



Service Learning as a tool for the development of pre-professional skills for students of Psychology of Social Intervention

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Abstract

Background: Based on our team's professional and teaching experience, we aim to enhance the academic training of Social Psychology and Master of Social Psychology students, bolstering their professional and personal skills with practical insights. Our project seeks to bridge the gap between academic learning and real-world practice, providing students with a direct connection to the realities of social intervention work they'll face post-graduation. The significance of cultivating these competencies is evident in the increasing demand for social intervention psychology professionals, currently the second-largest group within the field. **Objectives:** The aim of this article is to examine Service learning as a catalytic element in the transformation of self and society. **Method:** This project was done in a Research-Action model, especially with participative action of stakeholders. **Results:** When designing the initial project in the 2020-2021 academic year, we were aware of the urgent and significant demand for social intervention psychology across various domains. As the project progressed, it became evident that this need existed, not only within identified 'risk groups'—such as individuals facing exclusion, loneliness, minors with behavioral challenges, and those dealing with severe mental illnesses or substance abuse—but also within the broader population and specific subgroups within it. **Conclusion:** The project has brought about a transformation in how participants acquire capabilities, particularly in the development of competencies and skills. The emphasis on skill training and active involvement has been greatly appreciated by the students.

Keywords: Service Learning, Psychology of the Social Intervention, Skills and competencies, Learning outcomes, Evaluation of programmes.

BRIEF REVIEW

Molina Fernández, A.J., Arribas Tiemblo, I., Ayllón Alonso, E., Mena García, B., Salazar García, M., Vecina Jiménez, M.L., Moreno Martín, F., Piñuela Sánchez, R., Saíz Galdós, J., Estévez Paz, M.A., Borja Block, R., & Lana Blond, R. (2024). Service Learning as a tool for the development of pre-professional skills for students of Psychology of Social Intervention. *International Journal of Psychology and Neuroscience*, 10(1), 61-70. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.56769/ijpn10106>



Introduction

Service Learning”Aprendizaje Servicio”(ApS) as educational tool for university students

The strategy for service learning is a tool for developing appropriate competencies and skills for students. Addressing sustainability issues as it is based on guidelines from local and global agencies level. It analyses the pedagogical experience of the authors using the methodology of service training in higher education, it is important to train future teachers in the basic competencies of sustainable development systemic thinking, joint decision-making, responsibility towards existing and future generations and education strategies for sustainable development. It assumes that the UN guidelines claim that educators must be empowered to transform themselves through learning and serve as a leadership platform to adopt a more sustainable lifestyle for people and the planet we live on (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe [UNECE], 2013). Finally, it's confirmed the capacity of Service learning to stimulate scholarly debate and helps build capacity for transformative action, always if you want to create a more sustainable reality.

Aprendizaje Servicio/Service Learning (ApS) is a learning strategy that meets the social needs of the community. It's an useful tool to break down the isolation that centers sometimes suffer from the distance between university students and the projects that often pulls them away from reality. The university aims to be open to life and sensitive to society problems, difficulties or disadvantages caused by the surrounding environment. It is defined as:

Study suggestions aimed at finding specific formulas, involving students in everyday life of local communities, neighbourhoods

BRIEF REVIEW

Molina Fernández, A.J., Arribas Tiemblo, I., Ayllón Alonso, E., Mena García, B., Salazar García, M., Vecina Jiménez, M.L., Moreno Martín, F., Piñuela Sánchez, R., Saíz Galdós, J., Estévez Paz, M.A., Borja Block, R., & Lana Blond, R. (2024). Service Learning as a tool for the development of pre-professional skills for students of Psychology of Social Intervention. *International Journal of Psychology and Neuroscience*, 10(1), 61-70. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.56769/ijpn10105>

and institutions. It is conceptualized in experiential learning and has the following characteristics (Naval et al., 2011):

- a) Student protagonist;
- b) Focusing on real needs;
- c) Connection with goals courses;
- d) execution of service projects;
- e) reflection.

In practice, the necessary adjustments can create some methods and nuances. The context in which the learning process takes place, it's defined as training proposals that combine learning and service processes. The Community involvement in a project that connects the three missions of the university: teaching, research, openness and public engagement. ApS is based on a method Training in Solidarity services, where students, teachers and members Communities learn, train and work together to:

- a) meet community needs;
- b) To strengthen the civic consciousness of future professionals ;
- c) It's always a way to encourage learning;

And, as is often the case with this kind of lore, the protagonist is not the lecturer or the contents, it's the experience wisdom. It exists between teachers, but also between those who provides benefits and those who receive benefits.

