Service Learning: a philosophy and practice to re-frame higher education

In order to give an answer to the call of the Agenda 2030 (UN, 2015), higher education has to assist in giving form to a new society in which democracy is cultivated both in minds and practices. Education to democracy must be an answer to the challenges of contemporary society, which is characterized by indifference and unwillingness to engage for the common good. Educational practices, instead, are very often aligned to this trend so that they are planned with the aim of developing competences useful for both individual success and economic improvement of society. It is necessary to imagine a new vision of education intended as the opportunity to promote in people the disposition to engage in the construction of a society where everybody can live a good life. Useful for this purpose can be a re-discovery of the classical position of Plato/Socrates and Aristotle that present virtue ethics as a theoretical framework for education. Education is a practice: that is why we need to plan and design educative experiences able to translate theory into actions. Service Learning is a very interesting model that can draw up a practice where education to democracy is informed by virtue ethics. If useful to transform higher education, SL is particularly suitable for educating teachers, i.e. practitioners who have a great responsibility in transforming society through education. In the paper, after developing the theoretical framework, we present, as a sample, the experience of “Community Research Service Learning” carried out at the University of Verona, in the Master's Degree in Primary Teacher Education.

Key-words: higher education; service learning; civic engagement; ethics; pre-service teachers training.

Introduction

In order to give an answer to the call of the Agenda 2030 (UN, 2015), higher education has to assist in giving form to a new society in which democracy is cultivated both in minds and practices. This democratic education must be an answer to the drift that philosophers and sociologists describe about our contemporary society, which is characterized by indifference (Baumann, 2004; Morin, 2007), scarce perception of the other considered as a person who is neither felt in his own individuality nor in his call for responsibility (Boella, 2006; 2018; Lévinas, 1961). Also public debates and speeches are violent, the action for the common good becomes more and more dormant and to observe the democratic rules of coexistence is not felt as necessary and honorable (Pulcini, 2009).

This vision is enrooted in a not explicit individualistic ethic, in which the idea of “good life” consists in self-affirmation (Baumann, 1999); this individualistic way of interpreting life is one of the worst risks for democracy (Beck 1998). Educational practices are very often aligned to this trend so that they are planned with the aim of developing competences useful for individual
success and economic improvement of society (Mortari 2017a, p. 15) and therefore, education takes the form of a “banking model” (Marullo & Edwards, 2000, p. 746).

In order to give a meaningful answer to the globalization and the loss of significance of the common life in the global village, it is necessary to imagine a new vision of education intended as the offering of a rich meaningful experience, able to give form to a “good person” and a “good society”. The classical virtue ethics by Plato/Socrates and Aristotle constitutes a valid theoretical framework for this purpose. Since, as Aristotle states, 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). In the light of the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle we can affirm that what is primarily necessary is to cultivate virtues: responsibility, respect, justice, willingness to engage for the common good, and first of all friendship, which is the most important one (Nichomachean Ethics, Books VIII-IX).

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, i.e. through the contact with the real world (and its problems and chances) 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 educate people to become engaged citizens (Dewey, 1916).

The practice of Service Learning is a very interesting model that allows these theoretical premises to have a practical and educative implementation. Many researches, in fact, show how it can be considered both a philosophy of education and a didactic method that can be adopted in very different academic courses (see the literature review by Ubbiali, 2017).

Policy, ethics and education

Ethics and education

As Aristotle states, 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), that not simply means “happiness”, as this term is very often translated, but suggests a “good quality of the life of the soul”: the word, in fact, is composed by the two Greek terms eu, that means ‘good’, and daimon, that means ‘spirit’ or ‘soul’.

The good is the object of the research of ethics. Ethics cannot be a science because the 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 the human beings’ flourishing.
Educating people, and children in particular, to the research for the good (i.e. to 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*, the research for the good cannot be avoided in educative pathways. In this vision, education assumes the form of the Socratic *epimeleia*, i.e. the care that makes human beings flourish in all their aspects and potentialities (Plato, *Alcibiades I*st, 130e; Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, 30b; Noddings, 1984, 2002; Mortari, 2015; Mortari & Saiani, 2014).

