

UNIVERSITIES AND COMMUNITIES IN TIMES OF WAR: THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY- ORIENTED LEARNING

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Introduction

The contemporary challenges arising from the war and the socio-economic transformation in Ukraine compel the higher education system to seek innovative learning models that not only foster professional competencies but also contribute to social changes. In this context, the concept of service-learning gains relevance. This pedagogical approach integrates academic studies with practical engagement for the benefit of local communities, accompanied by systematic reflection on personal experience. Ukrainian researcher T. Rozvadovska defines community-based learning as an educational approach aimed at developing academic knowledge, practical skills, and responsibility through community service, problem-solving, and working with the community [1].

Such a model enables students not only to acquire knowledge but also to cultivate horizontal solidarity grounded in partnership, mutual support, and collective responsibility. In situations where the traditional vertical model of interaction (university → student → community) fails to ensure effective social integration, service-learning emerges as a tool for behavioral transformation—reshaping young people’s modes of thinking, interaction, and conduct.

Community-oriented learning has four main characteristics: comprehensive and high-quality education; initiatives aimed at meeting real needs in the community; active role of students in planning, developing and evaluating a community-oriented project; integration of educational content with practice with the community and for the community [2].

Moreover, service-learning opens pathways for developing future-oriented competencies, including communication, social, emotional, and civic skills—critical in the context of war and post-war recovery. The full-scale war initiated by Russia against Ukraine has led to a growing number of vulnerable populations: internally displaced persons (IDPs), veterans with varying degrees of injury and PTSD, families of fallen or missing defenders, individuals who have lost loved ones or housing due to shelling, those who have lost employment, people forced to emigrate due to lack of support or prospects, volunteers at high risk of emotional burnout, residents of depressed small towns, elderly individuals and persons with disabilities, families living below the poverty line, and individuals with addictions (alcohol, drugs, gambling, eating disorders, etc.).

To understand the financial situation of IDPs and former IDPs (those who have returned to their place of residence), a noteworthy survey was conducted by Rating Online LLC as part of the project “Women in War: Motivations to Stay and Reasons to Leave.” The survey covered the entire territory of Ukraine, excluding temporarily occupied areas and regions without Ukrainian mobile coverage at the time of data collection. The survey conducted between 23rd to 30th Jan 2025 targeted women of ages 18–60 residing in Ukraine. The sample included 2,337 respondents. According to the findings, 14 % of participants reported the lowest income level—insufficient even for basic food needs. The largest group (34 %) had enough for food but struggled to afford clothing. Thus, nearly half of Ukrainian women fall into the two lowest income categories. One out of four respondents reported a moderate level of financial well-being, while only 2 % belonged to the highest-income group, capable of making any purchases [3].

Considering these findings, engaging students in social projects becomes a critical task for both higher education institutions and communities. This necessitates the cultivation service culture – one that constructively counters excessive individualization and promotes socially responsible citizenship.

Methodology

The research employs a combination of methodological approaches:

Socio-pedagogical approach – to analyze educational practices, learning strategies, and competence development;

Behavioral approach – to examine changes in student behavior patterns, the influence of group norms, peer effects, incentives, and nudges;

Systems approach – to assess the interaction among students, educators, and communities as an integrated system of horizontal solidarity.

Service-learning is rooted in experiential learning, whereby students engage in community-based activities, critically reflect on their experiences, and integrate these insights into their educational, volunteer, and professional trajectories. Some educational institutions offer master's programs in Nonprofit Organization Management. At the Lviv Polytechnic National University or instance, the undergraduate program in Management includes a third-year course titled "Social Management."

Service-learning comprises three core elements:

- Learning;
- Serving;
- Reflecting.

Bachelor's level students are required to complete a mandatory course project in teams of four, comprising a project leader, a marketing specialist, a content manager, and a fundraiser. This project involves the analysis of social initiatives in terms of their feasibility, relevance, social significance, the needs they address, the target groups they serve, planning for project implementation, creation of social media resources and their informational content, negotiation with key stakeholders, and achievement of project goals.