“Recognize and accept all people's wants and needs” don't want to sound pretentious. The meeting between the people who participate in the experience is carried out from the recognition and acceptance of the wants and needs of all people affected. These are considered subjects, and not objects of the intervention. That's why action is not based on inferred needs, but in response to needs expressed by those who are experiencing the situation. It is key to make explicit this element, as it recognizes



the responsibility of the people involved directly in the search for more sustainable and equitable realities for specific communities in which they operate. The person receiving the service is considered as a central element and not as a simple receiver. A second characteristic of ApS is that it dedicates attention to a need real. It means going beyond mere cognitive learning to open up the possibilities of holistic, comprehensive and experiential learning, which involves not only the institution academically, but also to the community environment. When we reflect and we act in favor of a real need, our responsibility to learn is develops and we recognize the need to seek mutual support and the creation of social ties. Consequently, the curricular competencies that are developed go beyond a serie of imposed academic objectives. It turns into a contextualized and not fragmented experience; and, therefore, capable of providing of meaning and meaning to the subjects that the students take (Tronto, 2013).

The learning opportunities offered by real situations allow address the understanding of sustainability issues in a more complex way and holistic, as well as developing capacities for collaborative resolution from problems. The student body gets involved in processes in which they have to negotiate the concepts and methods exposed in the classroom with reality and people involved. In this way, academic content facilitates training of competencies for action (Brundiers, 2009). It is also important that teachers have sufficient skill to facilitate the connection with curricular objectives. The ApS has great potential to fill the contents of the subjects with life, but this Connection does not always occur spontaneously. Strategies are required well-thought-out pedagogical measures that act as guides so that students are able to make use of its flexibility and transfer capacity. The questions wisely directed and joint

reflection, between students and teachers, are key elements for each group of students to find, in a way idiosyncratic, the connection between your own ApS project and the contents. The questions must be open enough so that there are no standardized responses, and directed enough to that the student body feels the need to rethink the contents of the subject and to convert the contents of the subject into constituent elements of the competencies for action.

The aim of this article is to examine Service learning as a catalytic element in the transformation of self and society. Especially, to analyse the project “Development of Preprofessional Skills in Psychosocial Intervention for Psychology Students”, which it has being continuously done in the Aps call for project of “Universidad Complutense de Madrid” since 2020.

The Psychology of Social Intervention as an area of knowledge

When talking about “Social Intervention Psychology” it usually refers to some type of multidisciplinary intervention in which theoretical and practical activities and models from Clinical Psychology and Social Psychology can be related, in addition to Anthropology, Sociology, Social Pedagogy, Medicine (in recent years, especially Child and Adolescent Psychiatry) and Social Work, among others (López et al., 2017). The role of the Psychology of social intervention can be highlighted in actions related to community health promotion (Gurung, 2010), direct intervention with risk groups, social integration, development of social support networks (Uchino, 2014) and in any type of treatment and prevention from a multifactorial approach. Their contribution can be decisive in early detection, early intervention, initial approach, referral to specialized resources

BRIEF REVIEW

Molina Fernández, A.J., Arribas Tiemblo, I., Ayllón Alonso, E., Mena García, B., Salazar García, M., Vecina Jiménez, M.L., Moreno Martín, F., Piñuela Sánchez, R., Saíz Galdós, J., Estévez Paz, M.A., Borja Block, R., & Lana Blond, R. (2024). Service Learning as a tool for the development of pre-professional skills for students of Psychology of Social Intervention. *International Journal of Psychology and Neuroscience*, 10(1), 61-70. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.56769/ijpn10106>



(or care from them if their work is in one of them), socio-labor integration and in the coordination and monitoring from the different social and health teams, always through continuous communication with the user, taking into account the individual needs and favoring the development of each patient (Herrera et al., 2003).

This work methodology and the participation of different professionals are used to “encourage the monitoring of the user and the coordination between both networks and other community resources to promote a comprehensive approach, streamline the interventions of both networks and facilitate accessibility to the joint action protocols” (Molina et al., 2020). This intervention, sometimes closely identified with Social Services, can be developed in different public, private and/or in the Third sector of Social Action (Gómez & Sánchez, 2009).

