

Learning and Service at the University of Buenos Aires

**A theoretical framework guiding the implementation
of educational social practices**

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In recent years Argentina's higher education system has acted on a number of proposals that seek to prioritise those activities that link university and community. In 2010, the Ministry of Education created the Program for the Strengthening of the Argentinian University (Programa de Fortalecimiento de la Universidad Argentina). This followed from the earlier creation in July 2008 of the National Network of University Extension (REXUNI), which was tasked with acting as adviser to the National Interuniversity Council (CIN). These are just some of the nationwide proposals that confirm this trend.

Today, the University of Buenos Aires (UBA) has a subsidised program for university *extensión* projects that is consolidated and in permanent growth (UBANEX subsidies program: resolution CS no. 583, 2016, approved the ninth call), has overseen a considerable increase in financial aid scholarships, and has developed its first fully comprehensive and interdisciplinary program of community action in vulnerable neighborhoods (resolution CS no. 4308, 2008) – all of which directs much of the university's actions towards the communities that nurture it. This article discusses the implementation of educational social practices or mechanisms (Program of Educational Social Practices: resolutions CS no. 520, 2010 and no. 3653, 2011), which constitute the last stage of a clear public policy of *extensión* first developed by the university some decades ago. The policy aims to generate mechanisms whereby the knowledge produced through research and teaching will be put into the service of society. Our goal is to apply these educational social practices across the entire university, eventually involving almost 300 000 students. As Dr Risieri Frondizi, former rector of the University of Buenos Aires, noted, 'The university has to become one of the main agents of profound change, as required by the current situation. To achieve this goal, it is essential to know and respond to the needs, requirements and aspirations of the community' (Frondizi 1971, p. 247).

To get to this point, however, one must first start much further back. What are we talking about when we say 'link' the university institution to the community? What do we mean when

we talk about ‘learning and service’ and ‘educational social practices’ as the realisation of ‘university *extensión*’? Indeed, is the concept of university *extensión* explicit enough in defining the social role of universities? Probably not. *Extensión* can be understood as one of the three pillars, or the third mission, on which our higher education system is founded. However, unlike teaching and scientific research, its essential attributes have not yet been comprehensively understood. This has given rise to a major management problem: *extensión* has become a complex concept, and is used in attempts to explain a number of issues in the higher education system, but is not yet anchored in any of them. At a fundamental level, UBA’s third mission – as with many other Latin American universities – has developed without sustained strategic guidelines, making it impossible to build a theoretical framework on which to lean to continue this task, accumulate experiences, improve practices and generate discussion on the sociocultural problems of today.

To immerse oneself in the debates around proposals that seek to link university with community is to assume the challenge of addressing a very complex issue, not because of the kinds of practice that are being referred to – such as learning and service, situated or experiential learning – but because of the very concept of university practice that has been much discussed in recent years. For more than a century and a half, theoretical and practical education have been separated in higher education, especially in Argentina, whose higher education system is characterised as being deeply theoretical in orientation.

Traditionally, the pedagogical action of teaching and learning ran down the same street. It was common to hear specialists in didactics talk about the teaching–learning process, as if it were a continuous line where transmission of knowledge is one-way and dependent only on the teacher. In short, if all the variables of teaching were under control, the students automatically had to learn. And if they didn’t, they would have failed. Worse, they would have been responsible for that failure.

However, more recently, pedagogy is making a turn that allows a fresh look at ‘practical education’ as a means to make student learning more effective. Teaching is conceived as a complex process that takes place in institutional contexts of uncertainty, and where the teacher operates from personal assumptions and institutional conditions that he/she often does not control but which strongly determine the results (Davini 2008). To teach, to educate, involves the intent to transform, to produce changes in those who are at the centre of the educational action; it also involves selecting the teaching strategies for this purpose, together with the provision of adequate infrastructure that will make teaching a targeted and effective activity. But, is this enough? Surely not. The complementary term ‘learning’ refers to both the process by which knowledge (task) is acquired and its effective incorporation (yield). Teaching influences ‘learning as

