

# Service-Learning in Courses of Psychology: An Experience at the University of Turin

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## Abstract

Interest in the implementation of service-learning (SL) in university courses in psychology has risen in recent years. SL allows the students not only to read and talk about social problems, but also to act upon them and thus to learn from practice as well. The aim of this work is to present the service-learning experienced in psychology courses at the University of Turin, Italy. The experiences—named “The Volunteer's Helpdesk” and “Service Learning: Urban Area Analysis and Proposals for Action”—were analyzed following the Comprehensive Action Plan for Service Learning (CAPSL) model proposed by Bringle and Hatcher (1996) for implementing SL in higher education. The work presented is intended to contribute to laying the foundation for a broader reflection on how to implement SL in university courses in psychology.

*Keywords: psychology, CAPSL model, laboratory, Italy*



**S**ervice-learning (SL) is a teaching method that combines school education with community service. It first surfaced in the 1960s in the United States of America (U.S.) and was subsequently widely disseminated in the late 1980s. The U.S. National and Community Service Act (1990) defined SL as “a method . . . under which students or participants learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service that is conducted in and meets the needs of a community” (§ 12511(40)(A)). The Act outlines that SL “is coordinated with an elementary school, secondary school, institution of higher education, or community service program, and with the community; and helps foster civic responsibility” (§ 12511(40)(A)(ii-iii)). It further stipulates that SL

is integrated into and enhances the academic curriculum of the students, or the educational components of the community service program in which the participants are enrolled; and provides a struc-

tured time for the students or participants to reflect on the service experience. (§ 12511(40)(B)(i-ii))

In 2003, Furco wrote, “Over the last ten years, at least two hundred definitions of service-learning have been published, casting service-learning as an experience, a program, a pedagogy and a philosophy” (Furco, 2003, pp. 11-12).

Although each definition has its merit, we will adopt here that which was proposed by Jacoby (1999):

SL is a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together through structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development. Reflection and reciprocity are key concepts of service learning. The term community refers to the local neighborhoods, the state, the nation, and the global community. (p. 20)

This definition emphasizes that SL gives students an opportunity to participate in a structured service activity able to respond to the needs of an identified community (Acquadro Maran, Soro, Biancetti, & Zanotta, 2017). Reflecting on service activity is fundamental insofar as it allows a deeper understanding of the course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and a greater sense of civic responsibility (Bingle, 2017; Bingle & Hatcher, 1995; Kirk, Newstead, Gann, & Rounsville, 2018). Unlike other experiences that usually, though not exclusively, provide for the student's engagement for the benefit of a community—such as training or volunteering—SL stands out for its intrinsic balance, merging service and learning in equal measure, and seeks to ensure reciprocity and equality of benefits between students and communities. Service activities are also strictly linked to academic content and are a constituent part of the school curriculum, and both educational objectives and civic and moral responsibility are contemplated for the students (Furco, 2002). The development of SL within the American education system was accompanied by a wealth of studies aimed at identifying and measuring its effects on the skills of students enrolled in schools offering different degrees and curriculum subjects (Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011; Yorio & Ye, 2012).

Research conducted in Italy a decade ago yielded the suggestion to create a network for helping institutions, neighborhoods, and young adults to assess educational and community needs and provide appropriate organized responses. On these grounds, SL was introduced experimentally in a psychology course at the University of Torino (Acquadro Maran et al., 2009). Albeit with various vicissitudes, the initiative is still active. In this article we present this experience as well as the approach, the methodological principles, and the model on which it has been grounded, to let it be evaluated and possibly replicated in similar contexts. Thanks to the engagement of academic staff from other Italian universities (e.g., Bologna, Padova, and Firenze), a few SL projects have been launched and are currently active (see Guarino & Zani, 2017). This article will provide practical information to other SL projects that will be implemented in our country. Since 2018, SL has been in the testing phase by the Italian Minister of Instruction, University and Research (Miur, 2018) in three regions.

