

FROM RESPONSE TO RECOVERY: SERVICE-LEARNING AS A COMPONENT OF KNOWLEDGE INFRASTRUCTURE IN TIMES OF WAR AND GEOPOLITICAL TURBULENCE

Myroslava Chekh¹ <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6787-8067>

¹*Ukrainian Catholic University, Lviv, Ukraine*

Corresponding author: miroslava@ucu.edu.ua

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Abstract

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has revealed the limits of traditional academic and civic systems while underscoring the need for agile, democratic, and socially embedded knowledge production. In this context, service-learning (SL) – linking academic study with community engagement – has become a vital element of Ukraine's knowledge infrastructure during the most turbulent times. This paper examines how SL functions as a connective, participatory, and resilience-building educational practice within a broader landscape of geopolitical turbulence. Focusing on the Ukrainian Catholic University (UCU) experience and drawing on the international ServU project, it shows how SL has enabled students, faculty, and local communities to co-create knowledge relevant to immediate challenges including displacement, community support, trauma response, and local governance under stress. The analysis situates the Ukrainian case within a comparative international framework and concludes by proposing the creation of a Policy Lab as a mechanism for institutionalising SL – moving from course-based engagement to a sustained, university-wide platform for applied research and policy co-creation.

Problem Framing

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, launched in February 2022, has confronted higher education institutions with a crisis that is simultaneously physical, epistemic, and civic. Universities have faced the destruction of infrastructure, mass displacement of students and faculty, the psychological burden of sustained

warfare, and the imperative to remain socially relevant in conditions of urgent community need. What the war has exposed with unusual clarity is that traditional academic structures – designed for stability and continuity – are inadequately equipped to respond to the complex, urgent, and rapidly shifting problems that communities under stress actually face.

This crisis is, on the other hand, an epistemological one. The invasion has revealed the limits of knowledge systems that operate in separation from the communities they supposedly serve. It has underscored the need for agile, democratic, and socially embedded knowledge production: forms of inquiry and learning capable of generating practically useful understanding while remaining accountable to those most affected by war and displacement. In this sense, the crisis has not created new demands so much as made existing ones impossible to defer.

Service-learning (SL) – the pedagogical approach that links structured academic study with meaningful community engagement and critical reflection – has emerged in this context as more than a curriculum design strategy. At Ukrainian Catholic University (UCU) in Lviv, and across a growing number of Ukrainian institutions, it has functioned as connective link between the university and the communities it serves, sustaining social ties and co-producing knowledge when other infrastructures have been disrupted. This paper argues that SL, when embedded institutionally rather than practised sporadically, constitutes a vital component of resilient knowledge infrastructure: the relational, institutional, and pedagogical arrangements through which knowledge is produced, shared, and put to use in times of both stability and crisis (see Figure 1).

The problem this paper addresses is threefold. First, there is a conceptual gap: SL has been extensively theorised in North American and Western European contexts but has received less systematic attention in conflict-affected or post-Soviet educational settings (Kenworthy et al., 2025). Second, there is a practice gap: many Ukrainian universities that have informally mobilised community-engaged activities since 2022 lack frameworks to institutionalise, evaluate, or scale these efforts. Third, there is a policy gap: existing national strategies for higher education recovery have tended to prioritise physical reconstruction and

internationalisation while undervaluing pedagogical innovation rooted in civic engagement.

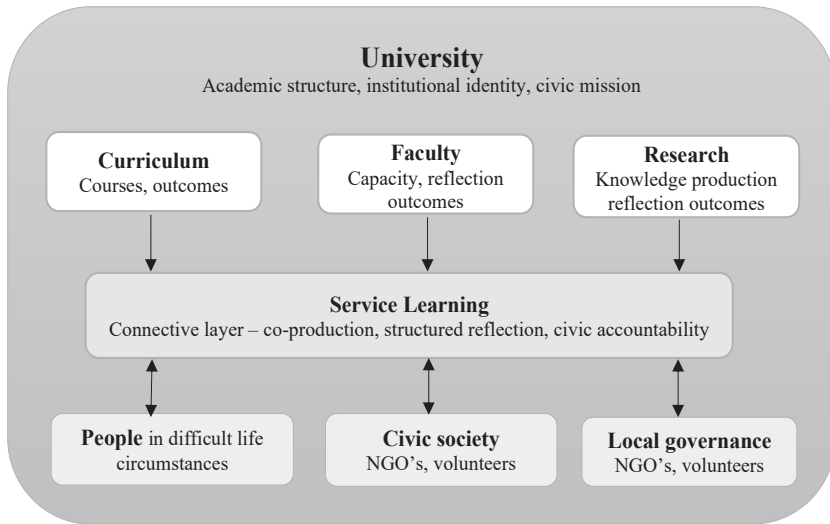


Figure 1. Service-learning as a connective layer of knowledge infrastructure

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Star & Ruhleder (1996) and Bringle & Hatcher (1996).

