

FROM ENGAGEMENT TO BELONGING: REFLECTING ON SERVICE-LEARNING AND THE DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON

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This article explores service-learning methodology as a pedagogical and institutional practice grounded in the dignity of the human person. Drawing on theological perspectives on disability and dignity, alongside a case study from the Ukrainian Catholic University, this paper argues that inclusion must be understood as a relational and structural principle rooted in the inherent dignity of every person. It critiques both medical and purely social models of disability for their insufficient attention to relationality and proposes a dignity-centred framework that emphasizes mutual recognition, vulnerability, and encounter.

The case study of the inclusive service-learning project “I Want to Be Your Friend” demonstrates how inclusive practices can be institutionalized through curriculum integration, reflective assessment, and mutual community partnerships. The findings suggest that inclusive service-learning not only improves student learning but also builds the university as a space of belonging. Ultimately, the article proposes that inclusive service-learning, when grounded in dignity, has the potential to transform both educational institutions and the broader social imagination by fostering relationships that affirm the equal worth of all participants.

Introduction

Contemporary education increases beyond the mere transmission of knowledge and the formation of professional skills. It is becoming a space of responsibility, encounter, and the co-creation of the common good. In this context, service-learning emerges not only as a pedagogical innovation but as a response to a deeper anthropological question: how can we teach a person to be with

others, for others, and together with others? As the experience of Ukrainian Catholic University demonstrates, being the first university in Ukraine to implement this approach institutionally¹, service-learning integrates academic learning with real community needs, shaping not only competencies but also a responsible attitude toward society.

At the same time, service-learning cannot be reduced to a tool of experiential education or social volunteering. Its deeper meaning lies in transforming the very logic of interaction: from a vertical model of assistance to a horizontal model of participation. It is not an activity done *for* the community, but an experience lived *with* the community, where each person becomes both a learner and a teacher. Such an approach opens the possibility of cultivating a culture of reciprocity in which human dignity is revealed not as an abstract principle, but as a lived experience of encounter.

This article is grounded in the confidence that service-learning has the potential to transform the educational process from mere engagement to a deeper sense of belonging. While engagement implies participation in activities, belonging signifies something more profound – to be accepted, to be needed, to become a co-creator of a shared space. It is precisely in this transition that the connection between education and the dignity of the human person becomes visible.

The experience of implementing service-learning in courses in philosophy, theology, and the humanities shows that education can become a space of genuine encounter. Service-learning is not merely a method it is a spiritual and cultural pathway, one that connects knowledge with compassion and transforms teaching into an act of hope. In this sense, teaching becomes an act of faith in the human person and a practice of hope, especially in times of crisis, war, or social instability.

Thus, this article approaches service-learning not only as a pedagogical model, but as an anthropological and ethical space in which dignity is formed through exchange, encounter, and

1 “УКУ – перший університет в Україні, який на інституційному рівні впроваджує освітній підхід Service Learning – «Суспільно-орієнтоване навчання»”, Український католицький університет, November 16, 2021, <https://ucu.edu.ua/news/uku-pershyj-universytet-v-ukrayini-yakyj-na-instytutstijnomu-rivni-vprovadzhuye-osvitnij-pidhid-service-learning-suspilno-oriyentovane-navchannya/>

belonging. The movement from engagement to belonging opens a new vision of education—as a space where a person not only learns to act, but learns to be with others, and through this, discovers their own dignity.

Words Matter: Rethinking Inclusion

The concept of inclusion in higher education is often approached through institutional frameworks that emphasize access and participation. While these dimensions are essential, they risk overlooking a more fundamental question: what does it mean to recognize the dignity of another person?

Contemporary disability studies have highlighted the limitations of the medical model, which tends to define individuals in terms of deficits or impairments. In this model, the person is often reduced to a problem to be solved or a condition to be treated. Although this perspective has contributed to important medical and rehabilitative advances, it can inadvertently undermine the agency and subjectivity of individuals with disabilities.²

In contrast, the social model of disability shifts attention from the individual to the environment, emphasizing the role of social barriers in producing exclusion. Accessibility, accommodation, and rights-based frameworks emerge from this model, enabling greater participation in public life. Yet even this model has its limits. As theological reflections on disability suggest, the social model may fail to account for the relational and existential dimensions of human life, particularly vulnerability, dependence, and the need for meaningful relationships.³

A deeper understanding of inclusion must therefore be rooted in the recognition of human dignity as intrinsic and non-negotiable. Human dignity is not something that needs to be proven, justified, or earned. A particularly powerful illustration

² See. World Health Organization, *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems, 10th Revision (ICD-10)*, vol. 1: Tabular List, 5th ed. (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2016).

