



Service-Learning

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Beyond the Classroom: The Transformative Role of Service-Learning in the Community

Working at the Universidade Católica Portuguesa, and specifically at the Faculty of Education and Psychology, has allowed me to experience deeply meaningful moments within the theme “Community. Communities”, particularly through the promotion and implementation of service-learning across UCP's campuses (Ribeiro *et al.*, 2025).

Service-learning enables students, faculty, and partner institutions to connect with the real needs of the communities in which they are embedded and to bring together knowledge, competencies, and energy to design projects that respond to those needs (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009). These projects are implemented and evaluated based on collaboration, horizontality, reciprocity, sharing, and engagement, with the intention of mobilizing all stakeholders – without forgetting those who find themselves in more vulnerable situations (Tapia, 2021). Students are challenged to step outside their classrooms and outside their comfort zones, to walk through the streets of their communities, to listen to real people, to hear their stories, to look into the faces of people whose backgrounds differ from their own, to communicate with them, and to connect with their experiences. Students are invited to feel, to connect with their own emotions, to develop empathy toward other human beings – real, not imagined. They are invited to challenge their beliefs, sometimes deeply rooted, questioning assumptions they may have taken for granted throughout their lives. They are invited to act – when previously their response might have been passivity, indifference, or the belief that there is little one can do. As I once heard in a conference I had the privilege of attending, engaging in service-learning means being MAD! Making a difference!

We are therefore speaking not only of a process of learning, but also of unlearning. Unlearning indifference, discouragement, bystanding, disconnection, dissociation, and the emotional ‘escapes’ that keep us from feeling. And also unlearning paternalism, the tendency to see from a place perceived as superior, the arrogance of believing we know what is best for others, the judgment that distances us so much from love. (Re) learning the value of presence – of ‘sitting’ with another person, opening mind and heart, and allowing something to be built together. Learning by doing... feeling... acting... collaborating... listening... expressing... building... applying what was studied... and bringing new questions back to the classroom, grounded in lived experience...

If I had to choose a single word to describe what service-learning means to me, I would say: CONNECTION. Connection with myself, getting to know myself, discovering myself, in all my different parts. Connection with the other – with their reality, sometimes entirely new to me. Connection with this shared sense of humanity and belonging to a community. Connection with meaning, with purpose, with an internal alignment that ties together the different parts of who I am and the different times of my life (Ribeiro *et al.*, 2023). Connection with being alive in this world, at this moment, with the experience of being human alongside other human beings. Connection with curricular content relevant to the field I chose – content that acquires a completely different meaning when I see its application in practice. Connection with questioning, with reflection, with what is, what no longer is, and what might become. Connection with other students, with faculty members, with professionals and volunteers from partner institutions, with people in the community we meet while mapping needs and designing projects that are meaningful, timely, and appropriate to the moment and context of those involved.

Being a University in a true community means recognizing that we operate in diverse, intertwined, mutually dependent communities. It means accepting that what unites us is far greater than what separates or distances us. It means embracing the humility of exchange, of sharing, of giving and receiving. It means looking not only at problems, needs, and difficulties, but also at resources, opportunities, and potentialities.

Service-learning (SL) inspires us to remain fully awake and to mobilize head, heart, and hands.

Like the element Earth, SL invites us to root learning in the lived realities of communities, to recognize their histories, needs, and resources, and to bring forward proposals that embody support, stability, and presence. Earth reminds us of the importance of touching the ground of people's daily lives and caring for what sustains collective life, with respect for the roots of each place.

The element Water reminds us of the importance of movement, of cultivating fluid, reciprocal, empathic, and trusting relationships within a context of interdependence. Water inspires us to overcome obstacles, to listen and mediate challenging situations with openness, to adjust rhythms, and to build bridges, channels, and social and affective networks that can make a difference in people's lives.

The element Air reminds us of the importance of vision, critical thinking, the circulation of ideas, narratives, and knowledges, shared learning, and lightness. Air invites us to lift our gaze, to question and reflect, to open space for imagination, to take a deep breath, and to welcome different perspectives.

The element Fire reminds us that transformation requires mobilizing energy to let go of what no longer serves, to confront, to deal with tensions and challenges. It calls us to act from a place of courage, capable of illuminating paths that can drive change. Fire reminds us that action is not empty of meaning, but expresses a profound commitment to justice, to the possibility of doing differently, and to the co-construction of new realities.

Thus, our University is itself a living and vibrant community – rooted in the territories, permeated by relationships, moved by ideas, and nourished by the energy of transformation. It does not exist on the margins of the communities that surround it, nor is it limited to observing and understanding the world. Rather, it participates actively in building a more humane world, aligned with the values of its own identity as an institution. It reinvents itself every day in this joint work with diverse communities, through which our students, too, can reinvent themselves – learning to exist in community with commitment, attentive listening, responsibility, courage, and care. A process that seeks to create space for each human being to become ever more themselves, expressing their unique voice and connecting with their purest essence.

References

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