## Implementing Service-Learning in University Courses

Introducing SL in the educational system and making it a fundamental part of the curriculum requires commitment and careful planning. The basic methodological principles that characterize a quality SL course, as proposed by Smith et al. (2011), are the following:

1. *Integrated learning.* The experience of service should be clearly addressed and connected to the educational content; all stakeholders must be able to recognize the link between service and teaching, based on a clear logic and methodology.
2. *Effective service to the community.* The needs toward which to align objectives, resources, and time should be clearly identified. If the expected timing of the project is longer than the duration of the course, which typically is due to the needs of the community and their evolution, the partnership between the educational institution and the community must be continuing, going beyond the activities of a single course.
3. *Collaboration between all the partners involved in the project.* They must work together during all the phases of the intervention: planning, preparation, implementation, management, and evaluation.
4. *Promotion of public spirit and community responsibility.* Students should be stimulated to think and critically evaluate their role in society, and the ties between the community and the educational system should improve and become more complex and fruitful.
5. *Reflection on the service to be carried out before, during, and after the experience.* Moments and methods are necessary for a synthesis capable of integrating self-awareness, knowledge of the disciplines of study, and knowledge of the community. An effective reflection should also be self-referent; that is, the experience must be evaluated with respect not only to the content, but also to personal values, attitudes, and goals.
6. *Evaluation and dissemination.* All the subjects involved should be able to analyze and interpret the results achieved, so as to also provide feedback and continuing quality improvement; the

dissemination of the results requires a celebration of effort and success that adds a “small touch” to the evaluation and disclosure process. (Kaye, 2004, cited in Smith et al., 2011, p. 320)

The principles proposed by Kaye (2004) and Smith et al. (2011) were adopted in SL projects in higher education, which turned out to yield benefits for all the actors involved (teachers, students, and the community; Burgo, 2016; Jurmu, 2015). Following these principles, we refer to the Comprehensive Action Plan for Service Learning (CAPSL) model proposed by Bringle and Hatcher (1996) for implementing SL in higher education. The CAPSL identifies four constituencies to be involved (namely universities, departments, students, and communities) and 10 areas of activity/outcomes that each constituency must carry out (namely planning, awareness, prototype, resources, expansion, recognition, monitoring, evaluation, research, and institutionalization). If everything works, the expected result is the institutionalization of SL within the universities.

The process is sequential with a necessary feedback loop: After an initial planning phase, the awareness of the nature of SL should be increased. This is best achieved through a practical example such as a prototype course. The development of SL requires the collection of resources and the planning of activities for each party involved. It is fundamental to document SL implementation by monitoring and evaluating the unfolding of the project. The results must be recognized publicly. The success of the project ultimately is reflected in the degree to which SL becomes institutionalized. The CAPSL model initially requires the identification of a group of key people—representatives of university bodies, university professors, student representatives, technical-administrative staff, community leaders—to be involved in the definition of the SL project, its theoretical foundations, and applicative guidelines. A person within the university should take management and administrative responsibility for the project in order to establish an office and pursue the planned operations (Bringle, Hatcher, & Jones, 2012).

The involvement of the faculty is crucial because SL requires the incorporation of a community service component into the academic courses. This does not imply that SL should be imposed on teachers, but that

teachers and students should be given information about its nature, roles, and functioning. Bringle and Hatcher (1996) recommend the implementation of short-term SL projects, so that the parties involved may become familiar with the methodology. SL can be regarded as institutionalized when it is no longer dependent on a small group of teachers and is taken into account in decisions involving personnel: recruitment, promotion, and so on.

Students' involvement is also crucial. Hatcher, Bringle, and Hahn (2016) suggested the investigation of students' interest in volunteering and their awareness of relevant activities in the local community in order to identify how many might be involved in SL and which thematic areas are more likely to attract them. Students' involvement is also necessary during the planning phase to foster motivation within the university context (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Jacoby (1999) highlights that wherever SL is located within the institution, what really matters to its effectiveness is that it be based on a partnership between the academic staff and the students, since each party has viewpoints, knowledge, connections, and resources that enable it to bring a unique and fundamental contribution to the development of the enterprise. SL can bring benefits to the course in which it is implemented by, for example, increasing the students' satisfaction with the course, which affects the overall perceived quality of the course of study (Zedda, Bernardelli, & Acquadro Maran, 2017).

Finally, the participation of representatives from the community is needed to identify the relevant needs and resources for creating the SL activities (Kalles & Ryan, 2015). Proof that the university-community partnership is stable and effective may be traced in the continuity of the relationship, the consensus about the mutual needs and their satisfaction, the degree of collaboration, and the participation of faculty and students in community agencies. To the best of our knowledge, no attempt has been made in Italy to apply this theoretical framework and the CAPSL model. The novelty aspect of the work presented here thus is an attempt to apply the model in a course of study in psychology in an Italian university from inception to institutionalization.