To conduct the analysis, a combination of research methods are employed:

- theoretical literature review;
- empirical methods: student surveys and questionnaires, interviews with instructors and project supervisors, observation of group interactions among students, and case analysis of social and marketing projects.

"A compelling case from the field of education: "How to hold a mathematical function in your hand." Johannes Kepler University Linz is integrating 3D printing into the learning process to make mathematics more visual and accessible. Instructors use GeoGebra

software to create physical models of complex functions and geometric objects, helping students better understand abstract concepts through touch.

Special attention is given to inclusive education, as tactile models allow blind learners to study material that was previously inaccessible to them. The university chooses reliable equipment from the Czech manufacturer Prusa, known for its ease of use, enabling future teachers to focus on creativity rather than technical challenges.

This approach prepares a new generation of educators to implement modern technologies in everyday teaching, transforming learning into an engaging exploration” [4].

Analysis or reflective evidence

Since the 1980s, the term service-learning has gained recognition as an educational approach aimed at developing academic knowledge, practical skills, and responsible attitudes through addressing community problems in collaboration with the community itself [5]. Over time, however, the term service has increasingly come to be associated with customer service. As a result, the term community-oriented learning has been adopted to better reflect the pedagogical intent. This form of learning is grounded in a deep understanding of the concept of solidarity.

Culture of Solidarity refers to a set of values, norms, practices, and modes of interaction based on mutual support, empathy, and shared responsibility. It manifests when individuals and communities act not only in their own interest but also consider the well-being of others – especially during times of crisis or adversity.

Key features of a culture of solidarity:

Empathy – the ability to recognize and respond to the needs of others with compassion.

Mutual assistance – the willingness to offer support even in the absence of direct personal benefit.

Trust – the recognition of shared goals and belief in collective action.

Civic responsibility – active participation in societal processes, volunteerism, and community initiatives.

Tolerance in diversity – embracing differences as sources of strength rather than threats.

In educational system and social practices, fostering a culture of solidarity entails:

- developing collaboration and dialogue skills;
- learning through social initiatives and collaborative projects;
- cultivating critical thinking about social inequalities and shared responsibility for changes.

The recognition of solidarity as an acknowledgment of fundamental human rights is interpreted by some scholars as horizontal solidarity. It differs from vertical solidarity, or what is sometimes referred to as naïve solidarity, in that the latter typically focuses on charity or state assistance delivered in a “top-down” manner, often framed through patronage and condescension.

Social oriented learning aims to go beyond the vertical model, as it recognizes the dignity of all individuals and communities, as well as the right to mutually beneficial relationships.

Horizontal solidarity is grounded in the recognition of others’ identities and in the acceptance that – even in contexts marked by unequal access to economic and cultural resources – we all have something to give and something to learn: from those who are stronger than us, and from those who are more vulnerable.

It is evident that contemporary Ukrainian society is deeply polarized: between those who have fought in the war and those who have not; those who have lost loved ones and those who have not; those who have experienced domestic violence and those who have not, and so forth. Nevertheless, engagement with the lives of vulnerable populations – through initiatives, support programs, and mutual aid – offers students, educators, and mentors invaluable experiential learning.

To foster horizontal solidarity, students must develop critical thinking skills, the ability to understand complex causal relationships and social issues, and a high level of emotional intelligence. Lviv Polytechnic National University is one of the most dynamic educational hubs in Ukraine, where engineering, humanities, and management education are integrated into a shared space of societal development. The principle of the “university as a city driver” is implemented here through numerous initiatives that combine science, innovation, and social responsibility.

Educational programs are designed with elements of social impact. Specifically, at the bachelor’s and master’s levels, Lviv Polytechnic

National University actively develops project-based learning, where academic tasks are directly linked to the real needs of the community. For example:

The Institute of Economics and Management (Department of Management of Organizations), within the course Social Management, develops projects with a social mission to support families at social risk, pensioners, children with illnesses, and veterans who have returned from the war, etc.

The Institute of Architecture and Design offers courses in which students create urban concepts for public spaces in Lviv, regional towns, or communities affected by the war. Some of these projects have been showcased in public exhibitions, and several have formed the basis for real urban planning solutions.

