



# Service Learning and Empathy

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# Introduction: a brief story

Sometime ago<sup>1</sup>, a school director shared her concerns with the teacher of Plastic Art expression about such conduct: lack of respect and collaboration, including signs of aggressiveness of high school students aging 15 and 16.

The teacher had employed all sorts of strategies to motivate and put the students on track, but to no avail. She felt lost. Consequently, this was causing uneasiness within the student body and thus failing to realize the full potential of their talents. Talents that were visible in their spontaneous carpet drawings and other activities. In short, it seemed that she could not bring out all the creativity of the students in the class.

The director advised the teacher to seek for outside help. It so happened that a psychologist was available in a psychiatric hospital nearby, and was delighted to look into this matter with them and collaborate with the school.

Upon listening to the situation, he took on this new challenge:

*During the conversation, the psychologist asked, 'Did you say that your students are not bad painters at all? Perhaps they could help us solve a problem: Not long ago, we inaugurated a new pavilion for children. Unfortunately, we didn't have resources to decorate it well. As it is, the pavilion is grey and dull; not appropriate to receive children with health problems. Do you think that your students will collaborate with us? Perhaps doing a mural on the wall could beautify this new pavilion and make it as a work of art.'*

Excited with the idea, the director and the teacher started to think about the project. Later on, in the Plastic Art class, the psychologist gathered the students and started to challenge them. This became the turning point.

As soon as the mindset had changed, the students began for the first time to work with enthusiasm. They started to communicate and share ideas with the hospital staff who really needed the help of the students.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a real story narrated by Padre Fito School's Director, from Neuquén (Argentina)



The project went beyond the Plastic Art class. In the maths class, for example, the students implemented the scale projections, which is not the same as drawing in a paper than on a twelve square meters wall! And also they had to calculate how much paint needed. On top of that, they had to develop a campaign to get funding for the paint. By putting themselves into the children's shoes, they were able to choose designs and colors appropriate for the children.

Without even realizing it, they turned matters beyond the area of discussion, teamwork, organizing, and self-control. In this, curious business had showed interest and inquired their activities while they were out buying supplies. This led more donation of paint in cans.

Along with it, they were able to transcend the area of discussion, teamwork, organizing and self-control. In addition, when they started out buying supplies, curious business owners inquired about such activities and this led to more donation of paint in cans.

It became evident that all the work was not only carried out in the time period of Plastic Art class, but there was a strong commitment of out of school hours. The enthusiasm of the students, of the professors, of the hospital staff and of the community was the driver to overcome any

difficulties. The issues of discipline and working together in the class soon evaporated. The decoration of the children's pavilion of the hospital became a great success and, in addition, the school gained public acknowledgement.

Looking back at the development of empathy and its success, the director and the teacher have identified some key points:

- The students had been invited to make something useful for the community and had contributed something really important.
- They had been valued and recognized for their commitments, efforts and results, which had built their self-esteem as individuals and as a group.
- The "we" thinking became "others" thinking approach. Both teachers and students stopped going back to their bad behavior.

Since then, the Plastic Art class in High School has been structured basing on social projects. It gives students an opportunity to be citizens committed to the community.

Teachers came to conclusion that doing a service to the community is also a way to improve the behavior of students.

This methodology, which is in line with *the empathic civilization*<sup>2</sup>, is called Service-Learning.

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<sup>2</sup> RIFKIN, Jeremy, *La civilización empática. La carrera hacia una conciencia global en un mundo en crisis*. Editorial Paidó, Barcelona, 2010, pág. 24.

# What is Service-Learning?

Service-Learning is a way of learning by doing service to community.

It deals with children taking action as committed citizens in a direct way by learning to be part in a society. It is doing in a practical and empathic way, instead of just speaking only about participation and exercising democratic skills in the classroom.

Expanded definition: Service-Learning is an educational proposal that combines processes of learning and service to the community in a well integrated project, in which students are trained by addressing the social needs and improvements of the the community.

Service-Learning is a methodology centered in education of empathy and citizenship. It is inspired by active pedagogies and a complements other educational strategies.