**Policy and education**

Starting from Aristotle’s famous expression that defines every human being, in his ontological essence, as a “political animal” (*zoonpolitikon*), Hannah Arendt affirms that “to live an entirely private life means above all to be deprived of things essential to a truly human life” (Arendt, 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 others’ look 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” (ibid).

According to Nancy the human condition is a co-existence (1996, p. 1): that means that every human being is, in his ontological singularity, plural: the dynamics of his existence can occur only within a net of relationships that gives form to his Lebenswelt. Every human being, in order to exist according to a human form, has to live together with the 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 the others, which is a real dependence: the common life, or better the ‘res publica’, comes up from the reciprocal dependency. The political dimension of existence does not deal only with the personal realization of the single human being, but it 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”, but it also means the end of the common world because the world itself is “seen only under one aspect” (Arendt, 1958, p. 57) representing a lost for all the humankind.

To live is to coexist: but it is not only a status quo, or an ontological condition. Human beings are linked together in the world, and this is a fact; but coexisting is an action that requires an intention becoming therefore an ethical one. 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 the others and the world. When care is devoted to oneself, the human being gives form to his 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 attributed to Zeus by Plato: 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, i.e. by these references that guarantee everybody to recognize the measure of something; care, instead, is the condition that allows every citizen to flourish in his personal potentialities.

Following this vision, policy is necessary for the human kind: in fact, it is a form of acting guided by the intention to create the conditions for a good life, i.e. a life that allows everybody to inhabit the earth with the others and live the good quality of the 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 meanwhile, a good educational policy is necessary, i.e. a vision of education that reminds 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 humankind. A good policy asks to cultivate minds that look for the good; it asks for an ethics and an education inspired to it.

We talk about ‘ethics’ referring to Ricoeur, who presents the difference between ethics and morality: ethics is an aim for personal conduct (i.e. it has a teleological dimension) while morality is the articulation of this aim in social norms (i.e. it has a normative or deontological dimension). More precisely, Ricoeur defines ethics as “aiming at a good life lived with and for others in just institutions” (Ricoeur, 1992: 172). 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).

**A community vision, to face the crisis of educational polices**

However, contemporary educational policy needs to be reconsidered and redesigned: in fact, educational institutions are crossing 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 doesn’t stay flattened on the present, but aims towards an ideality that can guide educators.

Instead, we are living a real crisis in educational policies and politics, 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 present an individualistic approach to learning and, in general, to life. These pathways are very often competitive, nurturing therefore that individualistic view of life that affirms that a good existence is the one that does not care for the others, and 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.

Anyway, 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.

Edith Stein (2000) affirms that the model of every form of communal
existence is the community, a way of living together that allows everybody to
give form to his own existence and best express his own potentialities. A
community takes form from the sharing of the project that its members receive,
welcome, revise, to which they refer their public action and engagement
enriching it with their personal qualities, approach and experience. Personal
competences are put in action within a common space, in relation with the
others’ competences, in service both for singular people and a common and
wider project of coexistence: in fact, it is the principle of solidarity that gives
form to the community (Stein 2000, p. 130, 195).

Community represents the possibility for everybody to flourish in his
individual singularity, differently from the imposing uniformity purpose of the
mass (Stein, 2000, pp. 241-261). Thanks to the community, every human being
can realize his own condition that is “singular-plural” (Nancy, 2000), while
contributing to give form to the community itself, in a sort of dance that makes
the humankind evolve.

A challenge for higher education: to educate “community engaged”
practitioners

If education assumes the task of educating citizens engaged in their
communities, university can also do more. It cannot only take care that the
students learn democratic values and virtues, but also that they become models
for other people or builders of communities that are found on the service and
civic engagement principles. This assumption is particularly valuable for
practitioners, i.e. people that are asked to give form to community and
community actions, and above all for educators and teachers.

Keith (2016) presents a vision of training for practitioners that she calls
“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).

It is necessary to design a philosophy of practice able to found pedagogy.
Pedagogy is a practical wisdom, because its epistemological foundation is
enrooted 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. An action that is oriented to the good, the good
for learners (the flourishing of everybody’s potentialities) but also for the
community they live in (the common good).

