networking with the social organizations and public institutions of the setting. It would make no sense to plan an intervention in a natural park without liaising with the municipal technicians in charge of this public service; neither would it make sense to program supportive activities with an old people's home without reaching an agreement with the management.

In networking, each part does what it is supposed to:

- the *educational centre* can work more on defining learning goals for the young people, and less on the socially necessary service.
- the *educational and social agents* can work more on defining the socially necessary service, and less on the young people's learning goals.

## Networking is worthwhile

Networking means cooperating. And cooperating is not the same as coordinating. We might say that coordinating is an *act of intelligence* - because lack of coordination is a threat -, while cooperating is an *act of love*, since, apart from intelligence, it requires affection and generosity.

A teacher who knows the social project of a neighborhood organization and encourages pupils to participate in it, or even adjusts their school syllabus to allow the young people to explain their participation experience, is beginning to "coordinate" with the social organization.

Cooperating is about going one step further, having all the educational centers and social organizations, foundations, NGOs and town or city councils working together, sharing the same project, although every participant does their own bit. It is more complicated, but there are very weighty reasons for attempting it:

- because networking facilitates direct awareness or knowledge of the services and resources in the area, which enables the educational centre to make the most of these resources.
- because sharing educational responsibilities is a basic strategy to rise to challenges that the educational centre cannot tackle alone.

- because student motivation and commitment improves when they come into contact with positive adult models from the community, with useful and interesting social tools.
- because it improves institutional image and the visibility of the educational centre in the neighborhood, which is particularly important in depressed or excluded social areas.
- because it improves the social impact of the educational centre in the neighborhood, as it spreads the educational culture, values and principles of the teaching staff in the community.

Therefore, although technically it is possible to engage in service learning without collaborating with another agent in the community, networking is much better.

### **Some recommendations on networking in service learning projects:**

1. *Take time to get to know each other and to know what each partner's needs and priorities are.*
2. *Before cooperating, learn how to get coordinated:* Have some previous experience, recognition or support.
3. *Link up with the right interlocutors:* Detect who leads the project in each organization.
4. *Start with small and very specific service learning projects:* Leave the ambitious projects for when you have more experience.
5. *Commit prior agreements to writing,* particularly organizational and economic questions and the distribution of responsibilities.
6. *Maintain fluent communication during the implementation of the service* in order to deal with any unexpected eventualities with the minimum degree of conflict between partners.
7. *Record the project with images* in order to evaluate, share and stabilize it.
8. *Evaluate* both the academic outcomes and the results of the service jointly.
9. *Repeat the project:* Once is not enough to consolidate networking.
10. *Disseminate the project* is also one way of consolidating networked projects.

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## **Some examples**

### **Acércate a los parques (Get closer to the parks)**

It is a project promoted by the Barcelona City Council through its Department of Parks and Gardens. It features schoolchildren aged 8 to 12 from schools near a municipal park. The municipal workers suggest that they get to know the nearby park better, learning not just about the flora and fauna, but also social uses, energy costs and budget, to create awareness of the ecological and civic value of the park. Motivated by this discovery, the children design and develop some kind of maintenance or cleaning action or to disseminate the proper use of the park in the neighborhood.

### **Conocer es amar (To know is to love)**

It is a project promoted jointly by a High School and a Special Education School. The learners aged 15 and 16 years from the High School, in their Physical Education subject, first learn and then prepare activities and psychomotor games to train the disabled children, who have severe motor and interpersonal communication deficits.

### **Blood Donation Campaign**

Every year, the Blood and Tissue Bank of Catalonia proposes a service learning project to Primary and High Schools, and non formal Education Centers, in which the boys and girls learn about blood, circulation, transfusions and hospital needs; as well as communication and advertising techniques to organize their own campaign to recruit donors in the neighborhood.

### **Cuidemos a nuestros abuelos (Let's take care of our grandparents)**

Young people from a Vocational Training School, students on the "Auxiliary Nursing Assistant" course, in response to a request from a local social organization, leverage the knowledge they have accrued to invent and give a workshop on "Looking after the elderly", for immigrants taken in by the social organization so they can find work in Spain as home helps.

### **Derecho al Derecho (The Right to the Law)**

It is a service learning project promoted by the Law School of the University of Barcelona, through which university students directly promote awareness of rights and legal resources among the more underprivileged population, and collaborate actively with the social organizations that work with these sectors. The objective is to empower these people to achieve greater independence and prominence in knowing, claiming, exercising and improving their rights as citizens.