

# UNIVERSITY-CULTURAL INSTITUTION COLLABORATION IN SMALL COMMUNITIES: WORKING WITH CULTURAL MEMORY THROUGH SERVICE-LEARNING

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## Context and Problem Formulation

### *The University's 'Third Mission' During Wartime*

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has triggered a crisis of social institutions, confronting universities with a fundamental question: how can they be of service to society not only after a crisis has passed, but during it? The university's 'third mission' – service to society – ceases to be a declarative aspiration and becomes a real, urgently demanded function. It serves as an instrument for supporting societal resilience and for participation in the country's recovery processes.

The response to this challenge is embedded in the institutional vision of the Ukrainian Catholic University (UCU). According to UCU's Strategy 2030, the university's mission extends beyond the campus, centred on the idea of 'A University That Serves.' This logic underpins the international project ServU ('Service-Learning in Higher Education for Ukraine's Recovery', Erasmus+ CBHE), within which the 'Communities of Memory' course was developed. The ServU project aims to integrate the methodology of community-engaged learning into Ukrainian universities, thereby strengthening their capacity to support communities in times of crisis.

### *Symbolic Transformations and Cultural Deficits in Rear-Area Communities*

At the same time, local communities across Ukraine are experiencing significant demographic and social changes. War disrupts intergenerational bonds, dismantles established narratives, and

generates new experiences that require sense-making. Rear-area communities are not located in active combat zones, yet they function in a state of 'deferred trauma,' prolonged uncertainty, and the need to integrate newly arrived residents.

The Kozova Territorial Community of Ternopil Oblast became the partner community for the 'Communities of Memory' course. According to the ServU (2024) report on community needs research, the Kozova community has hosted more than 1,300 internally displaced persons (IDPs) since the beginning of the war. These changes pose a challenge to social cohesion and call for a new articulation of local community identity.

Against this backdrop, the central research question emerges: can university education function not merely as an instrument for the transmission of knowledge, but as an effective partner in processes of community cultural recovery through collaborative work with memory? This article analyses the 'Communities of Memory' course as a case of such interaction, examining it as a form of pedagogical and cultural intervention that organically combines academic reflection with the practice of social action.

## **Research Methodology**

The article is grounded in a qualitative case study that combines elements of pedagogical action research with field-based reflexive analysis. The choice of the case study method is motivated by the nature of the research object: a singular yet conceptually rich instance that allows for an in-depth analysis of the mechanisms of university–community interaction, the generation of theoretical insights, and the formulation of hypotheses for subsequent comparative research.

The empirical base comprises four sources: (1) the results of the final evaluation report of the 'Communities of Memory' course (11 December 2025, response rate 80 %); (2) written and audio reflections of students collected throughout all phases of the course; (3) instructor field observations; and (4) feedback from community partners – representatives of cultural institutions (NGO 'Kozova.zamok', Centre for Culture and Leisure) and local self-government.

The study acknowledges several limitations. First, the single-case design limits the possibility of direct generalisation. Second, the

author's dual role as instructor and researcher creates a risk of interpretive bias, which is partially mitigated by the inclusion of external data sources (partner feedback, formalised evaluation). Third, student reflective texts may contain elements of social desirability – a typical challenge in service-learning research.

### **Theoretical Framework and Course Architecture**

Community-engaged learning (service-learning, SL) is defined as a structured educational experience in which students participate in organised activities that meet identified community needs, and engage in deep reflection to enhance their understanding of course material and to strengthen civic responsibility (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). The fundamental distinction of SL from traditional academic practice lies in the principle of reciprocity: the university and the community do not stand in a relationship of 'expert to beneficiary,' but enter into an equal dialogue in which local knowledge is recognised as equivalent to academic knowledge.

In accordance with Andrew Furco's typology, the course operates on a model of balanced partnership, wherein academic knowledge and community needs carry equal weight. In contrast to 'extractive' methods of data collection from communities, the community here acts as an active participant. The philosophy of such interaction draws on John Dewey's theory of experiential learning, which holds that knowledge is formed at the intersection of theory and practice. The course was structured around David Kolb's experiential learning cycle: students lived through concrete practical experience, reflected upon it, and only thereafter conceptualised it in the form of new cultural products.

The theoretical framework of memory studies provides the scholarly foundation for practical action. Students employed Maurice Halbwachs's concepts of collective memory and Pierre Nora's 'lieux de mémoire', viewing Kozova's memorial landscapes not as static objects but as dynamic elements of identity. In the context of war, Marianne Hirsch's concept of 'postmemory' becomes critically important for understanding the mechanisms through which trauma is transmitted from previous generations to the present-day youth of the community. Avishai Margalit's 'Ethics of Memory' is central to answering the question of how we remember within communities, and whether memory can constitute

an obligation. It was this philosopher's work that gave the course its name. The aim of the community-engaged project was not merely to assist in preserving the past, but in working through it – in collaboratively searching for a new language with which to address complex experience, an endeavour essential to societal resilience.