But what is practice? 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 coll. (2014) refer 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 kind of learning and of personal aspects that are involved in action.

A good proposal on which found a philosophy of practice is Aristotle’s thought, in which the concepts of *phronesis* and *virtue* are central.

*Phronesis*, wisdom, is the capacity of the soul to deliberate about the good (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III, 3, 1112a 19), a capacity that orients practitioners to the good.

In education, *phronesis* consists in deliberating about the good for learners and acting according to it. Similarly in policy, wisdom is the capacity to understand what is good for the most, and then deliberate and design those strategies that allow realizing what is recognized to be essential for a good life for everybody (Mortari, 2008, p. 76). But the good is the object of the discipline of ethics, i.e. of the research of the good. Socrates/Plato and Aristotle face the question of ethics through the concept of virtue.

According to Aristotle, virtue (*aretè*) is a disposition that, when acted in a context, allows a situation to become good (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II, 1106 a 15-17). If every action is guided by an evaluation of the situation, to act according to virtue means to be guided by the “golden mean” or “golden middle way”, i.e. the desirable middle between two extremes (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II, 6, 1106 b 11-13) that allows avoiding excess or deficiency. Virtue is not an emotion or a capacity, but a habitual disposition to good acting, that assumes its form under the continuous and critical guide of reason (Mortari, 2014, pp. 20s.).

Educating to ethics is necessary: but is it possible? Since we intend ethics not as a codified discipline (the presentation of the different ethical positions through history, for example), but as the research for the good, this question is neither simple nor trivial. Socrates/Plato and Aristotle, who intends ethics as acting according to virtues, address this question by reflecting on if and how it is possible to educate people to virtues. Socrates doubts that virtues can be taught (Plato, *Protagoras*, 320b; *Meno*, 96c-d), but he also states that daily discussing about virtue is the greatest good for human being (*Apology*, 30a) and his educative maieutic model, as it emerges in the dialogues, and suggests that in order to live according to virtue it is important to reason about what virtues are in their essence. According to Aristotle, virtues can be learned through the exercise of them (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II, 1103a, 27–33).

According to these premises, it is necessary to design and implement practices that offer learners to act according to virtue and critically reflect on their actions.

A good practitioner looks for the good, acting with wisdom. A good educative practitioner is able to design and carry out educational pathways
starting from his analysis of the context and its history, of the elements and people involved, of their future intentions and directions. Using his wisdom, the educative practitioner is able to catch challenges in contexts and, through his virtuous habit, he acts with learners to orient them in looking for the good, actually for 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 not good practices and propose new ways to improve them also struggling for the good.

A community engaged planning is not confined in school classrooms and textbooks or disciplines, but it proposes learnings that are more complex than simple knowledge or skills.

Moreover, this vision has also important consequences for academic research that can “go further than descriptions, although this is an essential starting point” (Keith, 2016, p. 23) towards an “approach that supports critical policy analysis and the ability to induce significant change” (p. 24). A research that can be defined educative (Mortari, 2007).

Service learning is a practice where it is possible to act according to virtue ethics, in the spirit of service, generosity, courage (for example in advocacy activities: see further), respect for the others who live differently, search for social justice. And all these virtues are not merely practiced, but they are nurtured by reflection: through reflection on the service and democratic experience, students are stimulated to expand their vision of citizenship and include acting in a way that recognizes and promotes the citizenship of everyone.

The proposal of Service Learning

A call for educational institutions

At school and university, we often assist at a hyper-specialization in technology and hard sciences that, if from one side develops knowledge in an exponential way, from the other cultivates an analphabetism of civic competences.

The aim of educational institutions, instead, is to plan and offer good learning experiences where people can develop their personality as a whole and the capacity of thinking, feeling and acting with the others in the world.

Even J. Dewey underlined that schools and universities are often artificial, where learning objects are far from real life. Instead, in order to give form to personal life, it is necessary to design and realize learning contexts guided by the “learning by doing” principle (Dewey, 1938): we could call them “laboratories of things in life”.

