Definitions and Background of Service Learning

The term of Service Learning was first invented in 1967, in reference to an internship program that was sponsored by the Southern Regional Education Board and through which college students gained academic credit and/or federally funded finance as remuneration for work on community projects. As a pedagogical practice in higher education, Service learning was limited to a small group of participants until the mid-1980s. By the late 1980s, service-learning was growing in prominence and was finally distinguished from community service by its attention to the integration of service with academic study (Liu, 1995). The 1990s have witnessed tremendous growth in service-learning, such that it is now regarded as a "vital force in educational change". Colleges and universities have espoused a renewed commitment to civic responsibility, with service-learning as a central vehicle for fulfilling this commitment (Crabtree, 2008).

Service learning (SL) is a method that provides young people with opportunities to use newly acquired academic skills and knowledge in real life situations in their own communities. It is also defined as a strategy by which young people learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that meet the actual community needs and that are coordinated in collaboration with the school and community. SL contains two main elements: engagement within the community (service) and reflection on that engagement (learning). These elements should be balanced by expecting students to "participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs" and "reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility".

According to Jacoby (2014), definitions of service-learning can be divided in two main parts. The first part describes SL as a form of education, and the second part of definitions defines SL as an educational philosophy. **Definitions of SL as a form of education** share three key elements that differentiate SL from other forms of experiential education. These elements are *structured extensive reflection, application of learning in real-life settings,* and *relevant service*. *Student reflection* encourages integration of theory and practice. *Application of learning* in real-life contexts should complement objectives of students' future careers. Therefore, *service needs to be relevant*, meaningful, and tightly integrated into the curriculum. **Service-learning as a philosophy** is characterized by "human growth and purpose, a social vision, an approach to community, and a way of knowing".

Based on the assumption that engagement in community service may cause changes in social reality, SL belongs to the tradition of radical/critical pedagogy (Jacoby, 2014). The students can benefit from service learning as: It facilitates effective content teaching, encourages students to reflect on their experience, provides a deeper understanding and a concrete application of the content learned in class, increases the level of students' motivation and critical thinking, teaches independence in the real world, and offers students a valuable experience (Goldberg *et al.,* 2006). In addition to this, service-learning helps to enhance understanding of academic curriculum, provide diverse and practical "real-world" experiences, encourage community involvement, foster civic responsibility, raising awareness of social justice issues and provide career-exploration opportunities.

Further definitions in the literature show, that service learning can be seen as **"a philosophy, pedagogy, and model for community development** that is used as an instructional strategy to meet learning goals and/or content standards. For example, Grim (2005) defines service learning as a new pedagogical approach which can incorporate any subject matter (e.g., sciences, political sciences, English, foreign languages). The philosophy is to provide students with an increased knowledge of the course material through hands on situations and concrete applications. Such application refers to the community that Mitchell (2008) considers as important in academia industry relationships. Mitchell (2008) states that Community service learning serves as a vehicle for connecting students and institutions to their communities and the larger social good, while at the same time instilling in students the values of community and social responsibility.

According to Heffernan (2002), service-learning is a reflective, relational, pedagogy that combines community or public service with structured opportunities for learning. It is premised on experiential education as the foundation for intellectual, moral, and civic growth. This focus on the synergy of the intellectual, moral, and civic dimensions of learning distinguishes service-learning from other forms of experiential education. Rather than focusing on preparing students for a particular job, SL prepares students for practical community-based problem solving.

That said, Barbara Jacoby (2014) confirms that SL is a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities for reflection designed to achieve desired learning outcomes. In other words, SL is a combination of what we know as formal education and applying that learning in a service-oriented way. It is a type of educational philosophy that requires the student to demonstrate their knowledge, thus connecting the cognitive to the emotive and resulting in better learning outcomes. It incorporates personal passions with intellect, empowering students to find their passion and exercise useful ways to engage in real world problems.