Students of the *Vyacheslav Chornovil Institute of Sustainable Development* participate in the Green City and Energy-Efficient Community programs, where they design models of environmental education for schools and municipal institutions, and conduct energy-saving training for residents.

As part of the Smart City Lviv program, students of technical disciplines develop digital solutions – from chatbots for municipal services to systems for monitoring traffic and air quality. These practices combine academic training with public benefit, fostering systems thinking, innovation, and social empathy.

Several university-based structures function as educational collaboration labs, including:

Tech StartUp School – a platform that supports student startups focused on social innovation. Examples include mobile apps for assisting people with disabilities, eco-filters for water purification, and systems for safe movement at night.

Urban Curators Lab – an inter-institutional initiative that brings together architects, designers, sociologists, and programmers to create inclusive urban solutions. One of its projects, Barrier-Free Lviv, involved mapping public buildings and creating a digital accessibility database.

These platforms foster the development of co-creation, teamwork, and entrepreneurial competencies, teaching students not only technical skills but also social responsibility, civic engagement, and empathy.

An important component of socially oriented practices at Lviv Polytechnic National University is the activity of the Student Government and the Council of Young Scientists. They initiate and implement socially significant projects such as the charity campaigns Lviv Polytechnic Supports the Armed Forces of Ukraine and Warmth for the Front, where students produce trench candles, camouflage nets, and collect humanitarian aid. They also lead the Green Polytechnic project, organizing campus greening events, recycling drives, and more.

Lviv Polytechnic National University participates in numerous international programs aimed at advancing socially oriented approaches:

ERASMUS+ “Social Impact of Education”, where students develop projects to improve the educational environment in local communities.

Horizon Europe “Sustainable Cities and Communities”, within which Lviv-based researchers work on urban solutions for climate adaptation. The *“CivicTech4Democracy”* program, in collaboration with universities from Poland and Germany, promotes the development of a digital culture of civic engagement.

Participation in these programs fosters students’ transcultural communication, digital literacy, and global thinking.

One of the defining features of Lviv Polytechnic National University is its integration into the urban development ecosystem. The university collaborates with the Lviv City Council, the IT Cluster, and NGOs such as Khmarochos, Eco-Busol, and the Platform of Urban Initiatives, among others.

During the Innovative Community project, students developed IT solutions for municipal services.

In partnership with businesses, the university established the Career Hub, which combines academic learning with mentorship from socially responsible companies.

Within the Urban School of Urbanism, students engage in discussions with community representatives, exploring models of sustainable urban planning.

These examples show that Lviv Polytechnic cultivates a humanistic dimension of engineering education, guiding students not only toward professional success but also toward public benefit.

Thus, the university's activities demonstrate that education can serve as a tool for social impact, and the formation of future competencies is the result of combining academic preparation, hands-on community experience, interdisciplinary collaboration, and value-based education.

The university becomes a space of collaborative action, where students learn not only to think, but also to act – innovatively, ethically, and responsibly.

Implications for education, policy, or recovery. Socially-Oriented Learning (SOL) enables students to better understand social realities and develop a sense of empathy – compassion and shared experience. It also fosters reflection as a pathway to building effective forms of solidarity. SOL is an educational approach that combines theoretical learning with practical activities for the benefit of society, encouraging a shift from passive knowledge consumption to active, horizontal solidarity. It involves student collaboration with communities to address social challenges, develop critical thinking, and cultivate leadership. This approach makes learning more practical and positions students as active participants in civic life rather than passive recipients of services. Socially oriented educational practices enhance community resilience. They mobilize human potential, strengthen civic participation, and foster a culture of collaboration – especially vital in times of war and national reconstruction.

Institutional support for socially driven educational programs is essential for modernizing education. Integrating socially oriented practices into university development strategies, educational standards, and partnership policies will ensure the sustainability of these mechanisms and embed them into national education and youth development policy.

The formation of future competencies is a strategic goal of national education policy. As Ukraine undergoes transformation and recovery, it needs a generation of young professionals who combine intellectual potential with civic maturity – individuals capable not only of adapting to change but of actively shaping a new quality of social life.

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