

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Service Learning, Civic Competencies and Working Life Skills

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Universities are expected to encourage the education of the active citizen, and thus provide students with the skills associated with civic competencies. In addition, students need to acquire working life skills to navigate their employment in increasingly boundary-less work cultures. This chapter evaluates the potential of service learning in fostering these skills in higher education. We provide a review of research literature on the topic and provide an example from one university course at the University of Helsinki in 2017. From this basis, the potential of service learning in fostering working life and civic skills is analysed and discussed.

Contemporary society is increasingly facing global, multi-dimensional challenges such as climate change or the humanitarian crises and conflicts resulting in waves of migrants around the world. These challenges require an awareness of belonging to a common social and cultural space, and values that are directed towards constructive solutions instead of simplified, populist, or even violent processes. Such pro-social, democratic values, motivation, and engagement are in this article referred to as civic competencies. The Council of Europe has highlighted civic competencies as competencies, whereby individuals need to participate actively in a democratic context, and they also have adopted the ‘framework of democratic citizenship’ (Competences for democratic culture, 2016). This framework contains a commitment to democratic legislation and human rights, respect towards cultural diversity and equality of all citizens as well as willingness to express one’s own opinions and take other opinions into account. (Competences for democratic culture, 2016) Such civic values,

motivation, and participation, rooted in the freedoms and rights of individuals to participate in their society, are essential pillars of democracy, and the backbone of well functioning, stable, peaceful, and democratic societies. They increase the sense of purpose, participation as well as the well-being and, health of individuals and are connected to social capital and generalised trust at the societal level. (e.g. Poulin, 2014; Putnam and Campbell, 2010; Townsend et al., 2014).

Also working life in Western societies is undergoing a major change. This shift was described in 1999 by Sullivan's extensive review as a transition from traditional work to boundaryless work (Sullivan, 1999), and has later been refined in numerous other studies (see Sullivan and Baruch, 2009). The transition from a linear and predictable, single-employer career has given way to a more versatile, unpredictable, and fragmented process of employment. The new work life paradigm has been given several names such as boundaryless, protean, nomad, spiral, post-corporate, that all emphasise slightly different aspects of the phenomenon (list adapted from Sullivan, 1999). Baruch and Vardi (2016) define several commonalities related to these new career concepts. The common descriptor in all the various viewpoints is the increase of uncertainty and flexibility, in whatever forms these may take. For example, 'protean' refers mainly to individuals being in charge of their own career progress and also to their responsibility of staying employable; 'boundaryless' refers in the main to career progress as a process of self-development and the blurring of borders as the individual travels across professions and jobs pursuing personal growth. However, both concepts are rooted in an climate of fluidity, or instability, and a more individual and flexible landscape in attitudes towards work (following the descriptions by Baruch and Vardi, 2016).

Civic competencies as well as new, generic skills for working life are thus called for in the above introduced discussions. Education in particular has been seen as vital in fostering these competencies. For example, the Bologna Declaration states that a Europe of knowledge is irreplaceable in enriching European citizenship and giving its citizens the necessary competences and shared values. It goes

onto highlight that; ‘[T]he importance of education and educational co-operation in the development and strengthening of stable, peaceful and democratic societies is universally acknowledged as paramount...’ (Bologna Declaration) Regarding new work-life skills, both the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the European Commission have recently published policy papers highlighting the need for the cultivation of new skills for future working life and for engagement with society (European Commission, 2012a, 2012b; *Skills for Social Progress*, 2015). Thus the need for higher education to intensify working life preparation has been made explicit, as well as the need to provide students with the relevant skills. The connection between theory and practice has been seen as a fruitful ground for fostering generic skills, especially when cultivated as integrative pedagogy (Jääskelä, Nykänen, and Tynjälä, 2018), and learning in real-world contexts is becoming increasingly important.

