NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION AS A PSYCHOLOGICAL FOUNDATION FOR SERVICE-LEARNING IN THE CONTEXT OF POST-TRAUMATIC RECOVERY

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1. Context and Problem Statement

Since November 2023, Ukraine has been implementing the ServU project – 'Service-Learning in Higher Education for Ukraine's Recovery' – involving three domestic and three European universities with Erasmus+ support. One of the project's key objectives is adapting the service-learning (SL) methodology to wartime and recovery conditions (ServU, 2024). This objective is not merely methodological. Behind it lies a deeper question: what does genuine partnership between a university and a community look like when both sides carry the weight of unhealed wounds?

Service-learning as a pedagogical concept involves interaction between a university and a community in which students engage with real social needs while simultaneously gaining academic and personal experience (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). In Ukraine, where full-scale war has caused mass displacement, infrastructure destruction, and profound psychological trauma, SL takes on special significance – as a space where learning and recovery intersect.

At the same time, research on Ukrainian universities during wartime indicates that students and faculty function under conditions of chronic stress, reduced academic productivity, and emotional exhaustion (Brintseva, 2026; Coping with adversity, 2025). The psychological state of participants directly affects the quality

of interaction. In this context, the question 'how do we speak to one another?' becomes no less important than 'what do we do together?'

This paper proposes Nonviolent Communication (NVC) as developed by Marshall Rosenberg as a psychological resource for enhancing the quality of SL interactions. We argue that NVC is not a technique of politeness, but a way of remaining in contact with another person's reality even when one's own reality is difficult.

Originality. Unlike existing studies that address NVC primarily in school mediation or clinical settings, this paper proposes, for the first time, a conceptual framework for applying NVC as a systemic psychological tool within service-learning in the context of war and post-traumatic crisis. The combination of three analytical fields – NVC, SL, and post-traumatic context – drawing on sources published after 2020, constitutes an original contribution to the international discussion on the psychological preconditions for university–community partnership.

2. Approach and Methodology

This paper employs a conceptual-analytical methodology. Drawing on a systematic review of literature published between 2020 and 2026 across three intersecting fields – NVC research, SL pedagogy, and trauma-informed education – it constructs an integrative framework for applying NVC within SL practice. The analysis is supplemented by reflective evidence in the form of illustrative scenarios derived from documented SL interactions in Ukrainian higher education. The paper does not report original empirical data; rather, it offers a theoretically grounded and practice-oriented conceptualisation that can serve as the basis for future empirical inquiry.

3. Analysis

3.1 Nonviolent Communication: Psychological Foundations

Nonviolent Communication was developed by clinical psychologist Marshall Rosenberg in the 1960s–70s and has since spread into educational, clinical, and peacebuilding contexts (Rosenberg, 2015). The name can be misleading: NVC does not presuppose that

we are inherently violent. It simply points to the fact that most of us were taught to speak in the language of judgement, diagnosis, and demand – rather than in the language of observation, feeling, and need. Rosenberg captured this distinction metaphorically: the 'language of the wolf' versus the 'language of the giraffe.'

The four components of NVC form not an algorithm, but a way of listening – to oneself and to another:

Component	Meaning and Example
Observation	Describing a concrete situation without evaluative judgement. Not 'you never come on time', but 'you arrived 15–20 minutes late to the last three meetings'.
Feelings	Expressing one's own emotional state. It is important to distinguish feelings from thoughts: 'I feel disappointed' is a feeling; 'I feel that you don't care' is an interpretation.
Needs	Identifying the underlying need behind the feeling. All feelings are signals of a satisfied or unmet need – safety, recognition, connection, stability, justice, and so on.
Request	A concrete, feasible, positively framed request – not a demand. 'Could you let me know in advance if you expect to be late?'

From a psychological perspective, NVC draws on Rogers' (1951) humanistic tradition – in particular, unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding. Recent evidence confirms that NVC training improves empathic communication, reduces conflict behavior, and enhances emotional intelligence across diverse populations (Chen et al., 2026; Espiritu, 2023). A 2024 scoping review of NVC in high-stress healthcare environments found it to be a significant resource for improving interpersonal relationships at work (Wikipedia NVC, 2025). Koopman and Seliga (2021) demonstrated that when higher education faculty learn to listen empathically and speak with greater openness, students begin to share not only their successes but also their difficulties – directly improving the quality of learning and interaction.

There is also a neuroscientific basis: evaluative and blaming language activates the amygdala and defensive responses, while need-oriented language supports engagement of the prefrontal cortex and capacity for cooperation (van der Kolk, 2014). In a post-traumatic context, where many participants' nervous systems are

chronically in a state of arousal or shutdown, this distinction carries direct practical significance.

3.2 Challenges to Service-Learning in the Post-Traumatic Context

Research on Ukrainian universities during wartime reveals that students and educators are functioning under conditions of persistent stress and emotional exhaustion (Brintseva, 2026). A qualitative study of Lviv University students during the winter examination session of 2022–2023 showed that educational continuity was maintained through collective resilience and mutual support – yet this resilience was not automatic, and required deliberate nurturing (Coping with adversity, 2025). For SL, this has immediate implications: the quality of university–community interaction depends on the psychological availability of participants.

Three specific challenges can be identified. First, chronic stress impairs the capacity for open communication: a nervous system in threat mode simplifies perception, heightens reactivity, and narrows the capacity for empathy (van der Kolk, 2014). Trauma-informed pedagogy proceeds from precisely this observation – not because students 'do not want' to be open, but because their bodies are functioning in survival mode (Stromberg, 2023).

