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THE IMPORTANCE OF SERVICE LEARNING

Service learning projects aim to strengthen the students' relationship with the community, with a view to their personal development and civic engagement (Wildstein & Reiher, 2001). The essential elements of this strategy entail the active involvement of students in solving a need identified in the community, the clarification of skills or knowledge to be developed, and the provision of spaces intentionally organized for reflecting upon the experience (Leming, 2001). In other words, service learning projects encompass the implementation of the action-reflection conditions set by Sprinthal (1991) through his strategy of deliberate psychological education: an opportunity for taking significant roles in real contexts, balanced with systematic occasions for the careful integration of the meanings of experience, supported by by professors and colleagues, with temporal continuity.

The development of service learning projects has been part of the implementation phase of the UNIBILITY project. Within each partner university, the students involved have been supported in developing USR service learning projects to have an impact on local communities. All the service learning projects have been documented interactively and will be available on the project website as examples of how universities can connect to the local community. Through the service learning projects, UNIBILITY wants to contribute to improving the relevance of HE for society, promoting cooperation between universities and the non-academic world. In this newsletter you will find 3 examples of service learning projects: from Austria, Romania and Slovenia.

TO A HEALTHY NEIGHBOURHOOD (Austria)

Austria's service learning project "To a healthy neighbourhood" deals with the integration of senior citizens into community life through neighborhood activities like hiking tours, regular lunch tables, discussion rounds, and sports activities. The target group are people over the age of 60 whose ties within the local community are rather weak. The goal is to strengthen community ties and relationships among local residents and strengthen social participation. Project activities take place in five different federal states in Austria and address urban, rural and mixed spaces.

In total 11 students are involved in this service learning project. They are accompanied by four staff members and meet once a week to share and discuss their experiences in the plenary. They also write a logbook of experiences.

Students benefit from their participation through their direct tasks, which are qualitative and quantitative research methods like interviewing, observations, and questionnaire analysis, and from the collaboration with senior researchers and professionals. Within their participation they gain practical experience in the research field "community/action research" and train professional skills they will need as researchers.



BLOOD DONATION (Romania)

Within the "Blood Donation" service learning project students from University Politehnica of Bucharest had the opportunity to be part of a large-scale project focused on an information and public awareness campaign (addressed to students as main target audience) about the importance of blood donation. This was followed by a 5-days event - "Blood means Life" - organised in partnership with the Bucharest Blood Transfusion Centre, during which the students and the faculty staff, as well as other willing people, donated blood. The volunteering students were trained on how to assist the medical staff during the 5-days event, especially by identifying and reducing anxiety in first-time donors in order to overcome fears or

doubts. In addition to this, the students themselves became blood donors, this way providing a personal example to their fellow students. The event, organized between 31st of October and 4th of November 2016 within the university premises, gathered more than 500 students and 30 faculty staff, who donated approx. 225 litres of blood.



PARENTIATION (Slovenia)

“PARENTIATION” is a non-formal educational program for parents of children with special needs who attend educational programs at the Public University of Ptuj (PUP). The program was the starting point of the Slovenian service learning project. PUP already implemented the program for parents of children with special needs in 2016 and prepared an integrational program for them. The University strongly supports volunteering and was ready to share the experiences with young people, making the cooperation and sharing of ideas very easy.

The purpose of the project is to get insights into the implementation process of workshops in real situations and gain knowledge about the types of problems of children with special needs, from the parents’ perspective. At first, students merely observed and listened to practical

implementation. Then, they prepared a motivational workshop for parents, envisaging that each of the parent involved should bring another parent “friend of his/hers” by the end of the workshop. The proposal for the first meeting with parents was initially tested by the students themselves in role playing games (with two participants playing the role of parents in the mediation process) and through the “mediation test”.



READ MORE ABOUT SERVICE LEARNING

Leming, J. S. (2001). Integrating a structured ethical reflection curriculum into high school community service experiences: Impact on students’ sociomoral development. *Adolescence*, 36, 141, 33-45.

Sprinthall, N. A. (1991). Role taking programs for high school students: New methods to promote psychological development. In B. P. Campos (Ed.), *Psychological intervention and human development* (pp. 33-38). Porto: Instituto de Consulta Psicológica, Formação e Desenvolvimento e Louvain-La-Neuve: Academia.

Waldstein, F. A. & Reiher, T. C. (2001). Service-learning and students’ personal and civic development. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 24, 1, 7-14.

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