The course is structured in five phases that combine theory with social action. The first, motivational phase helps students overcome internal biases and build a productive group dynamic. An exercise in mapping the memory landscape of one's own city allows students to become conscious of their positionality before working in another community's space. Hearing stories of Donetsk, Hurzuf, Dnipro, Chornomorsk, Kostiantynivka, and Lviv – and creating space for varied experiences – proved valuable. This ethical preparation provides the foundation for the second, diagnostic phase. The methodological importance of this stage is confirmed by the ServU (2024) data, which identified a need for youth cultural spaces and cultural education (Priority No. 3). Accordingly, the course set the goal of making memory more accessible through contemporary formats of public history.

The planning phase introduced students to oral history and visual storytelling techniques, enabling the transition to the intensive implementation phase. This phase included three field visits, in which each stage – from introduction to public presentation – was accompanied by iterative feedback and reflection. Students did not simply 'arrive with ready-made solutions,' but developed products (such as the historical game 'Mafia' and community quests) in dialogue with the community. In this scheme, the community functioned as an equal co-author, validating the accuracy and appropriateness of representations of its own heritage.

The inner scaffolding of this structure is a cycle of structured reflection embedded within each phase. Reflection not only consolidates learning but also guards against the instrumentalisation of community experience. It enables the conversion of the emotional and professional stress of fieldwork into a considered civic disposition. The final multiplication phase ensures the durability of outcomes: the tools created are transferred to the cultural institutions of the partner community, and such partnerships sustain the project beyond the conclusion of the semester.

## Empirical Analysis of Outcomes: Educational and Social Dimensions

The evaluation was conducted through an anonymous online questionnaire administered immediately after the course concluded. The response rate was 8 out of 10 students. The questionnaire comprised nine closed Likert-scale items (scored 1-5) and two open-ended reflective questions. This evaluation approach allows for the assessment of the service-learning methodology as an effective instrument not only of social action, but of a profound anthropological transformation of young researchers in cultural studies. The analysis demonstrates that the educational process extended beyond the conventional acquisition of knowledge and became an experience of developing professional and civic agency. The central indicator here is overall student motivation ( $M = 4.00$ ), which exhibited the U-shaped curve characteristic of intensive SL projects. An initial period marked by academic idealism and expectations of rapid results was followed, as expected, by a phase of temporary crisis during active immersion in fieldwork. This phase was defined not only by logistical strain but by the emotional exhaustion arising from direct engagement with complex, and frequently traumatic, community narratives. During the final phase, however – the public presentation of results in Kozova – motivation levels reached their peak. This dynamic is best understood through the lens of Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory: the key drivers were the sense of personal competence derived from producing a viable cultural product and a profound feeling of belonging to a community, which transformed an external academic obligation into an internal value commitment.

*“On the eve of one of our planned visits to the community, a major missile strike took place. We spent the night in a shelter. The following morning we were still uncertain whether to go, but we decided to proceed. We had made a commitment to the community, and they were expecting us.”*

– Sofia Lazorko, course teaching assistant, at the international ServU seminar in Leuven

A notable finding is that all respondents without exception (100 %) reported significant progress in those competencies they had identified as deficient at the beginning of the semester. The highest-rated item was the development of ethical dialogue

(M = 4.63), indicating the overcoming of research-centred self-involvement. Student reflections highlight the complexity of this process: the recognition that a community is simultaneously invested in and biased towards its researchers prompted students to seek subtle 'points of contact.' Working with memory under such conditions required the ability to 'listen and catch what is said between the lines,' to distinguish durable strata of identity from silenced zones of estrangement. Interaction with local youth proved challenging, with the primary goal being to 'break the ice' while avoiding intrusiveness and maintaining an ethics of presence.

*"My image of the community has changed – though I cannot say in which direction. It turned out to be nothing like I had imagined. The community is simultaneously interested in us and guarded. Memory, too, is complex material, so individual that each case requires a careful approach, a search for points of contact. Community memory is, on one hand, something enduring – something on which identity is built – and on the other, still not fully comprehensible to me. Working with young people is difficult, because (as it seems to me) they often perceive you as a threat, since you are an outsider. The main thing is to break the ice and avoid being intrusive or overly persistent."*

– *Kateryna Voitovych, course student, written reflection*

The indicator for the growth of civic responsibility (M = 4.38) correlates with a somewhat lower, yet symptomatic, index for the change in students' perception of small towns (M = 3.75). The statistical dispersion of this parameter suggests that for some students, the Kozova experience constituted a radical discovery of the subjectivity of the Ukrainian province. In practice, the stereotype of the small community as mere 'backdrop' for a larger history was overcome. Instead, the community emerged as a centre of multilayered cultural dynamics. This awareness of peripheral agency is critically important for forming a new generation of recovery professionals capable of viewing communities as equal partners rather than passive recipients of assistance.