World Health Organization, *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF)* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2001).

³ See. Talitha Cooreman-Guittin & Armand Léon van Ommen (2022) Disability theology: a driving force for change?, *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 22:1, 1–4, DOI: 10.1080/1474225X.2022.2046760

of this problem emerges not from abstract theory but from lived experience. Sophie Lutz, the mother of Philippine (a girl with multiple disabilities), reflects on an invitation she once received to speak about the dignity of persons with disabilities. What initially appeared as a well-intentioned request gradually revealed a deeper, troubling assumption: that people with disabilities must somehow explain or justify their dignity. As she recognized, such a request implicitly communicates a hidden message: “Explain why you have the right to be here. Prove that your dignity is equal to that of others.”⁴ This expectation exposes a fundamental misunderstanding of human dignity. Dignity is not something that needs to be demonstrated, argued for, or earned; it is inherent and equal in every human person.

This example reveals how deeply embedded the logic of conditional worth remains, even within inclusive or educational contexts. It also shows that exclusion does not always take the form of overt rejection; it can manifest in subtle demands for justification that place the burden of proof on those whose dignity should never be questioned.

Gordon Temple, who is responsible for fostering inclusive environments in British churches, argues that when we speak of *impairment*, we refer to the person, whereas when we speak of *disability*, we refer to the environment and society’s response to that person.⁵ A fundamental principle of an inclusive society, he emphasizes, is “Nothing about us without us.” In other words, it is inappropriate to speak about people with disabilities without their participation. They must have a voice, rights, and responsibilities that enable them to act in accordance with their own interests. Temple also stresses that both the medical and the social models of disability have their respective roles, and that they are most effective when they complement rather than exclude one another.

At the same time, the very term *inclusion* carries an implicit belief: it accepts that someone has first been excluded and must now be “brought back” into society. In this sense, inclusion is not a neutral concept; it reveals prior processes of marginalisation and

⁴ Sophie Lutz *Derrière les apparences* (Emmanuel, 2012), 27–31.

⁵ Gordon Temple *Enabling Church: A Bible-Based Resource Towards The Full Inclusion Of Disabled People* (SPCK Publishing, 2012) (Kindle).

exclusion. This raises a deeper question, whether inclusion should be understood merely as the act of incorporating those who were previously excluded, or as a more radical transformation of the social order itself, in which no one is ever positioned outside the community to begin with. Yet, for now, we do not have more enough language, and the term “inclusion” remains both necessary and insufficient.

Marilyn Hull, the wife of theologian John Hull, who lost his sight in adulthood, once remarked that it is not enough merely to speak about inclusion or to make minor adjustments toward a more inclusive world. Rather, the world should become so fully inclusive that we, as people who will all eventually experience some form of limitation (such as through aging) would not even notice it.

Service-Learning as a Practice of Encounter

When viewed through the lens of dignity, service-learning undergoes a profound transformation. Traditional models often position students as active agents who provide assistance to passive recipients. This asymmetry can reinforce paternalistic attitudes and obscure the dignity of those being “served.”

Inclusive service-learning challenges this dynamic by emphasizing encounter rather than service. Encounter implies a meeting between persons who are equally endowed with dignity, even if they occupy different social positions. It is not oriented toward solving problems alone but toward recognizing the presence of the other.⁶

Theological reflections on disability offer a powerful insight in this regard: the most significant form of “healing” in the Gospel is not always physical restoration but the restoration of relational visibility.⁷ Those whom Christ encounters, often marginalized, excluded, or deemed impure are first made visible, touched, and included in community. Healing, in this sense, involves overcoming

⁶ See. Yuliia Vintoniv, “Theology of DisArt: Service-Learning Experience.” In Proceedings of the IV Uniservitate Global Symposium, De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines, November 8–9, 2023. Uniservitate Collection, 2024.

⁷ John M. Hull In the beginning there was Darkness. A blind person’s conversations with the Bible (Trinity Press International, 2001), 34–59.

social and symbolic exclusion rather than merely correcting physical conditions.