This chapter addresses service learning as a work-integrated learning model and pedagogical approach that can provide both opportunities to develop civic engagement competencies and work life skills that aim to foster capable and enlightened future citizens and employees. We propose a conjunctive framework for the development of new work life skills and civic competencies based on previous literature, we demonstrate how service learning can foster these skills through a case study, and finally, we discuss the opportunities provided by service learning as a holistic pedagogical approach,...

### **The Interconnectedness of New Work Life Skills and Civic Competencies**

The modern and ever-changing work life requires, or even demands, different skills from the employee than ever before. In future work life, general work life skills are becoming more and more crucial. Working life skills are often referred to as professional skills, transversal or transferable skills, general or generic skills, employability skills, or even “soft skills” (for an analyses of the terms, see

Cinque, 2016a). Defined as for example ‘competencies that education should provide regardless of the specific field and that can be used in a variety of tasks’ (Jääskelä et al., 2018). These skills have been deemed ‘critical enablers of graduate ability to function effectively in the modern workplace and their development is now considered integral to undergraduate education’ (Jackson, 2015).

These skills include communication, team working and social skills, project work skills, problem-solving skills, information literacy, or professionalism. The employability skills approach adopted by Jackson (2015) encompasses ten skills within a four-unit framework. These ten skills encompass working effectively with others, communicating effectively, self-awareness, thinking critically, analysing data and using technology, problem solving, developing initiative and enterprise, self-management, social responsibility and accountability, and developing professionalism. Given that the list includes social responsibility and accountability, we can state that civic engagement competences come close to being included alongside general work life skills. Thus, work life skills and civic engagement competencies can be described as overlapping, and that together they provide a skill set essential for the citizens and employees in present and future societies. Despite this overlap and the significance of the necessity of this joint skill set, civic engagement competencies and work life skills are rarely discussed together and it seems that the value of civic engagement competencies as work life skills are not always recognised. However, a more holistic model has been called for within the literature (Cinque, 2016).

Brammer and colleagues (2012) have categorised the core competencies of civic engagement in academic programmes based on a literature review, that include 1) civic knowledge (of political systems, history, and international understanding to include globalisation and interdependence), 2) civic skills (such as critical analysis, using oral, written and mediated communication, building bridges across differences, and collaborating to achieve public outcomes, problem-solving), 3) civic

practice / action (applying skills to public problem solving in service, service learning, volunteering), and a final category they refer to as 4) dispositions, inclinations, and values (values, attitudes and preferences that guide thinking and can create the potential for action, such as a desire to contribute to the common good, ethical integrity or morality, empathy, open-mindedness, tolerance, justice, and equality). Although these competencies include skills that are very similar to those described in general and new work life skills, they are not articulated here as work life skills.

Service learning as a pedagogy that can potentially enhance and provide opportunities to gain work life skills has been studied less than many other pedagogical approaches. In a recent and extensive Europe-wide review of pedagogical approaches adopted to cultivate work life skills, service learning did not make it to the review list (Cinque, 2016). The few studies available on worklife skills and service learning focus on sustainability competencies (e.g. Jackson, 2015), which could be viewed as overlapping with civic engagement competencies as discussed above.

Instead, there is a good amount of research focusing on the impact of service learning with regards to the development of civic competencies among students in different educational institutions, also in higher education and academic contexts. Individual studies have indicated that service learning programmes help develop positive social attitudes, appreciate diversity, increase empathy, personal and social responsibility, political awareness, self-efficacy and desire as well as feelings of being able to make a difference in one's community (summarised recently by e. g. Hébert and Hauf, 2015; Rusu et al., 2015) Relatively recent meta-analyses on service learning outcomes (Celio et al., 2011; Conway et al., 2009; Warren, 2012) also indicated that it can enhance social responsibility, positive attitudes and behaviours related to community involvement, cultural awareness and empathy skills. Conway et al. (2009) found the most significant positive changes related (in addition to academic outcomes) to beliefs, knowledge, or attitudes toward those being served.