The “experiential learning” methodologies (Kolb, 1984) are an approach able to give an answer to this educational necessity. In his theory, Kolb affirms that knowledge is generated through the transformation of experience: according to this vision, ideas are not fixed object to be learnt, but they can be
formulated and reformulated thanks to the contact and the engagement to reality.

Even in these activities there is, indeed, a risk: schools and universities could adopt these practices as an instrument to approach reality (with its challenges and problems) only as a “test bench”, i.e. in a utilitarian way, only aimed at improving competences and disciplinary abilities, including the risk of nurturing a competitive and individualistic sensibility. Instead, there is an approach that is able to link schools/universities to the real world, that goes beyond this instrumental style: it is the “service learning” (SL) or “community service learning” (CSL) approach.

These kind of experiences, that in literature are documented in all the educational levels and grade, 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 researches, but also as a recipient, i.e. a place to offer a contribution for improvement, 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 the problem-based learning practices, even SL engages students in a work starting from real problems, but they are identified by communities (Connor-Greene, 2002); similar to the research-based learning approach SL can be designed as a scientific research, but it can be planned as an answer to relevant question collected in a community (Harkavy & Hartley, 2010; DePrince, Priebe & Newton, 2011).

Eyler & Giles (1999) underline that “using the community as a laboratory rather than working with the community on jointly useful projects” is not only a not ethical action, but it can also have bad didactical consequences; in fact 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).

SL or CSL practices share with the experiential learning theory the idea that the contact with communities exposes students to problems from real life that they could never have faced: this reality calls upon and challenges students’ preconceptions helping them to deconstruct and re-construct new visions about people, communities, values etc., thanks to the virtuous circle between service and learning that is possible to build 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, even if with different connotations and philosophical references. They have also
gradually been introduced in the rest of the world and in Italy as well (Ubbiali, 2017).

The term ‘service learning’ (SL) has first been introduced in literature by Robert Sigmon e William Ramsey to describe a project of the Oak Ridge Associated University (Tennessee) in 1966, even if it entered the current debate only in the 1980s (Stanton, Giles e Cruz, 1999).

If the pedagogical attention on a possible link between service and learning starts in the 1970s, the political assumption of this theme finds its public acknowledgement in the 1990s, when SL is 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 SL, called ‘aprendizaje-servicio soldiario’, was born in the school practice and later theoretically elaborated and institutionalized in political acts (Tapia, 2010).

**How to define service learning**

The value of SL has been quickly recognized and consequently spread in many contexts that produced a large amount of practices and theorizations, so that it is difficult to find a unique definition of SL (Furco, 2003). The multiplicity of definitions, if on one hand gives value to the richness of those practices that give an answer to different needs, on the other hand determines the scientific weakness of SL that, being an over-defined practice, is not a definite object.

Already in 1990, Kendall & Ass., through a systematic literature review, counted 147 definitions of SL, so that they proposed a “clustering” of them in two macro-categories: SL as a “pedagogy” and SL as a “philosophy”. The definitions that present SL as a pedagogy underline its methodological aspects, i.e. SL as teaching and learning method that has specific attentions, requests of a careful organization and related instruments. The definitions that talk about SL as a philosophy propose it as a “style”, a way of thinking and orienting practices of teaching and learning, without codifying practical aspects.

In literature, the paper by Sigmon (1979), *Service-learning: Three Principles* is recognized as foundational. It can be considered the first paper that defines and systematizes SL practices. The author presents the three principles that, as a framework, define SL pedagogy:

“**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”. (p. 10)

After this paper, several are the subsequent definitions. A good and influential one, is the one given by the public federal law *National and Community Service Trust Act* (1993):
“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.” (p. 59).

SL is defined as a method, i.e. the way to reach educative aims 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 educative institution, that has a specific pedagogical mission, but always in connection and cooperation with the community itself. The service has an educative aim by itself, because it promotes civic engagement and sense of responsibility in the students. Nevertheless, SL also represents an academic educative experience because it is part of a structured curriculum within schools and universities: it is an integrant part of the educative pathway, i.e. it contributes in reaching disciplinary and interdisciplinary aims typical of the different curricula. Thanks to SL experiences students can put in action curricular contents, knowledge and abilities learnt in their formal activities; moreover, they can learn by doing through the reflective activities that should be organized after the actions in the field.