Approach and Sources of Evidence

This paper employs a combination of conceptual analysis and reflective practitioner evidence. It draws on the author's direct experience of integrating service-learning into university courses at UCU during the period 2022–2025, and on participation in the ServU international project – a grant-funded initiative that supported SL implementation across multiple universities through curriculum development, joint research by students and faculty in collaboration with the local community, teachers training, and train-the-trainer activities. This experience is situated alongside a selective review of international scholarship on SL in conflict-affected and post-crisis educational settings.

The analytical framework brings together three intersecting bodies of literature: service-learning theory (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996;

Eyler & Giles, 1999); knowledge infrastructure studies (Star & Ruhleder, 1996); and a growing body of scholarship specifically addressing SL and higher education in crisis contexts, including foundational work by Kenworthy and Opatska (2023), the collective provocation of Kenworthy et al. (2025), and the UCU-grounded empirical analysis of Chekh and Vasyltsia (2026). The reflective component follows Schön's (1983) concept of reflection-on-action: the practitioner retrospectively examines institutional responses for broader theoretical and policy implications – a mode of inquiry particularly appropriate in contexts where large-scale empirical study remains difficult to conduct.

Analytical Findings

UCU's engagement with service-learning preceded the full-scale invasion, and this prior institutionalisation is central to understanding its wartime relevance. UCU was, in fact, the first Ukrainian university to institutionally implement the SL approach (Ukrainian Catholic University, 2019). Before February 2022, several faculties had already developed course-embedded community engagement components: students in social work, communications, public administration and the humanities were placed in NGOs, schools, and civic organisations, as part of structured learning activities with explicit reflective requirements. The war did not suspend these practices – it intensified them and revealed their structural significance as a form of knowledge infrastructure that physical disruption could not easily destroy.

Analyzing UCU wartime SL experience we can define several dimensions:

- co-creating knowledge under displacement and stress;
- trauma response and the pedagogical value of reflection;
- local governance under stress and civic knowledge production;
- international collaboration and the exchange of knowledge.

Co-creating knowledge under displacement and stress. Lviv rapidly became a transit and settlement hub for internally displaced persons (IDPs) from eastern and southern Ukraine. Students in SL-integrated courses were positioned not as service providers in a charitable sense but as co-researchers and co-designers: documenting needs, mapping available resources, facilitating

communication between displaced families and local institutions, and contributing to the design of practical responses. As Chekh and Vasylytsia (2026) demonstrate through case-study evidence from UCU, this kind of wartime SL engagement effectively enacts the core principles of education for sustainable development – not as an abstract ideal, but as a lived pedagogical reality. The knowledge generated was simultaneously academically rigorous and immediately applicable, a combination that neither conventional coursework nor unstructured humanitarian voluntarism could easily produce.

Trauma response and the pedagogical value of reflection. Students working with displaced communities, veteran support organisations, and families of the wounded encountered psychological and emotional material that standard academic preparation does not address. This created demand for a new kind of curricular integration: one in which structured reflection – the defining pedagogical element of SL – became not merely an academic requirement but a necessary processing mechanism. Reflections, facilitated seminars, and peer dialogue provided epistemic consolidation: spaces in which raw, often disturbing experience was transformed into learnable, communicable, and transferable knowledge. This is a pedagogical function that neither purely academic nor purely humanitarian frameworks can replicate, and it represents one of SL's most undertheorised contributions to crisis education.

Local governance under stress and civic knowledge production. A third dimension of UCU's wartime SL experience concerns the challenge of local governance. Communities receiving large numbers of displaced persons, adapting to wartime resource constraints, and supporting families of mobilised soldiers faced governance challenges for which existing administrative frameworks were insufficient. SL courses that engaged students with local government bodies, community organisations, and civic initiatives created channels through which university-based analytical capacity was directed at real governance problems, such as policy briefs, facilitation support, communication materials. Modest contributions individually, but meaningful as part of a sustained pattern of engagement that a Policy Lab model, described in the implications section, is designed to scale.