In summary, we can broadly report that there are several studies and approaches that have focussed on civic engagement competencies related to service learning pedagogy, but few exists on work life skills aspect. Also, there are several studies and frameworks for the development of new work life skills, but service learning is not seen as a central pedagogical approach.. However, as discussed above, new work life skills and civic competencies can be seen as not only supplementing one another, but as overlapping: jointly providing a set of capabilities needed in contemporary societies. And it seems service learning could provide a prominent approach for learning such skills in a holistic manner.

Of several work-integrated and community based learning approaches (for an overview, see Jackson, 2015), service learning is a an approach that is as yet rather uncommon within European higher education. From a pedagogical perspective, service learning can be seen as one example of the integrative pedagogy framework to action. Jääskelä et al. (2018) have identified four different models of how higher education institutions can organise the development of generic skills. Of the four models, the service learning approach can be identified within the project-based integrative model where project-based courses integrate theory and practice.

Thus, it could be fruitful to analyse service learning as a work integrated learning method (Jackson, 2015), that can be adopted in higher education to provide students with civic engagement competencies and work life skills, along with an understanding of the overlap. We will in the following chapter demonstrate and analyse this overlap and the opportunities posed by service learning with a case study from one service learning course in Finland.

### **Case Study: Holistic Learning through Service Learning**

As the Finnish partner in the Europe Engage Erasmus+ project, the Faculty of theology organised a pilot service learning course and it was carried out in January-February 2017 by Henrietta Grönlund,

the second author of this article. The course, entitled 'Religion and Civic Engagement' (5 ECTs) consisted of twenty-four hours of group meetings, twenty hours of service, and individual as well as group written assignments. Students got to know and participate in the work of a civil society partner organisation, namely the Helsinki Deaconess Institute, and their drop-in centres. These centres offer health care, meals and hygiene services along with counselling and peer group support. The centres aim to offer those who are socially excluded or those at risk of exclusion an opportunity to participate and feel accepted as they are. Students served in groups organising activities, cooking and baking with the people at the centres, and discussing and spending time with them. Students reflected upon and analysed their service in relation to theoretical knowledge (e. g. societal structures behind exclusion, welfare models, roles of civic engagement) searched for information, and studied themes related to the service. They also evaluated their experiences and generated feedback and ideas for developing the work of the centres. Joint meetings were used for sharing and reflecting on the experiences and analysis and sharing of knowledge.

Regarding the context of the course, service learning or other approaches that foster civic engagement in higher education is at infancy in Finland. Service learning as pedagogical approach is scarcely adopted, and usually not even recognised especially within the university context. The Finnish polytechnic sector has played a pioneering role in integrating experiential learning and volunteering in their curricula, but service learning is rare also in that context (McIlrath et al., 2016). In the University of Helsinki the strategy for 2013-2016 describes the university as 'a responsible social force' (The best for the world, 2012, p. 13). One of its' development areas is to utilize its research results and competence for the good of society, and the Regulations of the University state that "the university shall operate in close interaction with other actors in society' (The best for the world, 2012, p. 13). However, there is no formal acknowledgment of civic engagement or service learning as an approach to achieve these aims in the strategy nor is it included in the mission of the University.

Furthermore, civic engagement activities and service do not exist as formal degree elements nor are faculties encouraged to develop such approaches. (summarised from Europe Engage's *Finland National Report*, 2016).

Thus within the Finnish context research on work life skills or civic competencies gained through service learning in higher education is almost non-existent. Polytechnics have published reports on civic engagement as a learning environment, and concluded that civic engagement provides a space for experiential and interdisciplinary learning (e. g. Backman, 2015; Kaunismaa and Ylikoski, 2016). However, these studies have rarely focused on civic competencies explicitly. The few examples of such an approach have concluded that students have experienced civic engagement or service learning to develop their collaboration skills and skills of encountering others, and to increase their understanding of the importance and societal role of volunteering / civic engagement, and of dialogue in communality. (Luhtasaari, 2015; Manninen and Raatikainen, 2014). Regarding work life skills gained through service learning, no studies seem to exist within the Finnish context.