This global scheme theoretically allows adaptations to the characteristics of the different risk groups. Knowledge and experiences in different areas of action (in many cases interrelated such as social services, care for families and adolescents, drug addiction (Molina, 2020b), crime and social exclusion) and with different roles: the same professional could be (at different stages of their life) director of a center, responsible for initial care, the person who carried out the evaluation and diagnosis interviews, responsible for the design and implementation of the programs, evaluator of the processes and results (Garau, 1995).

The panorama changed little by little, through the addition of a series of reasons (some of our own, others of others) that have led to a complicated situation for the participation of psychologists in Social Intervention. Some of the reasons that have had an impact are:

- The proliferation of studies adapted to the needs of the programs: Social Education, BRIEF REVIEW

Molina Fernández, A.J., Arribas Tiemblo, I., Ayllón Alonso, E., Mena García, B., Salazar García, M., Vecina Jiménez, M.L., Moreno Martín, F., Piñuela Sánchez, R., Saíz Galdós, J., Estévez Paz, M.A., Borja Block, R., & Lana Blond, R. (2024). Service Learning as a tool for the development of pre-professional skills for students of Psychology of Social Intervention. *International Journal of Psychology and Neuroscience*, 10(1), 61-70. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.56769/ijpn10105>

Social Work, Social Integration... as well as the incorporation into social intervention of disciplines that were not originally directly oriented for this, such as Social Pedagogy and Psychopedagogy. Regarding the intrusiveness of “social coaching” it would be necessary to reflect very forcefully on what is acceptable and serious in training and application of “coaching” and what cannot be tolerated, especially due to the proliferation of “Xcoachs” and pseudo-training on the subject (Molina, 2020a).

- The position of Social Psychology within the priority currents of Psychology, in many cases with postulates closer to Sociology and Social Anthropology than to the current dogmas of Psychology. The cognitive-behavioural currents and Third Generation Therapies, with their combination of “Normative Individualism + Environmental Modification” have seriously limited the participation of researchers from Psychology to study the Structure, social systems, roles and characteristics of each social context (Molina, 2020a).

- The “sanitization” of the psychologist's work and the pressure of Clinical Psychology on the rest of the disciplines. In reality, biological reductionism has caused Clinical Psychology to mimic some of the assumptions of Psychiatry, limiting the role of the psychologist to that of a clinical/health psychologist.

- Social Research in Psychology has become a minority compared to the numerous studies in Neuroscience, Psychopharmacology and Clinical Psychology. Hopefully, new currents such as Social Neuropsychology, studies on Social Emotions, Moral Judgments and Decision Making, Neuropsychology of Gender... will once again place social analysis at the focus of activity. It is also feasible to recover the qualitative methodology, more structured and



systematic, which allows delving into aspects that statistical studies have not been able to reach (Creswell, 2014).

**Methodology: The project
“Development of skills for students of
Psychology of Social Intervention in
UCM”**

This project was done in a Research-Action model, especially with participative action of stakeholders. It was oriented towards the voluntary participation of students, which implies that within the subjects the option has been given to be part of the ApS and develop the corresponding activities in said project. The present project has carried out the evaluation of the students' acquisition of the ability to apply the acquired knowledge and their ability to solve problems in new or little-known environments within broader (or multidisciplinary) contexts related to their area of study. The subjects involved have been from the Practicum of the Psychology Degree in the Social Psychology itinerary, sharing learning objectives with the following subjects:

- Practicum
- Community Psychology and social problems
- Intervention and treatment in Social, Work and Educational Psychology
- Evaluation applied to Contexts II (social, work and educational)
- Psychology of persuasion, Conflict, Negotiation and mediation
- From the Master of Social Psychology UCM, especially in the subjects of Practicum (especially the field work activities have been carried out by the students of the master's Practicum, as part of their academic activity)
- Group and Community Intervention