Service-Learning is not an absolute innovation, because it originates from a combination of two well-known educational elements: learning based on the experience and doing service to the community.

Therefore, it is not the latest pedagogical invention, but rather a discovery. It values best practices that develop good teachers, good schools and good social organizations in a natural setting, because these projects do work.

Service-Learning motivates, inspires, and also strengthens the empathy in the classroom. Furthermore, it improves students' academic results.

Service-Learning is a practice to bring together school successes and social commitments: learning to be competent by being empathic and useful to others. Its simplicity and versatility makes it powerful, because it can be developed in a wide range of ages and in different contexts. Let's enumerate some examples:

- At the end of the school semester, children in the Primary School<sup>3</sup> organize a musical concert in an elderly nursing home instead of organizing the traditional musical show only for their families. This musical learning is integrated with the social project. During this process, children learn about life of the seniors, and through this, they

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<sup>3</sup> Milagros Consarnau Primary School, from L'Hospitalet de Llobregat, Spain.



are able to prepare better and choose the right songs that resonate with senior citizens.

- High School<sup>4</sup> students, under the framework of their Physical Education class, learn dynamic exercises to stimulate the mobility of children who are suffering from sensory and physical difficulties. Understanding the importance of every exercise and the different personalities of handicapped children is essential to better know of their conditions as well to establish better relationship with them.
- Business Administration<sup>5</sup> students follow an oral communication module to prepare a workshop for high school students having difficulties in expressing themselves orally in public. This workshop reinforces and put the skills and knowledge in practice towards high school students and thus, will encourage them to make an effort to speak in public.

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<sup>4</sup> Bisbe Berenguer High School, from L'Hospitalet de Llobregat, Spain.

<sup>5</sup> ESADE Business School, from Barcelona, Spain.

# Why service-learning reinforces empathy?

In a rural school of Catalonia<sup>6</sup>, majority of the families of the Kindergarten children migrated from Maghrib and have Amazig as a mother language. Consequently, it could delay their learning development.

Addressing this concern, teachers started to look for tools and resources to attend children in a personalized way in order to improve their understanding skills.

They came up with a project that consisted of a collaboration between two groups: a group of 10 and 11 years old and group of 4 and 5 years old.

This service-learning project has been put in the practice since it started. Over time, it has been adopted in many other schools. It is called, "Tutors telling stories".

Tutors, in a language class, work on stories, and then, in a period called "the hour of stories", they narrate these stories to younger children.

With this experience of service to others, tutors strengthen their own reading and communication skills, patience, responsibility and empathy towards younger children.

Among other values, the evolution of this project emanates a chain effect: younger children receiving stories will pass on to other kids when they reach a certain age.

Let me cite a clear example how these experiences stimulate empathy:

One evening, Mohamed, a 10 year-old boy, came distressed in his classroom. He went to his teacher and said to her: *Come with me, because Jordi, of the Kindergarten class, fell to the ground and is crying.*

The teacher said to him: *Well, I am coming. Why didn't you go to Jordi's teacher?.* On the way out of the classroom,

Mohamed answered his teacher's question: *it is because I am his tutor of stories!*

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<sup>6</sup> This is a real story narrated by a La Monjoia School's teacher, from Catalonia (Spain)



In retrospect, the responsibility of Mohamed towards Jordi went beyond the "hour of telling stories". It was found later that Mohamed had been tutored by another older student.

Many studies show how service-learning practices improve empathy on students:

- Students who engaged in service-learning showed greater empathy and cognitive complexity than comparison groups (Courneya, 1994).
- Students who engaged in quality service-learning programs reported greater acceptance of cultural diversity (Melchior, 1999; Berkas, 1997).
- Middle and elementary school students who participated in service-learning were better able to trust and be trusted by others, be reliable and accept responsibility (Stephens, 1995).
- College Students involved in the service-learning assignment were significantly more likely to express empathy in their reflective writing than the students who did not participate in service-learning. (Wilson 2011).