## Service-Learning in Psychology Courses

Altman (1996) hoped that social awareness would become an integral part of the university curriculum along with foundational and professional knowledge. He added: “I cannot imagine a field more suited to the idea of socially responsive knowledge than psychology. And is it not our goal to both understand behavior and promote human well-being?” (Altman, 1996, p. 376). SL is an apt pedagogical approach to engender the development of such awareness, as it may educate about social problems, enabling students to experience and understand relevant collective and personal themes through firsthand active learning and action.

Bringle, Reeb, Brown, and Ruiz (2016) considered SL to be the pedagogical method most effective for the development of a “psychologically literate citizen,” namely “someone who responds to the call for ethical commitment and social responsibility as a hallmark of his or her lifelong liberal learning” (McGovern et al., 2010, cited in Bringle et al., 2016, p. 295). Discussing the British university system, Duckett (2002) invited applied psychology to reform its educational practices if it wants to achieve ideological coherence in its theoretical and empirical settings. Moreover, several expected SL outcomes are part of the mandatory “bag of skills” of a psychologist, such as the capability of understanding and sympathizing with individual and social problems while keeping an appropriate distance from them, willingness to listen to and help others, tolerance for diversity, and, in general, a certain ethical, moral, and human sensitivity (Maistry & Lortan, 2017). Dunn, McCarthy, Baker, Halonen, and Hill (2007) discussed how SL may provide a testing ground for several psychological principles and skills. Indeed, many relevant experiences are described in the literature. Examples include Brown (2011), Harnish and Bridges (2012), and Crone (2013) in social psychology; De Prince, Priebe, and Newton (2011) in psychological research methodology; Olson (2011) in neuropsychology; Heckert (2010) in occupational and organization psychology; Barney, Corser, Strosser, Hatch, and LaFrance (2017) in psychopathology; and McClure Brenchley and Donahue (2017) in health psychology. The systematically positive impact of SL, in terms of learning and satisfaction on the

part of both students and teachers, of the contribution brought to the analysis of the problem, and of intervention success, was well described by Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2011). The authors highlighted that SL may help the students discuss the moral correlates of scientific research and how environmental concerns interplay with the supply of public utilities.

## The Experience at Torino

The Department of Psychology of the University of Torino has been committed for about ten years to introducing SL as an opportunity for the development of students’ skills and the improvement of teaching. We believe that there is a close connection between psychology and the community. On the one hand, psychology is a discipline that aims to tackle individual or collective problems affecting every facet of human behavior, and on the other hand, organizations and individuals in need of help could at the same time provide students with precious testing grounds. In this article, we will describe two SL implementations with different degrees of structuration to demonstrate how the commitment by the Department of Psychology has realized the institutionalization of SL. The description will follow the CAPSL model (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996) and specifically the sequence of phases described above.

### First Project: The Volunteer’s Helpdesk

The first SL project at the University of Torino was set up during the years 2008–2010. The target was a set of voluntary associations. In accordance with the CAPSL model (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996), the project started with a planning phase, namely a survey of the existing partnerships of the community of reference and of the students’ interest in the activity (Acquadro Maran et al., 2009). The initial planning phase was implemented during a course of Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Several students turned out to be interested in the analysis of the community needs and in the codesign (with communities) of possible solutions and interventions. This allowed pinpointing the main organizational problem of the associations, namely that the size of their staff of volunteers was not on par with the increased flow of activities that they were tackling (support in situations of illness or need, actions upon social emergencies, and so on). Several students

were engaged in the study, along with four teachers and IdeaSolidale, an organization offering services (like training and other forms of support) to street-level voluntary associations.

The methods used were the scrutiny of archived data, interviews with the presidents of the associations, and focus groups with the volunteers. The issue was diagnosed to be one of low supply relative to demand: voluntary organizations invested too little in recruiting. They relied predominantly on the engagement of friends and relatives, which often proved unsuccessful in terms of both the size and the continuity of the staff. Two solutions that were not mutually exclusive were devised. First, it was suggested to the associations that they redesign their promotional and outreach initiatives as well as their recruitment procedures and that they offer more training, supervising, and support to the volunteers recruited. Second, the Volunteer's Helpdesk was set up at the university. This was cosponsored by IdeaSolidale, which advertised the initiative with the associations, and by the University of Turin itself, which granted a physical space where the associations and the candidate volunteers could meet. About thirty associations were involved during the 2 years of activity of the helpdesk.