- Analysis and Psychosocial Intervention in Social Problems

From the professional and teaching experience of the project team, we see the need to contribute to the official academic training of the students of the Degree in Social Psychology and Master of Social Psychology, a plus in terms of the development of their professional and personal skills from a perspective closer to professional practice. Hence, we believe that this project can provide the student with knowledge of the areas of social intervention that are closer to the work reality that they will encounter upon finishing their studies ((Molina et al, 2020). The importance of developing these competencies for the psychology of social intervention is justified by the incipient growth of society's need to cover this area of psychology, since professionals in the psychology of social intervention are the main group of Psychology professionals currently active (Molina, 2020a). When designing the initial project in the 2020-2021 academic year, we were aware that, given the circumstances in which we are immersed, the need for the psychology of social intervention in different areas is urgent and important. During the development of the project, and especially when carrying out field work in 2023 in the neighbourhoods of Madrid, it is confirmed that the need exists, both in the so-called risk groups (e.g., people at risk of exclusion, especially minors with behavioural problems and social support) as in the general population and in certain groups within this population (Molina, 2020b).

Qualitative and quantitative methodology has been used for the evaluation, with subjective and objective indicators. The various agents involved in the project (teachers, students, entities, beneficiaries) have participated in this evaluation. The assessment of the ApS has been very high

BRIEF REVIEW

Molina Fernández, A.J., Arribas Tiemblo, I., Ayllón Alonso, E., Mena García, B., Salazar García, M., Vecina Jiménez, M.L., Moreno Martín, F., Piñuela Sánchez, R., Saíz Galdós, J., Estévez Paz, M.A., Borja Block, R., & Lana Blond, R. (2024). Service Learning as a tool for the development of pre-professional skills for students of Psychology of Social Intervention. *International Journal of Psychology and Neuroscience*, 10(1), 61-70. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.56769/ijpn10106>



by all the agents involved, especially the participation in the training sessions and the field work carried out by the students in the neighbourhoods of Madrid, so we will continue presenting and developing actions with this methodology. It has also been carried out in the impact evaluation, including an estimate of unexpected effects (positive and negative) (Molina et al, 2020).

Results

The project has successfully brought theory and practice into contact. In this way, a successful transfer from classrooms to applied fields has been obtained. Students have been able to develop transversal skills, such as teamwork, time management or negotiation, and specific research skills such as systematic observation, content analysis or the generation of questionnaires. Through these educational methodologies, the active role of students is facilitated by involving them directly in tasks and promoting learning through practice.

Project execution is key when it comes to offering opportunities for learning social responsibility and curricular skills. As it happens with most learning, as in the case of mathematics or music, practice is necessary to make them your own and incorporate them into your own repertoire. When we get the student body to feel the need to reflect and put into action part of the curricular contents, it is not necessary the use of positive or negative reinforcement. The very involvement in the ApS is what rewarding enough to strengthen us.

Discussion: How ApS can work for Psychology of Social Intervention students

Psychology of Social Intervention allows people to have greater control of their own health, mental and social

especially (Molina, 2020a). It encompasses a wide range of social and environmental interventions aimed at benefiting and protecting individual health and quality of life by preventing and solving the root causes of health problems, and not by focusing solely on treatment and cure. 3 components are considered:

- 1) Good health governance (e.g., tax policies on harmful products, environmental policies);
- 2) Health education;
- 3) Healthy cities.

The conditions and requirements for health are: peace, education, housing, food, income, a stable ecosystem, social justice and equity. Any improvement in health must necessarily be based on these prerequisites (Molina, 2020a). The most natural and effective way to carry out these actions is through health education. Both education and health promotion consider the active participation of individuals and the community as a fundamental strategic element. Health promotion is not possible without community participation (Molina, 2020a). Citizens and groups learn to participate in a process that requires certain instruments and channels that make it viable, and always on the basis of the possibility of making decisions and the ability to influence. In this process of incorporation into decision-making, people and groups acquire autonomy and the ability to act and improve their situation (Amirburu & Corbera, 2009). When we talk about promoting community participation we have to think about a dynamic process in which a part of the population assumes areas of power that have to do with their interests and needs, among others health (Molina, 2020a). Participation is a process, both individual and collective, in which citizens "learn to participate." Community participation is a process that does not usually occur spontaneously and usually

BRIEF REVIEW

Molina Fernández, A.J., Arribas Tiemblo, I., Ayllón Alonso, E., Mena García, B., Salazar García, M., Vecina Jiménez, M.L., Moreno Martín, F., Piñuela Sánchez, R., Saíz Galdós, J., Estévez Paz, M.A., Borja Block, R., & Lana Blond, R. (2024). Service Learning as a tool for the development of pre-professional skills for students of Psychology of Social Intervention. *International Journal of Psychology and Neuroscience*, 10(1), 61-70. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.56769/ijpn10105>



requires an external "impulse" (Molina, 2020a).