- Various characteristics of community service-learning are significantly related to empathy levels in elementary school children. (Emerson, 2008)
- A study examined if a service learning method was accomplishing its potential in six categories of service-learning objectives: intellectual, skills, affective development, moral and spiritual growth, community outcomes, and college or university outcomes. Results of an initial reading of the narrative evaluations yielded five themes: connecting with learning; student personal issues; empathy and relating to others; changes in outlook; and program feedback. (Soukup, 1999)

Other voices from the economic sector, as Jeremy Rifkin, explain how powerful is service-learning in improving empathy:

*The walls separating classrooms and communities are breaking down. In the past 20 years, American high schools and colleges have introduced service-learning programs into the curriculum—a deeply collaborative learning experience. The exposure to diverse people from various walks of life has spurred an empathic surge among the nation's young people. Studies indicate that many students experience a deep maturing of empathic sensibility by being thrust into unfamiliar environments where they are called upon to reach out and assist others. Such experiences are often life-changing, affecting students' sense of what gives their lives meaning.*

*Empathic Education: The Transformation of Learning in an Interconnected World*  
by Jeremy Rifkin.

Service-learning improves empathy because:

- Children and Youth break the barriers between themselves and the people with different needs, diversity of culture, and opportunities.
- They don't limit themselves to feeling and thinking about empathy only, instead they act on it, and this action allows empathy to integrate as a real attitude.
- Service-learning can be an ordinary practice in all the curriculum, that provide an educational environment with small and big activities, to integrate empathy continuously.

# Networking and empathy in the community

In the service-learning projects, educational institutions (school, High School, University ...) ought to collaborate actively with non-profit organizations, city council, community based organizations, foundations, etc.

It ought to change from an individualistic working culture to a networking culture. Service-learning provides many opportunities to get things done.

Therefore, service-learning is not only an educational methodology, it is also a tool of community development and cohesion. Its projects are both educational and social and thus, require collaboration of all parties involved.

However, most educational institutions, in general, are not used to working with others. Working individually seems easier and more effective. In spite of it, service-learning projects need to work with the community.

For example, it does not make sense to plan any sort of activity in a Natural Reservation Park without asking permission from the Bureau of Public Service. The same thing is true with planning activities without reaching an agreement with the person in charge in a nursing home.

In networking, every partner does their own role:

- Schools can identify better learning for children to achieve, but less on service to do.
- Community based organizations can identify better social needs and services that children can do, but less on learning to achieve.

Networking means cooperation. And to cooperate is not the same thing as to coordinate. So, coordinated working is an act of intelligence, because lack of coordination could lead to a threat. On the other hand, cooperation is an act of empathy because it needs not only intelligence, but also generosity.



Teachers may start to work on coordination with community based organization when they encourage their students to take part in their social project, or when they allow their students to explain their experiences in classes.

However, cooperation has to go one more step. Schools and community based organizations work together, share the same project, and assume their own responsibility. It gets more complex, but there are convincing reasons to give it a try:

- Because working together facilitates direct knowledge of the resources of the territory. It allows the school to get a better academic benefit out of this.
- Because sharing educational responsibilities is a fundamental strategy to take on challenges that the school cannot achieve by itself.
- Because staying in touch with exemplary citizens in the community improve students' motivation and commitment.
- Because working together enhances the institutional image and the visibility of school in the neighborhood, and this is particularly important in zones that are depressed or marginalized.

- Because making a better social impact in the neighborhood is done by school. It reflects its educational culture, its values and its principles of teaching.

It is doable to do service-learning without full collaboration with community participants, however, it makes a better impact to pursue it in networking. And networking entails a flow of empathy among those that decide to work together.

It is for this reason, service-learning not only stimulates empathy on children toward persons and the social needs of the environment, but also those in the institutional, educational and social participants (schools, public administrations, community based organizations) that unite together to make this type of projects possible.

## Conclusions

1. Service-learning promotes empathy awareness on students toward the social needs of the environment and the commitment for improvements.
2. Service-learning also reinforces empathy on the educational and community organizers.
3. Service-learning is not only an educational tool, but also a social tool, because it strengthens the social capital of communities for having promoted the work within the network, for having shared values, and for having improved the confidence and self-esteem of the locals.

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