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Experiences With Implementation of Service-learning at Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica

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Abstract. This paper presents experiences with implementation of service-learning at Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica. It briefly describes the bases of service-learning implementation into education and analyses the results of a questionnaire survey carried out among our students identifying their needs.

Keywords: service-learning; student; school; community, Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica.

Introduction

Voluntary service in Banská Bystrica has a long tradition institutionalised in 2000 by establishing a citizens' association called *Centre for Volunteer Activities*. "Its establishment originated from the need to connect people who wanted to work as volunteers with organizations which needed volunteers. Another impulse for establishment of the *Centre for Volunteer Activities* was an effort to raise enthusiasm and affection towards voluntary work especially in young people

and to make it more accessible to all citizens.”* This systematically and purposely carried out activity is related to a programme called *service-learning*. Its research conducted in the USA shows that service-learning “can contribute not only to development of society, communities and individuals to whom this help is directed but it can also be an important means of self-development of volunteers, i.e. students” (Brozmanová, 2013). This fact, connecting school, students and community and their needs through service-learning, indicates an interest in applying this strategy into the environment of the Slovak school system.

The Faculty of Arts of Prešov University is among the first schools in Slovakia that are trying to implement the strategy of service-learning into education. According to M. Lipčaková and T. Matulayová (2012, p. 189) “the purpose of this project is to test a new elective course called *Service-learning* available at the Faculty of Arts of Prešov University in Prešov. Its aim is to improve cooperation between the University and organizations of third sector using a new form; to connect theoretical education with the needs of practice and community; to apply modern teaching concepts into university system of education. Among the other aims there are: application of acquired knowledge in practice; propagation of volunteering and civil participation among students and teachers of the University; community development and development of social services; increasing quality of life of social service recipients etc. [...] Within the scope of this course the students work for approx. 26 hours in a particular facility. [...] We are planning to extend the offer of voluntary work to all areas, not only to social services.” However, despite the efforts to distinguish service-learning from volunteering, the boundary between these two approaches tends to vanish when they are applied or at least considered to be applied in practice.

The students of Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica are being engaged in volunteering for more than ten years. The aim is not only to increase engagement of students in voluntary activities during their university studies but also to apply their experience in educational process and to develop their social responsibility and engagement which will also be transferred to their professional practice. Since 2000 voluntary activities of students are organized in tight cooperation with citizens' association *Centre for Volunteer Activities*. Voluntary activities of students are used within the scope of some fields of study (for example in Social Work) at Matej Bel University as alternative forms of practical professional training and their performance is supported and appreciated in various ways. Since the academic year 2005/2006 voluntary activities are integrated into selected disciplines as alternative activities within the scope of courses in terms of service-learning concept.

Since 2013 we are implementing a concept of service-learning into various models and courses within the frame of the project *Development of innovative forms of education at Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica* supported by EU funds. While applying this educational strategy the research team under direction of Alžbeta Brozmanová Gregorová primarily uses findings and practical application in the USA which is adapted for domestic conditions. The team is also aware of the fact that service-learning is a guided and targeted process that is performed to the benefit of oneself and the others, with a degree of responsibility of those who are involved, related to education and always reflected. It differs from the professional practice mainly by voluntariness, broader extent of activities and competences.

As far as service-learning is concerned, it is important to emphasize that it is an intersection of the needs of students, community and organization (school). This method is aimed not only at the process of teaching but also at the process of learning; therefore, service-learning at Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica is defined as **an active strategy of teaching and learning based on the service to the benefit of others aimed at forming civil responsibility and personality development**. This conception clearly implies that the performance itself is necessarily preceded by defining the needs of students, community and organization, and afterwards the activity fulfilling all discovered needs is created/sought.

Analysis of findings related to implementation of service-learning at Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica

In accordance with such understanding of service-learning strategy a questionnaire survey was carried out among the students of Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica in May 2013. Its aim

* <http://www.centrumdobrovolnictva.sk/o-nas> [2013-10-28]

was to identify the needs and preferences of the students in relation to implementation of service-learning into their education.