Another differential characteristic is the essential role that reflection plays in the quality of the training process (Amirburu & Corbera, 2009). It is the transversal element in this whole learning process. This is not meaningless chatter or a intellectual exercise, but rather an exploration aimed at the search for meanings shared and in search of the best actions for sustainability. Authentic reflection is not guided by merely analytical rationality or for a war model, whose sole purpose would be to win in the argument, but for an interpersonal rationality (Molina, 2020a). This dialectic between thought and feeling allows us to go beyond particular feelings and beliefs and own values to understand that other people are different from us but with human needs like ours. Authentic reflection consists in sharing and communicating, not in making statements (Amirburu & Corbera, 2009). When the group comes into contact with flesh and blood people and identified his true needs through dialogue, it's time to devise and implement such actions as it deems fit and proper under the circumstances condition (Molina, 2020a).

It is important that students receive guidance helping them to "know how to do meaningful things" and avoid the "doing it for the sake of doing it" (Amirburu & Corbera, 2009). For this reason, in the classroom students are encouraged to debate theoretical topics and relate them to their own practical situation's life experience. This is how public discourse is created and the lecturers have to be able to separate the anecdote from the root of things. Likewise, they are executed Theoretical and practical tasks that help transfer knowledge between content Professional theoreticians and experience in working with ApS. The training of people who are going to work in the Psychology of Social Intervention is

essential to improve the living conditions of the people participating in the programs. Especially relevant is training in the acquisition of skills and learning outcomes. An area of action that the Psychology of social intervention can develop is related to community health, including health education, health promotion, and community revitalization.

Conclusions

The study of ApS in objects allows us to imagine other possible ways. This is clearly visible in the specific structure of the adaptation to special issues covered by the final report of the ApS project. The project has meant a transformation in the approach to the acquisition of capabilities, especially the development of competencies and skills by the participants, both at the training level and in carrying out field work. The development of training on skills and active participation has been highly valued by the students, raising the level by carrying out field work in the neighborhoods of Madrid and direct intervention.

ApS is a valid, correct and useful strategy to go far beyond the academic knowledge. If we want to form new professionals of the Psychology of Social Intervention, with capacity of adaptation to context and ready to "think out of the box", ApS can be the right way to help those students to achieve their goals and to acquire the proper skills.

Authors Contributions

Conceptualization, A.J. M.; methodology, J.S.G, F.M.M. and A.J.M.; validation, R.P.S and B.M.G.; analysis, M.V.J., R.L.B. and I.A.T.; investigation, A.J.M., I.A.T., R.B.B and E.A.A.; writing—original draft preparation, B.M., E.A.A, I.A.T.,R.B.B. and R.L.B.; writing—review and editing, A.J.M B.M, M.A.E and J.S.G; visualization, B.M.; supervision, J.S.G. and

BRIEF REVIEW

Molina Fernández, A.J., Arribas Tiemblo, I., Ayllón Alonso, E., Mena García, B., Salazar García, M., Vecina Jiménez, M.L., Moreno Martín, F., Piñuela Sánchez, R., Saíz Galdós, J., Estévez Paz, M.A., Borja Block, R., & Lana Blond, R. (2024). Service Learning as a tool for the development of pre-professional skills for students of Psychology of Social Intervention. *International Journal of Psychology and Neuroscience*, 10(1), 61-70. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.56769/ijpn10106>



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BRIEF REVIEW

Molina Fernández, A.J., Arribas Tiemblo, I., Ayllón Alonso, E., Mena García, B., Salazar García, M., Vecina Jiménez, M.L., Moreno Martín, F., Piñuela Sánchez, R., Saiz Galdós, J., Estévez Paz, M.A., Borja Block, R., & Lana Blond, R. (2024). Service Learning as a tool for the development of pre-professional skills for students of Psychology of Social Intervention. *International Journal of Psychology and Neuroscience*, 10(1), 61-70. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.56769/ijpn10105>



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BRIEF REVIEW

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