Thus, the pilot course was carried out in a context where students had no experience of service learning prior to the course. After the course, the students received an invitation to reply to a survey via email. In addition to questions relating to background information (explained below), the survey comprised of two parts. **The first part** sought to map the development of working life skills by two sets of questions. The first set of questions was adapted from a recent study where alumni of our faculty had been asked about their work life skills (Buchert, Sainio, Salomaa, and Tuominen, 2015). These questions included for example, 'How have your communication skills developed during the course?', and the answers were given on a Likert scale from 1 (not at all) to 4 (a lot), with 'cannot say' as an additional option. The second set of questions was adapted from the service learning assessment tool developed in the Europe Engage Erasmus+ project. These questions included for



example, ‘How has your knowledge of other cultures and customs developed during the course?’ with the same scale response. Some of the skills examined in these two surveys overlapped, and were thus combined to a single item (for example, problem solving skills and leadership skills appeared in both surveys), already highlighting the intertwined and holistic nature of the two skill sets. **The second part** of the survey had open ended questions, in which the students evaluated their learning during the course were included. Eighteen students participated in the course, and nine replied to the survey. Due to the small n of respondents, statistical analyses of the replies were not applicable. Thus, the outcomes are best regarded as tentative examples of how students, who are new to the approach evaluate a service learning course.

Regarding relevant background details, all the students (n=9) reported that they put in the same (rather high) amount of effort for the course (M=4, sd=0, scale 1-5). They had moderate experience of NGO work (67% had some experience) and some civic engagement experiences (56% had some experience). They were not very familiar with service learning (44% no experience at all).

The development of the students’ skills, according to their self-evaluation, are detailed in Table 5.1. According to these results, the course had the biggest impact on their ability to help and understand others, societal motivation, ability to adapt to new situations, human relations, communication skills, ability to apply theoretical knowledge to practical situations and ability to ponder people’s life situations with them, and ability to work in different cultural contexts. Gaining these skills is further demonstrated below in the students’ answers to open questions.

**<TABLE 1 HERE>**

**Table 5.1 Development of different skills during the service learning course (1=not at all, 4=very much).**

The student actively answered the open-ended questions as well indicating interest and motivation to share their experiences. We will here focus on their answers to the question ‘Write a short evaluation about your own learning from this project’. We used the core competencies categorisation for civic engagement in academic programmes developed by Brammer and colleagues (2012) which as previously described includes both central generic and new work life skills.

Responses that related to the acquisition of knowledge described learning about issues central to civic engagement and social problems and this was a core part of the theoretical content of the course. The students mentioned the benefits of combining theory and practical work, and for example one student stated “[I] learned a lot of theory, which became concrete in the practical work.”

Skills that were mentioned by the students included communication, group work and reflecting with others, increased abilities for working with different people, finding one’s strengths and also areas one needs to develop, and finding issues one wants to focus on in working life. These competencies are civic competencies, but also key generic skills required in the new working life. Indeed, as seen in Table 5.1, work life skills related to interpersonal relations were among those most developed during the course.

In relation to practices and motivation, the students described how applying these through action made the course one of the most interesting ones during their studies. They felt it influenced their thinking more than ‘normal lectures’, and gave them the skills and the courage to work in different and even difficult situations. The students viewed the course as beneficial in their future studies and working life, and hoped that more similar courses would be offered in the future. Again, these could be described as central civic competencies as well as generic / new working life skills.

The most detailed answers nevertheless focused on the category Brammer and colleagues (2012) refer to as ‘dispositions, inclinations, and values’ (values, attitudes and preferences that guide thinking and

can create the potential for action, such as a desire to contribute to the common good, ethical integrity or morality, empathy, open-mindedness, tolerance, justice, and equality). The students articulated that they understood the significance of reaching out to people who are facing hard times. Many of them described the course to be eye opening as ‘these are problems one does not necessarily see in one’s everyday life’. One of them stated that the course had probably changed his/her viewpoint to humanity to some extent as he/she had spent time with the people in difficult circumstances: ‘We all share humanity, no matter which societal position we have’. The students wrote about the importance of civic engagement, they saw the course beneficial for their everyday life, and indicated their interest in continuing a similar activity in civic engagement or working life in the future. These evaluations refer mainly to civic competencies, but are no less central in the new working life, where career progress is seen as self-development and borders blur as the individual travels across professions and jobs pursuing personal growth (following the descriptions by Baruch and Vardi, 2016).