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

Moreover, according to the Act, SL can also be acted in “community service programs”, and not only in the formal ones. In fact, in literature we can find researches on this specific SL programs (Kackar-Cam & Schmidt, 2014), even if most of 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. Ehrlich (1996) attests that there is a big variety of practices but he affirms that all of them are enrooted in the experiential learning conception 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” (p. xi).

Some authors also offer operational definitions of SL, 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).

SL experiences are various in typologies and can “include short-term modules, semester-long activities, and multiyear as well as multicourse projects”. The service action can be conceived as “direct or indirect, may involve low or high levels of responsibility, and may have a research component”. 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).

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

“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

Through SL, the curriculum of a formal educative institution is enriched and the learning is reinforced thanks to the connection between academic and community aspects (Furco, 1996, p. 1), but it is only when service and learning are designed and carried out as two dimensions in perfect equilibrium and reciprocal reinforcement that it is possible to talk of a real SL (Sigmon, 1994). Sigmon (1979) defines SL as a "reciprocal learning" including the idea that there is a balance between learning goals and service outcomes. This statement represents a sort of critical instrument to evaluate SL projects. In fact, if the projects defined as “SL” are many, only the ones in which the two dimensions are equilibrate 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: differently from other form of practice-based learning (such as cooperative learning, placement, education in the field, internship, practical courses), SL is an educative experience that allows learning specific competences, typical of a course of study, together with civic and service engagement. Differently from the
community service programs that are often proposed in extra-school time or as an addition to the curriculum, SL has its power in being the framework of the curriculum: service actions in the community are a real field that provokes learning processes.

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

Mendel-Reyes (1998) talks about the dimension of civic learning underlining that it is ‘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” (Lummis, 1996, p. 37)” (p. 38).

Many authors underline that SL represents a method that activates growth in students’ personal aspects (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 research has been carried out on the educative aims of SL (Conner & Erickson, 2017).

Some authors show an increase in sensitivity and empathic competence in 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 decreasing of stereotypes (Conner, 2010; Meaney et al., 2008; Wright, Calabrese & Henry, 2009).

These aims are not reached in a “natural” way, only by acting in a community or improvising SL activities. In fact, the quoted researches affirm that practices that are not carefully prepared and accompanied, being occasional or too short in time, can reach aims that are opposite to the teachers’ intentions. If processes are not cared, stereotypes on groups or community where the SL action is carried out can be reinforced (Erickson & O’Connor, 2000; Erickson & Santmire, 2001; Hollis, 2004; Jones, 2002; Kendall, 1990; Sperling, 2007), or the will to engage in the common good can weaken (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, so different is the kind of services that can be carried out and consequently the kind of achieved learning (curricular, personal and civic).

Berger (2003) groups 4 types of “service” in SL practices: **direct service, indirect service, advocacy and research.**
“Direct service” is the name for those practices where the students and the community are engaged in a direct relationship. For example tutoring for younger children, or service in a senior center or shelters for poor, etc.

“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. For example caring of a park, restoration of public spaces, etc.

“Advocacy” is the term that defines activities where service consists in informational or awareness actions about a problem of public interest. For example writing letters for citizens or politicians, participating in public conferences, organization of committees, etc.

Service intended as “research” is that practice that involves the students in real research projects aimed at collecting and analyzing information related to problems of general interest. For example participating in studies or tests that will have an impact and dissemination in the community.

SL for pre-service teachers

Education of educators: SL and teacher training

If we want that the ethics of service and civic engagement spread in society and become the spirit of the common living, we have to invest on schools. The education of educator, i.e. teachers’ training, is central to provide a good ethical experience to future generations. In fact, it is necessary that also the teachers are community engaged, able to act for a community, actors of transformation and of social justice. Therefore, a serious and deep rethinking is even more important for university whose aim is to educate practitioners and in particular for pre-service teacher courses. Literature shows that SL is a real effective practice to educate community-engaged teachers.

Since the 1990s, SL is a pedagogical model that has been applied in teacher education courses: in fact, in 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). Already in 2003, Anderson and Erickson (2003) counted more than 300 teacher training programs integrating SL in the curriculum.