task' and these tasks performed by the student constitute 'learning as performance' (Basabe & Cols 2004). So it will be that teaching and learning cannot be seen as stages of the same lineal process since they are two separate and distinct processes: it is one thing to teach and it is quite another for the student to appropriate that which is taught. Of course, there is no learning without teaching or teaching without learning; they are certainly two different but conjugated processes. In short, only in the subjective experience will student learning be done, as it is this that develops the cognitive structures which help secure knowledge. Thus, know-how or 'learning by doing' appears as the basis for all effective learning.

As a consequence, we can now understand university *extensión* as a pedagogical innovation whereby learning and service, along with participatory research, both expands our understanding of what it means to teach, research and learn, and supports immediate community action in the social field, improving the living conditions of people while supporting the learning of students. University *extensión*, therefore, entails a comprehensive training process; bi-directionality between theory and practical experience; active and meaningful learning focused on the learner; and a conception of knowledge as a social good. Above all, however, its didactic practices are aimed at 'developing in students the skills and values of citizenship, fostering collaboration between the university and the community, and helping teaching teams that try to integrate teaching and research' (Campus Compact 1999). For the defenders of this particular pedagogical current, educational institutions not only have the responsibility to develop in students the knowledge, skills and aspirations of personal fulfillment, but must also seek that students commit to the context of the community in which they develop.

This article provides an overview of learning and service and its different traditions. It discusses how learning and service is understood at UBA as a pedagogical strategy that can guide the implementation of educational social practices. To illustrate what this means in terms of teaching, research and learning, we provide a brief overview of the Comprehensive Community Action Program in Vulnerable Neighborhoods or Programa Integral de Acción Comunitaria en Barrios Vulnerables (PIACBV), which was established in 2007. This successful program has substantially contributed to the university's understanding of *extensión*, and the pedagogy that underpins it. From 2017, the final stage of a longstanding policy to deeply integrate *extensión* across the entire university will get underway, with the mandatory introduction of educational social practices across all faculties.

THE CONCEPTUALISATION OF LEARNING AND SERVICE

The long journey of university *extensión* as a training activity has its origins in the British universities of the late 19th century. One of the consequences of the Second Industrial Revolution was

that it became necessary to train impoverished workers so they could be in charge of the process of mass production. Universities thus broke out of the ivory tower that protected the pristine minds of their students and orchestrated the first extracurricular courses for workers of textile industries. Gradually, this noble mission began to spread to the whole workplace, becoming more comprehensive, even covering needs that went beyond training. This way of approaching social problems influenced Latin American universities, and allowed for the generation of many projects drawn from different academic disciplines. *Extensión* tasks conceived in this way can be defined as direct and immediate action in the social field, supported by an array of research and teaching. The research allows us to address the field, knowing the real causes of social problems, as well as plan future actions (methodology and objectives), while the teaching allows us to train those who should carry out the intervention (activities and tasks), as they will not be carried out in any other way. In this sense, we can establish that any *extensión* practice involves the need to focus both on the community and the personal training of those who undertake the intervention. In recent decades, there has been an increase in the supply of training measures that take into consideration the development of a democratic and participatory culture, and which encourages active participation in public life and promotes coexistence and social cohesion in multicultural societies through understanding and dialogue (Folgueiras Bertomeu, Luna González & Puig Latorre 2013).