This perspective has important implications for service-learning. It suggests that the primary goal is not to change the other but to enter into a relationship that allows both participants to be transformed. Students are not simply agents of change; they are also recipients of an encounter that may challenge their assumptions, expose their vulnerabilities, and reshape their understanding of themselves and others.

Vulnerability plays a central role in this process. As Brené Brown suggests in *Daring Greatly*, the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way we live, love, parent, and lead. In the context of service-learning, this insight reveals that genuine encounters require openness to uncertainty, emotional exposure, and the possibility of being changed by the relationship.⁸ Students may face situations where their knowledge is insufficient, their expectations are disrupted, and their role becomes unclear. Rather than being a failure, this experience can become site of learning, revealing the limits of instrumental approaches and the importance of presence.

Service-learning can be seen as a response to the growing “normalization of disconnection” in higher education.⁹ Even though we are more connected than ever through technology, many students and teachers still experience isolation and a lack of real relationships. This sense of disconnection becomes even stronger in times of crisis. In Ukraine, the ongoing war has deeply affected everyday life, creating fear, uncertainty, and fragmentation, while at the same time intensifying the need for connection and solidarity. In this context, service-learning creates opportunities for real encounter. It brings people together and reminds us that “we need each other. We need connection”¹⁰. Human dignity is not something we experience alone it becomes visible in relationships with others, especially in moments of vulnerability and shared struggle. A key

⁸ See. Brené Brown *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (Avery, 2012) (Kindle).

⁹ Amy L Kenworthy, Sophia Opatska, and Yulia Vintoniv “Provocation Essay (Re)discovering connection and community: A call to move beyond the ‘normalization of disconnection’” *Management Learning*, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13505076251324651>

¹⁰ Ibid.

shift in this process is the movement from “I” to “We”.¹¹ Students, teachers, and community members begin to work together, not as helpers and recipients, but as partners who learn from each other and support one another. This kind of learning requires vulnerability. It asks people to be open, to listen, and to accept that they may be changed by the encounter. In a context of war, such encounters can become a form of solidarity a way of staying connected to reality, to others, and to a shared sense of purpose.

Inclusive Leadership as Presence: The “I Want to Be Your Friend” Project

The course “The Art of Leadership” introduced in the autumn of 2022, emerged as a response to the urgent need to form a new generation of leaders capable of contributing to the rebuilding of Ukraine in the context of war. Conceived as a laboratory of inclusive leadership, the course integrates theoretical reflection with lived encounter, challenging students to rethink leadership not as power but as presence, responsibility, and relationship. It is structured around video lectures and meetings with Archbishop Borys Gudziak¹², complemented by course readings, discussions, and a range of academic assignments. At its core, however, lies a service-learning project. Implemented in partnership with the NGO Maisternia Mrii (Dream Workshop), the course engages students in sustained, relational interaction with people with intellectual disabilities through the project “*I want to be your friend.*” In this way, leadership is learned not abstractly, but through concrete practices of encounter, friendship, and shared experience. Inspired by Archbishop Borys Gudziak’s vision of leadership as service, the course redefined leadership beyond administrative or hierarchical frameworks. Leadership here was not understood as influence, control, or efficiency, but as presence, responsibility, and friendship. This shift was not merely conceptual; it was embodied

¹¹ Amy L Kenworthy, Sophia Opatska, and Yulia Vintoniv “Provocation Essay (Re)discovering connection and community: A call to move beyond the ‘normalization of disconnection’” *Management Learning*, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13505076251324651>

¹² Ukrainian Catholic University, “Leadership: What Really Matters? A Reflective Course with Borys Gudziak,” *UCU Online*, accessed May 1, 2026, <https://online.ucu.edu.ua/courses/66d23471e4ee1dd97d93754b>. Based on this course, the author co-teaches the course “The Art of Leadership.”

in concrete practices of encounter, co-creation, and shared time. As an integral element of the course, service-learning provided the framework in which these practices could take shape, allowing students to experience leadership through real relationships and shared responsibility within the community. Students did not “serve” others in a traditional sense. Rather, they entered into relationships that challenged asymmetries between helper and recipient. The experience gradually destabilized preconceived notions of ability, usefulness, and value. As one student reflects: “I began to perceive people as people. Not higher, not lower, but here, nearby”¹³. This recognition of equality marks a foundational transformation: dignity is not granted through action but revealed through encounter. In this context, leadership becomes the capacity to remain in relationship without reducing the other to a task or problem.