In his literature review, Anderson (1988) refers that the most spread reasons argued by teacher educators to integrate 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 lifelong 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
It is interesting to underline 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 different educational goals concerning 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 gains important learning outcomes for teachers: a deeper comprehension of society (Kahne & Westheimer, 1996), the deconstruction of stereotypes and stigmas (Baldwin et a., 2007; Barton, 2000), the attention towards students with different cultural backgrounds or coming from disadvantaged areas (Hunt, 2007; Carrington & Saggers, 2008), the education of pupils with special needs (Russel, 2007), the building of learning communities between pre-service and in-service teachers and the community (Swick, 2001), the awareness of social justice problems in society (Donahue, 1998; Stamopoulos, 2006).

Wade (1997, pp. 185-186) argues 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 learnt in textbooks); it provides pre-service teachers with the skill 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 + Master’s degree in Primary School Education, we have been proposing for 5 years a Community Service Learning project as the form of the curricular training program that pre-service teachers have to carry out in their curriculum. Our choice is motivated by a philosophical view of education, as previously...
described, as well as by the listening 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.

To face these urgencies, we designed and we are carrying out a training model where the needs, requests, sources and competences of every actor interact, in order to give form to a “common good” that represents an answer that advantages students, faculties, schoolteachers and, eventually, schoolchildren. In this vision, students’ learning occurs within a service activity (towards the school, i.e. teachers’ requests, and in consequences children’s learning) thanks to the reflective mediation of the community of practitioners (school teachers) and the supervision of university (the faculties) that accompanies 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 where the pre-service teachers are engaged in helping in-service teachers in their everyday educational job: this action represents the curricular training for the university students and is the place where they design and improve a research that represents the basis for their dissertation.

At a political level, University assumes the SL project as the peculiarity for pre-service obligatory training in schools. When students engage schools they meet the teacher that will become his/her mentor in order to collect his/her 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 the mentor, analyze his/her words and observe the 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 act their service in the schools. Moreover, students are invited to carry out a qualitative research on their service action: and this is one of the peculiarity of our project that can really be defined as “Community Research Service Learning”.

From the point of view of service, students help in-service teachers in their professional life.

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 fact, even in accordance to 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 6 phases:

1. period for class observation, familiarization with the context and identification of the class’ and teacher’s need: using a qualitative
approach, students observe the class dynamics and interview teachers in order to identify and describe a need or a desire they would like to be helped for. 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 the contributions in literature about the need to face and the project to design;

3. design of an educational project: in order to give an answer to 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 act their project together with the teachers;

5. realization of a research related to their educational project; during the service actions in the class, students carry out an 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 in 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 not only what is happening in the pedagogical relationship, but also in their mind and feelings (reflective journal).

Since every class is different and has its own characteristics, and every teacher has her/his 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 in a specific project, during the class lessons; “indirect” service, where students are asked to make a critical analysis of the teacher’s practice through an accurate documentation about it or a research focusing his/her pedagogical actions; design project, where teachers ask students and faculties to be helped 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), i.e. a research useful for teachers to improve their competences and capacity to read (and try to solve) their classes’ needs and challenges.

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 referred in Figure 1, we can summarize the dimensions of the project as follows:
a. service: students act a service as an answer to a real school need or teacher’s desire;
b. learning: students learn from their expert mentor;
c. research: students collect and analyses data during the service learning experience;
d. learning: students learn 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 build, step by step, a real community between school and university, giving form to an effective political vision of education.

Figure 1: A schematic synthesis of Laboratory LeCoSe.

Conclusions

SL is shown as a practice truly able 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 practice of SL, animated by virtue ethics and phronetic capacity, can be furthermore nourished if read in the framework of the philosophy of care (Mortari 2015). Care is essential for every human being, because without care nobody can flourish in his own existential potentialities and directions, in relationships with the others, in a common research for the common good.

There is a kind of care that makes everybody’s existential directions flourish and a care for the other that is an action aimed at his good. These two aspects are strictly connected because every person gives (a good) form to himself only acting with the others and for them.
When care goes beyond the face-to-face relationship getting to a world
dimension and feeling 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.

Bibliography