It is worth highlighting that, in the pedagogical aspect of *extensión*, several proposals have been developed, but perhaps the one that has advanced most strongly is 'learning and service' (*aprendizaje y servicio*). Almost all North American universities have such programs. While learning and service projects are also expanding in Latin America, their practice, particularly in countries such as Argentina, Uruguay and Chile, deviates from what is seen in other parts of the world, and is instead associated with a social welfare vocation performing direct community service; hence it is preferable to talk about 'solidarity learning and service', rather than learning and service only. Such practices were first initiated in the 1980s in Latin America, and were consolidated in 2000, with the creation of the Latin American Center for Solidarity Learning and Service in Buenos Aires. There are many and various definitions that have been expressed on behalf of learning and service, each belted by the nature of the specific educational institution and context in which the activities take place. We can thus see two major trends. The first, of Anglo-Saxon origin, understands 'service learning' as one of the many forms of learning through experience, 'learning by doing', where the emphasis is on the development of technical skills rather than the consequences or impact of such practices. Here the word 'service' evokes more 'do together' than 'give to' (Tapia 2003). The second major trend is the Ibero-American context, where

the concept of 'service' is understood more broadly to include a solidarity response to the many challenges posed by the conditions of social vulnerability.

Another term used to describe these practices is 'situated education', in which school learning is considered a process in which students gradually integrate into a community of social practices. In this case, it refers to a particular kind of learning, guided by a teaching strategy with a holistic approach that is intended to relate academic learning to real life (Camilloni 2009). Hence, for situated education, learning and performing activities for and with the community are inseparable actions, so that students have to learn by doing within the relevant context (Díaz Barriga 2003). In situated education, teaching strategies focus on experiential and/or located learning, and include:

- the construction of knowledge in real contexts, through participatory projects and case analysis
- the development of knowledge and skills to design social action plans and projects in which students substantively take part
- the development of reflective and critical capacities, and high-level thinking
- participation in real social practices of the community, encouraging collaborative teamwork.

Regarding the above strategies, it should be noted that some of the strategies were developed decades ago, and have their antecedents in experiential teaching, project method and case analysis. However, they are now being re-conceptualised from a located and sociocultural perspective. As well, several of these strategies can be combined in practice and even be integrated into more Anglo-Saxon models of service learning. A key difference with the latter, however, is that in situated education, the basic unit of analysis is not the individual or the learning processes themselves but the reciprocal action; that is, the relational nature of people acting in certain contexts. Thus, situated education, for the purposes of its analysis and instructional intervention, must be conceived of as an *activity system* whose components include:

- the learning subject(s)
- the instruments used in the activity
- the knowledge and content that regulates the activity
- a community of reference in which activity and subject are inserted
- standards or rules of behaviour that regulate the social relations of that community
- rules establishing the division of tasks in the activity.

It follows from the above that situated education, by drawing on Anglo-Saxon and Latin American traditions, is a new pedagogy that provides a specific way of linking the university and the community. Part of this 'linking' is the creation of spaces for reflection and curriculum learning, which help understand reality as well as the development of creative skills to meet new situations and respond to problematic social environments. These

spaces act as bidirectional interfaces where teachers and students learn and the community benefits with the two-way transmission of knowledge.

More recently, these proposals have been spreading in Europe (Folgueiras Bertomeu, Luna González & Puig Latorre 2013). This century has already seen the creation of different organisations, programs and meetings, including:

- 2002 Higher Education Active Community Fund, United Kingdom
- 2005 Service Learning: Dialogue between Universities and Communities, European Union (Proyecto Leonardo: CIVICUS)
- 2005 Educational Civic Forum, Madrid, Spain
- 2005 Centre for Promoting Learning–Service, Barcelona, Spain

SOLIDARITY LEARNING AND SERVICE AS COMPREHENSIVE EDUCATIONAL STRATEGY

In higher education it is of radical importance to reflect on the professional skills that a context requires. Today, the labour reality demands comprehensive training that, in short, cannot mean only the acquisition of theoretical content or technical skills that have not been tested in real scenarios. For these reasons, to present a new teaching means to provide tools so that students get different views of the world, participate in new and varied forms of educational practices, and acquire a reflective position facing reality. This should be the main objective of a comprehensive higher education, whereby the acquisition of specific knowledge is complemented by the ability to understand, share and produce meanings, and the adoption of an active attitude towards social reality through a thoughtful, critical and creative outlook. As Kolb (1984) noted:

The challenge here is to develop tasks in the community that can become learning experiences worthy of the academic year in which they integrate. Experiential or located education is that which occurs outside the classroom and in a community liaison. It involves necessarily an interaction. It integrates learning and personal development.