The outcome of the intervention was positive for all the actors (Acquadro Maran et al., 2009). The voluntary associations benefited from the competence of the students (whose curriculum was in industrial and organization psychology), who conducted an analysis of their needs and demands and identified solutions that were both internal (redefinition of the staff's functions) and external (recruiting strategies). To the students, the initiative offered an organized space to reflect upon the relation between "knowing that" and "knowing how" and an opportunity to appreciate how the content of their studies could prove useful to the community. This first experience was used as a practical example, becoming a prototype course.

### **Second Project: The Laboratory "Service Learning: Urban Area Analysis and Proposals For Action"**

Starting from 2017, SL has been officially included in the curriculum of the master's degree in psychology of work and well-being in organizations, with the introduction of a 40-hour laboratory titled

"Service Learning: Territorial Analysis and Intervention Proposals." The laboratory was divided into a first theoretical part and a second applicative part. The latter involved a different second-level organization, Vol. To—Volontariato Torino—as the recipient community (Vol.To is an umbrella nonprofit organization whose members are street-level volunteer associations based in Turin and its province). Vol.To supplies a wide range of services to its members and has created and manages the Guidance Center for Volunteering Opportunities, a meeting point devised to match supply and demand for volunteers in the area. It is to this structure that the SL activities have been directed. The Guidance Center conducts about 1,300 interviews a year with a rate of efficacy (i.e., share of candidates who end up being permanently recruited) of about 40%. The recruitment and integration of the volunteers extends over several stages: the initial orientation interview, aimed at matching the aspirations of the candidates and the needs of the demanding organization; the volunteer's contact and interview with the organization(s) identified, and possibly the actual recruitment; and the start of a permanent collaboration. Each stage may turn out to be critical and often could lead to the termination of the overall process. Vol.To management asked for advice to improve the service and achieve a higher percentage of successes. The students were required to redescribe their academic skills as tools useful to the social and organizational operations of a community. The 40 available hours were divided into 6 classroom hours about SL and its applications; 15 hours of activities within Vol.To for the analysis of the demand, meetings with the management, and field observations; 15 hours of group work for the development of the intervention; and 4 hours for monitoring and reflecting upon the experience.

To conduct the needs analysis and provide useful advice, the students had to recall and integrate the knowledge acquired in different courses of their curriculum. The project yielded three tools:

1. A follow-up questionnaire investigating the volunteers' careers within the organizations, with the following objectives:
  - to have a precise measure of the success of the recruitment process;
  - to monitor the breaking points of

- the process;
- to investigate the causes of failure; and
  - to keep track of the relationships with the people interviewed, so as to keep alive the link between Vol.To and the community.
2. A satisfaction survey regarding the interview, to measure the volunteers' satisfaction with the service. The primary focus of the survey was on the interviewees' perception of having been understood and helped, and of having received clear information relevant to their expectations. The goal was to have a first-quality assessment of the Vol.To service in terms of the ability to meet the users' wishes and needs.
  3. Advice about the guidance interview with some indication of how the assessment of the prospective volunteers' interests, needs, and personal motives could be better focused.

In addition to a precise needs analysis, the SL project included intermediate monitoring and evaluation, conducted jointly with the Vol.To staff to keep a shared track of the activities and work toward concretely helping the community. Finally, the SL laboratory offered the students a space for personal reflection, in which to focus on how the experience affected them and possibly their future professional or personal choices.

Students' satisfaction was assessed at the end of each class with the same questionnaire already in use at the University of Torino. It consists of 12 questions about general satisfaction with the class (4 items), the teacher's skills (4 items), the overall workload (1 item), the adequacy of the preliminary knowledge (1 item), possible supplementary classroom activities (1 item), and a final summary score (1 item). However, a further open question was added, asking what the participant had learned on the cognitive, personal, and social levels. The questionnaire was anonymous and was administered at the end of the course by students enrolled in other courses who were trained for that duty. The teachers were not present during the administration of the questionnaire. The laboratory obtained the maximum degree of student satisfaction, scoring 10 (on a 0–10 scale, with 0 = not satisfied to 10 = completely satisfied), and was recognized as instrumental to their

growth in each of the areas that are typically affected, namely academic, cognitive, personal, and social. In particular, all the students confirmed that the field experience had allowed a better understanding of the relevant knowledge than was gathered from standard classroom learning and exams and that it had contributed to the development of cognitive and personal skills of reflection, decision making, and commitment. The laboratory was perceived as an opportunity for personal growth, enabling the students to understand their capability to contribute to the group and face their difficulties. To some, it had also yielded better knowledge about the social issues of the city where they lived. Above all, it had added to their awareness of their own potential and aspirations.

