

2_Conceptual Abstracts

SERVICE-LEARNING AS A TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATIONAL RESPONSE TO WAR IN UKRAINE

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Introduction

As defined by Robert Sigmon, "service learning (SL) occurs when there is a balance between learning goals and service outcomes, each enhances the other for all participants". The experience of Ukrainian higher education, particularly at Ukrainian Catholic University, offers a model for using SL during crises. This approach allows universities to fulfill their core mission of education while increasing their social impact and making studies more meaningful for students, even during major disruptions like a full-scale invasion. This does not limit the case to war or any other difficult crises and can be used in what can be called normal times with great results for the community engagement, however it becomes especially helpful in crisis times. As hypotheses we consider that in "normal" times it is learning and education enhances the service outcomes, but in crises it can be vice versa – great disruption and need for social help drives learning and education as it happened in Ukraine since February 2022.

Our research question is therefore, how does the Ukrainian experience of war as major disruption and ability of the institution to connect learning process with country and community urgent needs helps students to follow their educational journey and have purpose through Service Learning.

Context

Ukrainian universities had barely recovered from the challenges of the COVID pandemic when Russia's full-scale invasion of

Ukraine began in February 2022. The invasion is causing a massive humanitarian crisis. Every single day Ukrainians live under constant attacks on civilians and infrastructure providing basic needs: water, heat, electricity. It is important to note that the destruction and damage to educational infrastructure occurs systematically, regardless of the zone of active hostilities. 4358 educational institutions have suffered bombing and shelling, and 400 of them have been destroyed completely. [2] Russia deliberately targets institutions that have a long term impact on the future of Ukrainian society, its human capital and identity.

Living for more than 1500 days in war experience transformed perceptions of young people in Ukraine. The country became a “social laboratory” where every 6 months context changes and educational institutions have to be places which not only react and help with urgent needs but first of all fulfill their missions and help to sustain the human capital of the country, prevent brain drain.

Ukrainian universities had to adapt to these new challenges in many ways, therefore the educational process has many new elements and Universities actively practice “service” to those in need, communities and country as educational instruments. For University the goal became not only to help with the most urgent needs of the society but help our students reflect and have conclusions on level of values and attitude. A number of scholars (Janet Eyler and Dwight E. Giles Jr. 1999) claims that learning is the most effective when students not only employ their cognitive processes to education but also their affective thought process and emotions. The service learning approach became a crucial tool for that.

Integrating Mission and Action: The ServU Project and the Transformative Power of Service-Learning in Wartime Ukraine

What we have experienced in 2022 was a sudden and rapid increase of requests from society. The response to that request was rather intuitive than with deep research about what we should do. Students of UCU were very focused on volunteering (the idea of being useful for the country was prevailing in their thinking) and after we (management and faculty of the University) realized it is not for weeks, hopefully for months but might be for years

we understood that we have to bring them back to classrooms (physical or virtual), as their primary role in winning this war is to continue education. Therefore, offering our students to combine volunteering and studies, suggesting assignments and intellectual tasks connected to the needs of specific organizations and communities kept them both physically safe but also in a rich learning environment.

In December 2022, realizing our students were desperate to feel a sense of purpose and be useful to their country, six universities—three Ukrainian and three European—formed the ServU project. We realized that while "nonsense" prevails in global news, "sense" is found in the coordinated collective action of students working directly with their local communities. Within the project Guidelines for Service Learning during wartime and recovery and Guidelines of Need Assessment of Local Territorial Communities during wartime and recovery were developed. Six service learning courses were introduced within the framework of the project in 3 local territorial communities in Ukraine: 4 in Sumy and Dnipro region - close to the frontline, and 2 in Western Ukraine.

Through the project, we experienced that SL serves as a transformative pedagogical approach that bridges academic knowledge with practical action to address community challenges, which continue to grow with every day of the war. Furthermore, this methodology helps students become more self-aware through reflection, a process that profoundly influences their thoughts, emotions, psychology, and coping strategies

Growing Sense of Purpose through Service Learning

Felten, Gilchrist, and Darby (2006) explore how the emotional dimensions of service-learning projects contribute to developmental outcomes. In crisis situations, these emotional experiences can lead to enhanced motivation, empathy, and persistence, helping students face adverse situations in a positive way. Service-learning helps cultivate a sense of purpose by transforming students from passive consumers of knowledge into active agents of positive impact. Especially in times of crisis, it provides a structured framework that connects academic study to the urgent, real-world needs of the community, helping participants find meaning in their contributions.

From experience of ServU project and wider experience of enabling learning process in wartime we can observe that using SL courses in very disrupted learning environments allows students to:

See the tangible benefits of learning: by using their academic skills to help others. For instance, such as business students pushing for ethical market boycotts or helping veterans with legal issues at the Law clinic, psychology students providing career mentoring for high school graduates—students see that their education has immediate relevance and usefulness.

Goal-oriented framework: SL provides a clear objective that focuses energy of students and faculty and feeds internal resolve, which is a core pillar of resilience. Engaging in "coordinated collective action" helps students move beyond the feeling of helplessness that often accompanies major disruptions.

Build the "frontline" at home and overcome despair: for Ukrainian students, SL provides a way to serve their country without necessarily being in the military, helping them find the "meaning of their contributions" through academic and humanitarian work.

Exercise student agency: the pedagogy encourages learners to recognize how their actions shape social reality, fostering a belief in their own capability to secure a fulfilling future. SL serves as a vital instrument to restore order and meaning.

Ash, Clayton and Atkinson (2005) highlight that service-learning is uniquely suited to develop higher-order reasoning and critical thinking through guided reflection. This capacity for informed judgment is vital for people navigating through surrealism or absurdity caused by conflict or war.

Conclusions:

The Ukrainian experience demonstrates that service-learning can become a powerful educational strategy during periods of extreme disruption and crisis. In the context of Russia's full-scale invasion, universities were forced not only to preserve educational continuity, but also to respond to urgent social and humanitarian needs. This situation transforms service-learning from an optional pedagogical practice into a central mechanism for sustaining both education and social resilience.

The case of Ukrainian universities, particularly the ServU project, shows that integrating academic learning with meaningful community service helps students maintain motivation, purpose, and engagement during wartime. Rather than abandoning studies for volunteering, students were encouraged to combine civic engagement with academic tasks, allowing education itself to become a form of contribution to national resilience.

The urgent needs of communities naturally pushed Universities to create authentic learning environments where students developed practical skills, emotional resilience, critical thinking, and a stronger sense of agency. Through reflection and real-world action, students became active participants in shaping social reality instead of passive recipients of knowledge.

Moreover, service-learning proved especially valuable for students' psychological and emotional well-being. Participation in coordinated community action reduced feelings of helplessness and despair, replacing them with a sense of usefulness, responsibility, and belonging. The approach also strengthened empathy, persistence, and higher-order reasoning, all of which are essential for coping with uncertainty and trauma.

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