Following is an explanatory model of the various pedagogical strategies deployed by the University of Buenos Aires (Figure 1). The model has four quadrants that result from applying two criteria: first, the student's relationship with the community (social service); second, the student's relationship with established learning in the curriculum (formal instruction).

Figure 1: Classification table of experiential education strategies

Internship Educational practice where the focus is on individual technical training only	Solidarity Educational practice that only emphasises the benefit to the community
Volunteering Educational practices in which the focus is on both the benefit to the community and the learning of non-curricular skills	Learning and Service Social practice in which the focus is on both the benefit to the community and the learning of curricular knowledge

When educational practices, as a pedagogical strategy, are based on recognising and fulfilling curricular interests (the acquisition of technical skills), without being related to direct action in the community, they are referred to as classic internships for a professional practice. It is important to highlight that, in this case, the community is a passive scenario in which it hardly matters what changes occur in it. When educational practices are based on recognising and satisfying community interests without being related to the curriculum, they would be considered purely solidarity activities. On the other hand, if the activity falls within a social service and the student learns, but does so in matters not related to the curriculum, we would be in the presence of so-called volunteering. Finally, if the teaching strategy implies the total combination of both dimensions, that is, a high degree of social service and high relationship with curriculum mandates, we would be facing what is known as solidarity learning and service. Of course, this kind of strategy requires expanding the curriculum to include the socialisation of values and skills such as developing in students the capacity for critical thinking, and to propose possible solutions to societal issues. The student is then able to identify and define problems, using technologies for their own purposes and needs (and not be used by them); act autonomously in unexpected situations; face crossroads and make decisions with ethical sense; and, finally, work for a new and better world guided by interrelationships between objective knowledge, moral purpose and social practice.

We should emphasise that university learning and service and professional practices differ on several issues. While it is true that both are forms of learning based on experience, they are markedly different. First, as we saw, the learning and service favour both the acquisition of knowledge and the specific beneficial application of this knowledge in the social field, while the internship or professional practice focuses only on the service provided as training for the student (Porter Honnet & Poulsen 1989). Second, professional practices are driven by the needs of the curriculum; the former, by curricular and community needs. Third, professional practices technically prepare students for later work activity, while learning and service prepare them for ethical and responsible professional practice facing the social reality of their time.

From the above, we can understand that solidarity learning and service provide the theoretical framework to guide the university's educational social practices, whereby clear benefits for both individual training and the community in which it intervenes are achieved, promoting social integration and inclusion, improvement in people's quality of life, and the strengthening of local development. All of it resulting from interdisciplinary, intersectoral and participatory work.

For the student, what is learnt? Academic training, technical skills, citizen responsibility, responsibility at work, ethical

formation. Learning and service requires partnerships with the community, objectives framed in response to community needs, explicit curricular learning objectives, reflection, evaluation and mentoring. It may be also noted that learning and service is characterised by authentic experiences, cooperation rather than competition with others, personal commitment to the community, the acquisition of new knowledge, and the need to deal with complex problems in real situations (Eyler, Giles & Astin 1999). It is not enough to have abstract and general knowledge; students must learn to apply it in real situations. This promotes deep learning because it is necessary to reorganise acquired knowledge and integrate new knowledge. It also facilitates evaluation because the results are immediate and visible to the different actors. It commits the whole person, intellectually, emotionally and physically.