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

To conclude, as discussed above and further demonstrated by our case study, generic / new working life skills and civic engagement competencies are interlinked and overlap. The students in our pilot course gained working life skills especially in inter-human relations such as communication skills and cultural adaptiveness skills. Furthermore, one of the skills that the service learning pilot course succeeded to cultivate in the students was their ability to adapt to new situations. Adaptability is one of the key generic skills in future work life since it requires the individual to possess a rather large and versatile amount of individual career management skills to navigate the jungle of fragmented employment (Savickas, 1997). Career adaptability has been defined as ‘the readiness to cope with the predictable tasks of preparing for and participating in the work role and with the unpredictable adjustments prompted by the changes in work and work conditions’ (Jackson, 2015). The approach for fostering generic working life skills in this pilot course follows the project-based integrative model

identified by Jääskelä et al. (2016). They discuss whether the fourth model, the model of networked culture, could be seen as a more advanced model for the cultivation of generic skills in higher education. The project-based approach can be viewed as a starting point, followed later by an advancement towards a more integrated model of fully incorporating service learning within higher education.

Furthermore, the boundaryless working life does not mean the blurring of boundaries only between work and life, but between work and society, or work and participation in civic society. This phenomenon is also visible in the overlapping skill sets in this study. It invites a more holistic view on the skills gained in higher education. Service learning is a holistic pedagogical approach well suited to meet these needs, as demonstrated in this case study. The students report on having gained skills that are best described as holistic as they acquired both working life skills viewpoint and civic engagement competencies. Taking a step further, academic learning cannot and should not be treated as separate from the rest of a society. Work or service integrated learning is an example of a more contemporary, holistic view of learning.

Our case study has demonstrated how civic engagement competencies and work life skills can be provided holistically through service learning. The case study strongly suggests that this approach is a valuable method for cultivating capabilities that are necessary in the future working life. However, although not the focus of our chapter, however it should also be recognised, that in addition to advancing these skills, service learning also provides an excellent method for learning theoretical frameworks and substance knowledge. As substance knowledge can be approached both from an academic point of view and from a practical point of view (during field periods), the experiences from both of these may influence one another and provide a more in-depth understanding of the phenomena in question. Service learning is an approach where the theoretical material can be simultaneously

applied in a real-life context, thus providing the student with an opportunity to see the direct connection between theory and practice.

Since the demands of work life are becoming increasingly pressurised, there are strong arguments for trying out new approaches. The current working life has often been studied with a rather optimistic approach: focusing on opportunities, strengths, and capabilities. While Baruch and Vardi (2016) point out that this picture, as pleasant and energising as it may be, is not the whole truth. The dark side of the current work life is necessary to acknowledge. The skill set that an individual needs to gather and master to cope in work life is rather extensive, and requires also a lot of psychological strength. Therefore, everything that higher education institutions can do to help students to gain, foster, and maintain these capabilities, they are obliged to provide. Thus they are also required to try out new approaches that may provide the skills needed. The ability of service learning to develop ethical integrity, empathy, and desire to contribute to the common good, in addition to more specific work life competencies, can provide students with perspective, self-compassion, and strength to cope in the demands of contemporary societies and their working life.

In sum, we encourage further utilisation of service learning within university settings as a way to enhance both civic and working life competencies as well as theoretical substance in a holistic manner. We also suggest further research and pedagogical categorisations combining the viewpoints of generic / work life skills and civic competencies as they are not separate in our societies. Similarly, research on and practical approaches of service learning should further explicate the opportunities of this framework in providing generic / work life skills, and highlight the ways in which it can provide a holistic and motivating learning experience regarding academic contents, the requirements of protean work life, and the challenges facing contemporary societies.

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