International collaboration and the exchange of knowledge in crisis environment

The UCU faculty participation in the ServU international project offers an important comparative reference point. ServU, involving multiple European partner universities, worked to embed SL across different national higher education contexts through curriculum development, faculty capacity-building, and train-the-trainer programmes. The cross-national dimension highlighted both the universality of SL's core principles and the importance of contextual adaptation: what works institutionally in a stable Western European setting requires significant translation for a Ukrainian university operating under wartime conditions. Equally, the Ukrainian experience generated insights that enriched the project's comparative framework – about urgency, about community need as a curriculum driver, about institutional identity as an enabling condition.

This bidirectional learning resonates directly with the argument made by Kenworthy et al. (2025), whose essay constitutes an urgent provocation for academics in non-crisis environments to proactively reach out to colleagues in Ukraine and other severely disrupted contexts. Their call is not merely ethical but epistemological: crisis environments generate knowledge about SL, pedagogy, and institutional resilience that stable contexts cannot produce. The UCU experience, shaped by ongoing warfare, large-scale displacement, and sustained civic mobilisation, offers precisely this kind of contextually specific and theoretically generative knowledge. Making it visible and available to the international scholarly community is part of what knowledge infrastructure, in a genuinely democratic sense, requires.

Viewed together, these dimensions of UCU's experience confirm a central theoretical claim: the most resilient elements of institutional response were those that were already structurally embedded. Infrastructure, as Star and Ruhleder (1996) argue, becomes visible precisely when it breaks down. What the war has made visible is that relational, community-embedded pedagogical practices constitute a layer of educational infrastructure that physical disruption cannot easily dismantle and that their absence significantly constrains the quality and sustainability of institutional response.

Implications for Education, Policy, and Recovery

The analysis developed in this paper carries implications that extend beyond the Ukrainian case, though they speak most directly to the situation of conflict-affected higher education systems navigating the transition from emergency response to sustained recovery.

For educational practice, the UCU experience suggests that SL, when embedded in the curriculum prior to crisis, functions as a form of pedagogical resilience. Institutions seeking to build recovery-oriented curricula should move beyond emergency voluntarism toward sustained course integration: designing learning outcomes that explicitly connect disciplinary knowledge with community recovery challenges, embedding reflective practice into assessment structures, and building faculty capacity through train-the-trainer models of the kind developed in the ServU project.

For university leadership, the implication is that civic mission cannot remain a values statement disconnected from academic architecture. UCU's case illustrates that coherence between stated mission and actual curriculum design creates the enabling conditions for effective crisis response. Universities that treat community engagement as a public relations activity rather than a core pedagogical commitment will find, under pressure, that they lack the institutional grammar needed to respond with integrity and sustained effect.

For education policy in Ukraine, the argument points toward a reframing of the recovery agenda. Current frameworks rightly address physical reconstruction, academic mobility, and quality assurance under wartime conditions (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2023). What they address less systematically is what kind of knowledge and what kind of knowledge-producing relationships is required for genuine community recovery. SL, understood as knowledge infrastructure, offers a partial but significant answer: it is a mechanism for keeping universities epistemically accountable to the communities they serve.

The most concrete institutional proposal emerging from this analysis is the creation of a Policy Lab at universities engaged in SL. A Policy Lab would move beyond individual course-based engagement to establish a sustained, university-wide platform for applied research and policy co-creation, a space in which

community partners, students, faculty, and public institutions work together on challenges that require both analytical rigour and civic legitimacy. Unlike a standard research centre, a Policy Lab would be explicitly designed around participatory knowledge production: its outputs would include not only academic publications but policy briefs, facilitation processes, community consultations, and training programmes co-developed with public institutions.

At UCU, the foundations for such a structure already exist in the form of accumulated SL practice, established community partnerships, and demonstrated capacity for civic engagement under pressure. The Policy Lab model represents the logical next step: institutionalising what has been proven in practice, scaling it across the university, and connecting it to the broader national and international effort to rebuild Ukraine's civic and democratic infrastructure. It would also represent a tangible institutional response to the call made by Kenworthy et al. (2025) – creating a sustained structure through which international collaboration with colleagues in crisis environments can be formalised, deepened, and made mutually productive.

In a world characterised by geopolitical turbulence, disconnection, and epistemic uncertainty, universities that can serve as democratic infrastructures of knowledge – not merely as providers of credentials – will be among the most important contributors to long-term resilience and recovery. The Ukrainian experience, shaped by extremity, offers a powerful demonstration of what this can mean in practice.

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