Finally, can a responsible citizen culture be built? The issue takes on real importance, because, today, citizenship has become a diffuse concept. It is clear, if there is something that has characterised modernity (especially during the 20th century), that the concept of 'citizen' was visibly established in all countries, alike. A citizen was an individual who claimed to exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship in his/her nation, which is nowadays described as 'statutory citizenship'. This traditional concept of citizen adhered to the legal framework of a nation state based on a determined territorial area. In the last 40 years, however, this has entered into crisis, largely due to successive changes on the international scene: massive migratory flows, growing multiculturalism, technological impacts on communication and the rise of the information society, gender policies, progress in youth legislation, and so on. These factors gradually eroded the traditional idea of citizenship. Today, we speak of cosmopolitan citizenship, which even puts into crisis the very definition of the nation state, making it indeterminate and flexible.

Providing an educational response to these new dimensions of citizenship is then a challenge and draws on the intellectual debates of the early 19th century. This new concept of citizenship is understood through the full exercise of rights and responsibilities, rather than in any objective legal description: a citizen will be the one who empowers themselves through active participation in order to guarantee the realisation of rights. Therefore, the new model of citizenship becomes a process of construction; it is not defined in a finished way and must be built every day, making education an extraordinary instrument for this purpose (Folgueiras Bertomeu, Luna González & Julián 2010).

SOLIDARITY LEARNING AND SERVICE IN ACTION

PIACBV was created by the University of Buenos Aires' Superior Council in 2008. This is important to note, as it demonstrates that, from the outset, the program had institutional backing. Since then,

it has received several awards for the development of good practice in learning and service, including the Declaration of Educational Interest by the Buenos Aires City Legislature, 2010; Special Mention Prize Presidency of the Nation, 2010; and First Place, MacJannet Prize for Global Citizenship, Talloires Network, 2011.

PIACBV was established as the main *extensión* policy of the Department of Student Welfare and University Extensión at UBA, and has since substantially informed the university's thinking around learning and service as pedagogical framework and how whole-of-university *extensión* could work. The program works with at-risk populations in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires, across multiple areas of need, and with multiple partners. Broadly, projects come under three main areas: non-formal education (literacy, tutoring, job training, digital literacy, vocational and teacher training); preventative healthcare measures (primary health care, nutrition, vision, cardiovascular risk, dental health); and community development (legal assistance, citizenship, social and cultural activities and sports). Key objectives are the fostering of inclusivity, supporting local development and opening up resources to the community.

At the heart of PIACBV is the creation of communal spaces, called *centros de extensión*. The centres serve a number of purposes: ensure a stable, ongoing connection with the communities involved; give the program organisational and physical structure; centralise the efforts of projects and participants; and allow for the exchange of information across stakeholders and projects. A critical feature is that the centres allow for the full range of *extensión* experiences, as presented in Figure 1; that is, volunteer and solidarity projects, pre-professional practicums, and service and learning. As well, faculty-based research, university chairs and institutes are all involved. However, all of these exist within a matrix that frames the teaching, learning and research tasks as inseparable from consideration of the involvement with and impact on the community. Interdisciplinary, intersectoral and collaborative approaches are central to the program.

The program can be seen as transformational, in large part due to the context switching that occurs, whereby students must apply their classroom-based knowledge and skills in situations that are impossible to completely predetermine. For this reason, technical knowledge must be supplemented by the ability to make decisions, work collaboratively and imagine solutions to unanticipated problems, in contexts not always associated with the application of their knowledge. At the very least, this leads to expanded employability; but, fundamentally, this interdisciplinary work, the relationships with neighbours and civil society organisations, and the guidance of teachers favours the formation of a complex understanding of citizenship today.

IMPLEMENTING EDUCATIONAL SOCIAL PRACTICES

UBA began to implement, on an optional basis, educational social practices in the curricula of all disciplines during the academic

cycles from 2012 to 2016. From 2017, implementation will be obligatory. The following gives a brief overview of the goals and means of implementation.

General objective:

- To implement educational social practices as a way of achieving integrality in the learning process, to be interdisciplinary and obligatory, have impact on the curricula, and aim to develop cooperation and collective intelligence in the students.