Second, SL initiatives in Ukraine often bring together people with fundamentally different experiences: students and veterans, local residents and internally displaced persons, people from frontline and relatively protected regions. This difference can generate hidden tensions and mutual incomprehension. Without conscious management of this dynamic, participants may be physically present together while emotionally inhabiting parallel realities.

Third, there is the risk of paternalism in 'helping' relationships. When a university 'comes to help', it can inadvertently position the community as a recipient rather than a partner (Mitchell, 2008). In a wartime context, this asymmetry is sharpened: those who help may lack the personal experience of crisis that community members carry – and this is felt. Trauma-informed approaches to community recovery emphasise that people must be engaged not as 'objects of assistance' but as agents of their own future, with attention to how trauma may affect the capacity for longer-term planning (Rosenberg et al., 2022).

3.3 NVC as Psychological Infrastructure: Three Levels of Application

We propose analysing the potential of NVC across three interconnected levels of SL practice.

At the level of student preparation, NVC training builds several competencies that are critical for SL engagement: the capacity for empathic listening without judgement; the ability to distinguish observations from interpretations; and the recognition of one's own triggered responses. Particularly important is what may be called 'reflective capacity' – the ability to remain aware of one's internal state during emotionally charged interactions. This is key to preventing secondary traumatization, a well-documented phenomenon in volunteer and social work. Three targeted exercises can be integrated into a preparatory seminar (two to three hours):

Exercise 1. 'Observation Without Judgement' (15 min.)

Students receive five scenario descriptions from SL practice. Each must be reformulated: remove the evaluation, retain the fact. For example: 'Community members seemed indifferent to our proposal' → 'After our presentation, three people left the room and two did not respond to questions.' Post-exercise discussion: what changed in your perception of the situation?

Exercise 2. 'Needs Map' (20 min.)

In pairs, students role-play a scenario: one is the SL coordinator, the other is a community representative with a 'difficult' reaction (reluctance to participate, scepticism, open criticism). The coordinator's task is not to persuade, but to listen: 'What need might be behind this?' Debrief: what was hard to hear? When did the impulse to defend or explain arise?

Exercise 3. 'Check-In Before Going Out' (5 min., before each SL encounter)

A brief individual self-assessment using four NVC questions: 'What do I observe in my own state right now? What am I feeling? Which need is especially strong today? What am I asking of myself in this meeting?' Recorded in a personal reflection journal. The aim is to

increase quality of presence and reduce projection of personal stress onto the interaction.

At the level of university–community interaction, NVC offers a concrete way to reframe 'help' as 'encounter.' Instead of 'we can offer you X,» there is a dialogue in which both parties first speak about their needs, and then together identify forms of collaboration. Consider a scenario typical of SL in Ukraine: a student team proposes psychological support workshops to a community. The community leader responds briefly: 'We don't have time for this right now.' A conventional response might be to clarify, persuade, or withdraw. An NVC-informed response is to listen for what lies beneath:

'I hear that something more pressing is happening right now [observation]. You don't need to explain if it's not comfortable. But if you're willing – what is weighing most heavily on you at the moment? [request] We didn't come with a ready plan, but to understand what is actually needed [need for connection rather than programme delivery].'

This response is not a technique of manipulation. It reflects a genuine shift in position: from 'we know what you need' to 'we want to find out what you need.' This shift, as Mitchell (2008) argues, is precisely what distinguishes critical from traditional service-learning.

At the level of institutional culture, NVC can support the formation of psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999) – an environment in which participants can speak openly about difficulties without fear of judgement. A structured reflection circle after each SL session (25–30 minutes) provides a practical mechanism. Each participant responds to four questions: What did I observe today – in the interaction, in myself? What was I feeling, and did that change? Which of my needs was met today, and which was not? What do I ask of myself or the team before the next meeting? These questions map directly onto the four NVC components while simultaneously structuring the academic reflection that is central to quality SL.

4. Implications for Education, Policy, and Recovery

For SL coordinators and educators, the practical implications are direct: a two-to-three-hour NVC module can be integrated

into preparatory seminars, structured reflection circles can be introduced after each SL session, and first meetings with community partners can be restructured as 'needs encounters' rather than programme presentations. These changes do not require lengthy specialist training; they require a shift in orientation – from delivery to dialogue.

For institutional policy, embedding NVC principles into the pedagogical culture of SL programmes represents a step toward the kind of sustainable, psychologically safe, and inclusive models that the ServU project and the broader European service-learning community are seeking to develop. Psychological safety is not a soft add-on to SL; it is a precondition for the genuine civic engagement and community partnership that SL aims to foster.

For the wider field of post-traumatic recovery, this paper contributes a framing in which communication quality is understood as infrastructure – as necessary to the rebuilding of trust and civic life as physical reconstruction. A community that has experienced war does not only need materials and plans; it needs spaces in which people can be heard without judgement. Universities, through SL, can be one such space – if they are prepared for it.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. NVC is not therapy and does not replace specialised work with trauma; its role here is supplementary. There is also a risk of psychologising structural problems: improved communication does not remove resource constraints or institutional power asymmetries, though it may make them more visible. This paper is conceptual-analytical and requires empirical verification through pilot implementation, pre–post measurement of interaction quality, and qualitative research on participants' experiences. Such designs could be pursued within the ServU project or related initiatives.

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