The following are a few of the students' statements in the questionnaire:

I applied my knowledge of psychometrics to the development of the questionnaire, becoming aware of what could actually be used. (Male, 25 years old)

My sense of effectiveness has grown a lot; while I was certain of my knowledge I was quite hesitant about how to put it to practice. Instead, looking at the questionnaire we had created, I felt proud of myself and more confident. (Male, 22 years)

First of all I have made it clearer to myself how much I am able to engage in a project that required collaboration between peers. . . . I learned to be part of a group, to communicate more effectively, and to recognize the role played by each person and their contributions. (Male, 24 years old)

In the team I felt shy and afraid of making mistakes, but I also tried to overcome my limitations, because I felt that my opinion was important. (Male, 24 years old)

This experience pushes me to look for something where I can be useful on the grounds of my life experiences, skills and education. (Female, 25 years old)

To the Vol.To staff the project provided a

space for reflection upon and discussion of their own work practices, which in turn proved an actual contribution toward improving the service to its users.

Finally, to all the parties involved—the Department of Psychology, the students, and the communities—the opportunity has been created to develop a network of relationships that can be expected to prove useful for future collaborations. As suggested by the CAPSL model, considerable resources (in terms of attention, time, methods, and instruments) were dedicated to the evaluation of the project by all the parties involved. The results of the project were acknowledged by the students, representatives of university bodies, and community leaders. This success led to the institutionalization of SL in the master's degree in psychology of work and well-being in organizations.

### Conclusion

This article aimed to describe SL, its distinctive characteristics and strengths, and the activities that may lead to the successful design and implementation of a SL project within the university system. The activities carried out in the Department of Psychology of the University of Turin were presented in light of the principles identified by Smith et al. (2011) and of the CAPSL model proposed by Bringle and Hatcher (1996). The results suggest that the integration between traditional teaching activities and community engagement may effectively contribute to a more complete and fitting training for students who wish to pursue a career in the psychological field. The salient feature of SL, which makes it different from other methods of civic engagement that can accompany the lives of students, is its full integration into academic curricula in terms of content, methods, teaching tools, and evaluation processes.

Based on mutuality, SL also requires a balance of benefits between students and community. SL thus differs sharply from both volunteering and internship. In the latter, at least in psychology courses, experiences and practices appear to be less closely integrated with theoretical content and subject to a milder control on the part of the supervisors and the users.

The benefits of SL for students, and therefore for the success of education, are now widely documented by decades of empirical research (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001) that have highlighted how contextualized actions of social responsibility are opportunities for improved learning of academic materials and for appreciable personal and civic development. In the face of unquestionable benefits, the implementation of SL requires of educational institutions significant efforts in terms of resources, know-how, and attitudes. This is now a critical issue for Italian universities, which have adopted several practices to allow students to gain experience and share knowledge and skills with the communities of reference, but typically not SL.

Although some SL programs are in the testing phase in schools, evidence of efficacy is not yet available (see the discussion in the Introduction). Even worse, the human and financial resources available to the Italian academic system have been severely dissipated, and the burden of activities worsened and shifted toward the managerial and the bureaucratic domains, by a dramatic sequence of neoliberal reforms during the past decade. Thus, the institutionalization of SL within the Department of Psychology may still be vulnerable, due in large part to neoliberalist, bureaucratic tendencies in the Italian higher education arena that may be unsupportive of SL as a “viable” pedagogy. Implementing SL requires time and human resources for the deployment of structures and systems in order to create and maintain partnerships with the community. The continuous management of the process and ad hoc interventions in content and teaching methods are also necessary for the effectiveness of SL. Last but not least, the institution as a whole must have a community orientation as well as a “democratic” mindset, open to sharing, leaving an active role to both the students and the community.

The work presented is intended to contribute to laying the foundation for a broader reflection on how to implement SL in university courses in psychology. We thus hope that the experience reported may be useful to other academic organizations as an instance of and good practice in SL implementation.



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