Specific objectives:

- Involve students in a ‘genuine’ experience, strong and common, to return to it in a reflective and analytical way, fixing new knowledge
- Promote social integration, in order to transform reality towards inclusivity, deepen local development and expand resources in the power of the community, based on interdisciplinary, intersectoral and participatory work
- Deepen the comprehensive understanding of the actions of social policies, contributing in that way to the improvement of individual training and people’s quality of life
- Promote the development of citizenship values based on social commitment
- Strengthen the links between university academic practices with the community in which the institution is inserted, articulating the curricular and community needs
- Integrate teaching, research and *extensión* functions
- Enable reflective and critical views on society from different disciplinary approaches
- Develop cooperation and connection between teachers and students, and between them and society
- Encourage the development of critical thinking and its use for the solution of concrete problems
- Develop in students autonomy and the ability to make choices and negotiate them
- Train students for the conception and management of projects, and to generate institutional leadership.

To achieve university-wide implementation, all faculties will elevate to the university’s Superior Council a list of projects, which will be offered to students through a database established for this purpose, including, among other information, the allowed student quota and task schedule.

Students will be able to start after completing the common basic cycle (compulsory first-year courses for every student); having passed the first semester of their discipline, students are able to opt for projects offered by their faculty of origin or from another academic unit. These practices will last 42 hours in the quarter and will be supervised by a teacher and a team of teaching assistants who will guide the activities.

Students must carry out weekly activities, and complete in writing a survey of all the activities, to be signed by the

teacher in charge of the project. At the end of the practices, the teachers in charge will issue a certificate for each student who has satisfactorily completed the activities.

It is worth remembering that an educational social practice is a formative path that includes three components: a formative component, which involves the development of skills mediated through teaching processes; a social component, since it is a practice that takes place in spaces outside the classroom and is directed to society; and an intervention component, since it involves the development of strategies that aim to provide a service to the community in which the institution is inserted.

CONCLUSION

So far, this article has provided an overview of the need to value anew experiential educational practices in higher education as a way to achieve more effective learning. It has discussed definitions and the problems that arise related to the incorporation of various curricular and pedagogical activities without a clear theoretical understanding on which to lean. Our evolving understanding of solidarity learning and service, as pedagogical strategy, now serves to guide our interaction with the community and allow for the development in students of skills beyond technical competences; for example, such things as social skills, ethical training and citizen responsibility.

The social commitment of the university should not be thought of as the mere transfer of the knowledge and technologies that it produces; rather, it is essential to understand community needs as a starting point for the creation of new knowledge. By engaging with critical issues in the public arena, attitudes change and new knowledge is produced; in turn, these act as driving factors behind increased maturity and social commitment of university students. *Extensión* is then a form of relationship between university and society, which can be an instrument of change, bringing the university closer to the most disadvantaged sectors, promoting their development. In this sense, it establishes a dialectical relationship between researching, teaching and concrete action. In this way, *extensión* activities should have as a priority objective 'solidarity support for solving the problems of exclusion and social discrimination, so as to give voice to the excluded and discriminated groups' (Da Sousa Santos 2005, p. 92).

To achieve a true survey of the needs and potential of a community, it is necessary to establish links with civil society associations. Direct contact with these associations facilitates a strategic look at the economic and productive capacities of the locality, and also provides the necessary basis for the articulation of direct actions.

The educational social practices at UBA also aim to solve one of the difficulties that university *extensión* programs often find: that of not being articulated as a whole-of-institution proposal, which can result in the discontinuity of projects, lack of connection between groups carrying out similar activities, dissociation from

teaching and research, lack of adequate funding, and irregular evaluation. That is why it is essential to incorporate educational social practices in the curriculum as mandatory, through a deep debate that goes beyond merely administrative and logistical, but which implies a real change in the institutional culture of the university: a desire to make real its social function and contribute to a more comprehensive educational process. In this way, such a program of practices may link the following instances: connection with civil society organisations, diagnosis of the potentialities and particular needs of the locality in which the institution is inserted, knowledge production, social research, project articulation, interdisciplinary approach and direct social action.

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