

ETHICAL COMMUNICATION AS A FORM OF SERVICE-LEARNING: HOLISTIC PEDAGOGY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN WARTIME UKRAINE

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Context and Problem Statement

Ukraine's ongoing war has fundamentally reshaped the responsibilities of higher education. Universities can no longer function as purely academic institutions they are increasingly called to serve as spaces of social reconstruction, community healing, and ethical formation. This paper draws on both theoretical research and direct practice to argue that service-learning, when grounded in holistic pedagogy, can offer a meaningful response to wartime educational challenges.

A key social challenge highlighted by the war is the communication gap between civilian society and military veterans. Veterans returning from active duty carry complex psychological and emotional experiences that civilian interlocutors including students, educators, and journalists are often ill-equipped to navigate sensitively. Miscommunication, well-intentioned but harmful questions, and a general lack of communication ethics can cause significant re-traumatisation. This gap represents not only a social problem but a concrete educational opportunity.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this work rests on a holistic approach to EFL teacher education, it is believed that conventional EFL programs focused primarily on linguistic proficiency and methodological techniques are insufficient for educators working in crisis contexts and a comprehensive transformation is needed. This transformation has to integrate three interdependent pillars. [5]

The first pillar is Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), which develops emotional regulation, empathy, and resilience competencies essential for navigating the psychological dimensions of wartime learning environments. SEL frameworks have demonstrated measurable impact on student engagement, classroom climate, and academic achievement. [3]

The second pillar is Trauma-Sensitive Pedagogy, which equips educators to recognise and respond to the signs of trauma without re-triggering distress. Empirical evidence from demonstrates that trauma-informed language instruction supports student engagement and creates emotionally safe learning environments particularly relevant in the Ukrainian context. [6]

The third pillar is Peace Education, understood not merely as the absence of conflict but as an active orientation toward dialogue, mutual respect, and nonviolent communication. As it is shown, peace-oriented classrooms develop students' critical thinking, intercultural sensitivity, and democratic participation skills making them capable of engaging productively with difference and trauma. [1]

Together, these pillars constitute an integrated professional standard for EFL teacher education one that positions ethical responsibility, emotional intelligence, and conflict sensitivity as core professional competencies rather than peripheral concerns.

Methodology

The theoretical framework was carried out through a concrete service-learning initiative – the micro project “Respectful Dialogue: Practices of Ethical Communication for the Internationalisation of Education,” developed within the VI Winter School of Higher Education Internationalisation of the NGO “Innovative University.” The project was implemented collaboratively by three Ukrainian universities: the National Academy of Internal Affairs (Kyiv), Uzhhorod National University, and Mukachevo State University.

The project's aim was to improve the culture of ethical communication with military personnel and veterans through a series of training events, the development of a bilingual practical guide, and the dissemination of results through academic channels. Three interrelated objectives guided implementation:

- to conduct a series of training events building students’ knowledge and skills in ethical communication with veterans, fostering cultures of respect and mutual understanding;
- to create a bilingual (Ukrainian–English) guide with practical recommendations for young people in communication situations with military personnel, suitable for use in educational settings and for international dissemination;
- to conduct research on the project’s themes and present findings at international conferences.

Two training events were held between March and April 2026, engaging approximately 60 students and educators across the partner institutions. The first event (12 March 2026) was an inter-university online training session titled “How to Communicate with Military Personnel Without Tension: Practical Advice,” facilitated by Oksana Chudnovska, a combat veteran of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and a military psychologist. Approximately 50 students from Kyiv, Uzhhorod, and Mukachevo participated, including journalism students from UzhNU and pre-service English language teachers from MDU.

The second training (2 April 2026), titled “Ethical Communication with Veterans: How Not to Wound with Words,” was facilitated by Maksym Shelepets a combat veteran and Director of the Veterans’ Development Centre at UzhNU. He spoke about the psychological dimensions of service, the importance of resilience and inner equilibrium, and practical strategies for sensitive dialogue. The session also drew attention to the often-overlooked emotional burden carried by veterans’ families, and the broader societal need for psychological recovery and reintegration.

Analysis and Reflective Evidence

The project’s outcomes demonstrate the practical viability of integrating holistic pedagogy with community-oriented service-learning in a wartime context. Several convergences between theory and practice are worth highlighting.

First, the training event instantiated the SEL principle of teaching the whole person. Students including future teachers, journalists, and economists were not positioned as passive recipients of information but as active participants in a shared civic learning process. Feedback

from participants (reflected in media coverage and post-event discussions) indicated increased self-awareness about their own communicative habits and heightened sensitivity to the emotional vulnerability of veterans.

The inclusion a military psychologist as a speaker utilized the trauma-informed principle of first-person authority. Rather than learning about veterans' experiences through abstract descriptions, students engaged directly with lived accounts. This approach mirrors the reflective practice model advocated in the holistic pedagogy framework, where biographical narratives function as powerful tools for developing professional empathy and ethical reasoning.

The second event, the inter-institutional format bringing together three universities across different cities embodied the peace education principle of building dialogue across difference. The multi-site collaboration also demonstrated the feasibility of cross-institutional service-learning partnerships in Ukraine, with implications for scalability and sustainability.

The ongoing development of a bilingual practical guide provides a further mechanism for knowledge transfer translating experiential learning into a structured resource that can be used in curricula across Ukraine and shared with international partners.

Implications for Education, Policy, and Recovery

This project offers several transferable insights for the broader service-learning and higher education recovery agenda.

- *Ethical communication as civic competence.* The ability to communicate respectfully with veterans and their families should be recognised as a core civic and professional competency for all university graduates, not only those in helping professions. Higher education curricula should integrate trauma-sensitive and peace-oriented communication practices across disciplines.
- *Service-learning as bridge-building.* The Respectful Dialogue project demonstrates that service-learning need not be confined to physical community placements. Dialogue-based, knowledge-sharing formats particularly when they bring civilian students into genuine encounter with military experience constitute a meaningful form of civic engagement with direct community benefit.

- *Inter-university collaboration as a model.* The three-institution partnership structure, developed within a professional development school framework, offers a replicable model for scaling service-learning initiatives in Ukraine. European partners can play a catalysing role by providing methodological support, co-developing bilingual resources, and creating channels for international dissemination.
- *Holistic teacher education as national resilience.* As argued in the accompanying theoretical article, the transformation of EFL teacher preparation toward a holistic, peace-oriented framework is not merely a pedagogical refinement it is a contribution to national recovery. Teachers who are trained to support students' emotional and social development, to communicate ethically across difference, and to reflect critically on their practice are precisely the educators Ukraine needs.

Conclusion The “Respectful Dialogue” micro project illustrates how the theoretical commitments of holistic pedagogy can be translated into concrete service-learning practice during wartime. By training students to communicate with empathy, respect, and ethical awareness, higher education institutions contribute not only to the immediate well-being of veterans and their communities, but to the longer-term project of building a society capable of sustaining peace. Victory, as one of the project’s speakers noted, is not only a military outcome it is the preservation of humanity, mutual respect, and inner resilience within society.

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