In the evaluation report, the highest score was awarded to the block on creating final products (M = 4.75), which exemplified effective public history. Students successfully addressed the community's 'symbolic deficit' through innovative formats. The first area was the gamification of memory – developing a historical quest and the game 'Historical

Mafia: Kozova.’ The application of game mechanics legitimised the discussion of difficult topics – the Holocaust, deportations, war – in a youth context, reducing psychological resistance through the safe space of play. This approach received a strongly positive reception from local intellectuals; Volodymyr Yarema, founder of the Kozova Brewery, noted that these formats ‘bring people and histories to life’ – histories that typically remain on the margins of official chronicles, including the stories of ordinary grandmothers and grandfathers whose lives in the twentieth century were equally extraordinary. The second and third areas of work – a pop-up exhibition, memory mapping, film screening and discussion, and a digital Instagram diary – ensured the visual visibility of local heritage for diverse audiences, from visitors to the ‘Kozova.zamok’ space and the Centre for Culture and Leisure, to the community’s digital sphere.

*“The course gave me the opportunity to rethink many things that might have seemed ordinary or banal. It was fascinating to observe our progress, our work, and our ideas. Collaborative work is what gave life to our projects.”*

– *Anonymous course evaluation*

The success of service-learning depends on the durability of its outcomes. Marichka Yurchak of the cultural institution Kozova.zamok shared: We are currently in the process of restoring and revitalising the castle and will in time become a fully-fledged cultural hub. But the soft formats (the quest and mafia game) can work right now, and we will certainly continue using them. Such feedback confirms that the materials co-created by students and community youth have become a viable format that local youth can continue to develop and implement. Furthermore, the university presence generated indirect social effects: the director of the Centre for Culture and Leisure, Svitlana Andrushkiv, noted that local youth – inspired by the engaged students – took the initiative to establish a Youth Council at the community cultural centre. This demonstrates that the university in the community functions as a mirror, helping the local community to see its own potential and latent resources.

## **Implications for Education and Recovery**

The experience of creating and implementing the ‘Communities of Memory’ course permits the formulation of several strategic

conclusions relevant not only to the local context, but to the broader development of higher education and state recovery policy in Ukraine. This case confirms that community-engaged learning is not merely a pedagogical innovation, but the optimal framework for humanities education under conditions of systemic crisis.

First, the application of service-learning in the context of an ongoing war requires an expansion of the methodological base. Classical SL models – such as those advanced by Bringle and Hatcher or Furco – were developed for the relatively stable societies of Western democracy, in which social challenges are largely predictable. The Ukrainian reality generates a need for additional pedagogical tools: skills for working ethically with grief and trauma directly in the field; high flexibility of formats under conditions of constant uncertainty (for example, conducting events between air-raid alerts); and the researcher's capacity to 'hold a space of presence' alongside another's pain without discontinuing academic work. This new 'pedagogy of the fragile world' constitutes a distinctive Ukrainian contribution to the international debate on the role of universities.

Second, the project confirms that cultural memory, as the subject of community-engaged learning, holds unprecedented potential for community recovery. Unlike infrastructural or economic projects, working with memory addresses questions of identity. It offers the community an answer to the existential question: 'Who are we?' Challenges naturally remain – the ethics of memory and a trauma-sensitive approach – but this approach to a course on cultural memory enables the diagnosis and navigation of those very challenges.

Practice demonstrates that humanities courses can have a measurable societal impact: the collaborative creation of quests, games, and memory maps enables the overcoming of alienation, the integration of marginalised groups (including thousands of IDPs) into a local context, and the formation of an inclusive local identity. Furthermore, the collaboration of universities with cultural institutions in small towns dismantles the postcolonial 'centre-periphery' hierarchy. The Kozova community demonstrated itself not as a passive recipient of cultural services or an object of research, but as an equal co-creator of innovative educational products.

Third, the sustainability of outcomes is directly dependent on the duration of the partnership. Partners from Kozova clearly identified a systemic challenge: the pace of a single academic semester is too fast for the organic processes of community life. For state educational policy, this implies the need for institutional support of multi-year, strategic university–community partnerships, rather than merely the stimulation of one-off courses or short-term grant initiatives. Only the long trajectory allows for the sustainability of the products created and a deep level of trust.

The project also refuted the widespread academic prejudice that social engagement diminishes the theoretical quality of learning. On the contrary, engaging students in the resolution of real community problems enhances academic quality through practical impact. In conditions of war, education must prepare young people to make decisions under total uncertainty. Service-learning cultivates critical reflection and tolerance for ambivalence.

The case of the 'Communities of Memory' course demonstrates that community-engaged learning is not merely a pedagogical innovation, but the optimal framework for humanities education under conditions of systemic crisis. The course fulfilled a dual mission: an educational one – developing measurable, evaluation-confirmed competencies in students; and a social one – leaving the community with durable instruments for working with its own memory and for engaging youth.

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