A key pedagogical dimension of the course was structured reflection. Students were required to articulate their experiences, including moments of discomfort, confusion, and transformation. These reflections reveal that one of the most significant shifts was the move from doing to being. Presence itself became meaningful: “They are okay with me just sitting there... they do not need me only when I am in a ‘good state’”¹⁴. Such insights challenge deeply ingrained assumptions about productivity and worth. Students discovered that their value in the relationship was not tied to performance, but to authenticity and availability.

The relational nature of the experience also reconfigured students’ understanding of belonging. Rather than entering as outsiders who contribute, they found themselves becoming part of a shared space: “I can just be. I can receive what others give...I am finally present to myself”¹⁵.

Importantly, the experience was marked by mutuality rather than one-directional giving. Students repeatedly emphasize that what they received exceeded what they offered: “I am glad that I could bring a little warmth into their lives and receive even more in return.”

¹³ Anastasiia Brus, BA student in Sociology at Ukrainian Catholic University, reflection on the course “The Art of Leadership” (2022–2023).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ This mutuality interrupts the logic of charity and replaces it with a model of shared humanity. Leadership, in this sense, is not about changing others but about allowing oneself to be changed through relationship.

Moments of shared joy, simplicity, and co-presence further reinforced this transformation: “We sincerely talked with each other as equals”¹⁷ and “They rejoiced in every small detail as if it were a diamond.”¹⁸ These experiences reveal that inclusive leadership is not enacted through extraordinary interventions, but through attentiveness to ordinary moments. The ability to recognize value in what appears small or insignificant becomes a key leadership competency.

At the same time, students encountered vulnerability, both their own and that of others. They faced uncertainty, emotional intensity, and the limits of their own expectations. Yet these moments were not obstacles but essential to learning: “In difficult situations... there is always someone who is also here, and in this, a friend appears.”¹⁹ Such reflections point to a crucial insight: inclusion is not the elimination of difficulty, but the willingness to remain in relationship within it.

Ultimately, the course demonstrates that inclusive leadership emerges not from mastery, but from encounter. It is grounded in the recognition that dignity is already present and does not need to be produced. What is required is the capacity to see, to remain, and to respond. In this sense, the project “I Want to Be Your Friend” embodies a fundamental reorientation of leadership: from power to presence, from action to relationship, and from service to shared life.

At its deepest level, this also redefines the purpose of education itself. The most important learning does not consist in acquiring skills or achieving outcomes, but in recognizing that human dignity

¹⁶ Lilia Biliak, BA student in Social Pedagogy at Ukrainian Catholic University, reflection on the course “The Art of Leadership” (2023–2024).

¹⁷ Danyil Rozvodovskyi, “The Art of Leadership” 2024–2025.

¹⁸ Khrystyna Havryliv, BA student in the Ethics–Politics–Economics program at Ukrainian Catholic University, reflection on the course “The Art of Leadership” (2022–2023)

¹⁹ Mykhailo Rozum, BA student in Law at Ukrainian Catholic University, reflection on the course “The Art of Leadership” 2024–2025.

is a given, something that precedes all action, performance, and evaluation. Education, therefore, becomes the space where this dignity is not taught as a concept but encountered as a reality. To learn, in this context, is to learn to see the other not as a task, a role, or a problem, but as a person whose worth is already complete.

Conclusion

Inclusive service-learning, when grounded in the dignity of the human person, offers a powerful framework for transforming higher education. It challenges instrumental approaches to learning and invites a reimagining of education as a relational and ethical practice.

The case of the Ukrainian Catholic University demonstrates that such transformation is possible when inclusion is understood not as an obligation but as a response to the inherent worth of every person. In this context, service-learning becomes more than a pedagogical method; it becomes a way of encountering others and, in doing so, rediscovering what it means to be human.

In the most recent iteration of the course (2025–2026), this approach has begun to develop further, as the partnership with *Maisternia Mrii* gradually evolves into forms of shared service directed toward a third party. This emerging dimension suggests a new stage in the development of inclusive service-learning, where relationships of encounter extend into broader networks of solidarity. While this direction opens important questions about the transformation of both leadership and community engagement, it will be explored in future research.

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