A total of 316 respondents participated in the survey: Faculty of Humanities (56 %), Faculty of Education (28 %) and other faculties of the University (15 %). The highest percentage of participants was from bachelor's (69 %) and master's (26 %) degree programmes. Furthermore, 14 postgraduate students (4 %) took part in this survey. With regards to the dominance of the Faculty of Humanities and the Faculty of Education and to their study programmes, 84 % of participants were women.

84 % of all respondents would participate in service-learning activities if they were included in university studies regardless of being carried out within the scope of an existing or an independent course. Their interest was a prerequisite for further possibilities of implementation of this strategy into education at Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica.

Second part of questions was aimed at identification of students' needs which influenced selection of preferred activities, areas and forms of performance*.

According to table T1 more than a half of respondents would expect this strategy implemented into education at Matej Bel University to develop their communication skills, to use theory in practice, to develop interpersonal relations, project management skills, and organizational skills. Another important skill to be developed is working in a team, as it was also chosen as preferred form of working (only 6 % of respondents would prefer to perform voluntary activities individually), as well as team leading and coordinating. Special attention was paid to expectations of students cited in the middle of the table. Those are intrapersonal needs such as self-knowledge, development of responsibility and self-reflection, increasing motivation, sense of being needed and sense of personal success. It turns out that students assign importance not only to development of their knowledge and skills (communication, project managing, team work etc.) but also to development of their personality in general.

T1 Students' expectations from implementation of service-learning into education at Matej Bel University

| | | |
|--|-----|-----|
| development of communication skills (ability to empathize with others, to listen actively, to know how to express one's opinion, to lead a constructive dialogue...) | 214 | 68% |
| use of theory in practice | 176 | 56% |
| meeting new people, development of interpersonal relations | 174 | 55% |
| development of project management skills (to plan an activity/event, to carry it out, to evaluate it, to prepare a budget) | 167 | 53% |
| development of organizational skills | 155 | 49% |
| fun | 153 | 48% |
| relax, stress elimination | 153 | 48% |
| learning how to work in a team | 146 | 46% |
| getting to know different culture(s) | 144 | 46% |
| real experience with various target groups (young people, children, elderly people, severely disabled people...) | 146 | 46% |
| development of team leading and coordinating skills | 141 | 45% |
| self-knowledge | 117 | 37% |
| learning in different environment | 118 | 37% |

* Some questions are cited here for illustrative purposes: *If voluntary activities were integrated in your education, what would you expect from participation in these activities? Do you think that it is possible to interconnect any of your university courses with volunteering? Which voluntary activities as a part of your university studies would you prefer? Which target groups would you like to work with? In which area would you like to perform your voluntary activities?* For the sake of better intelligibility of the questionnaire we were using a term *voluntary activity*. However, at the beginning of the questionnaire we gave an explanation of the term *service-learning*.

| | | |
|--|-----|-----|
| opportunity to do things I am good at | 116 | 37% |
| development of responsibility | 111 | 35% |
| elimination of stereotypes | 111 | 35% |
| increasing motivation | 112 | 35% |
| learning how to solve interpersonal conflicts | 103 | 33% |
| sense of being needed | 97 | 31% |
| development of self-reflection | 92 | 29% |
| sense of personal success | 93 | 29% |
| credits and points | 93 | 29% |
| development of presentation and propagation skills | 88 | 28% |
| improving the physical condition | 76 | 24% |
| development of self-respect | 72 | 23% |
| learning how to work with documentation | 71 | 22% |
| development of partnership and parenthood skills | 62 | 20% |
| being a part of the team | 59 | 19% |
| development of functional literacy (for example reading comprehension) | 58 | 18% |
| development of ecological thinking | 54 | 17% |
| participation in improvement of services at local level | 53 | 17% |
| being excused from school | 35 | 11% |
| other | 2 | 1% |

The most preferred activities within the scope of service-learning students would take part in were organizing or helping with activities or events, organizing and coordinating leisure activities. These activities were preferred to lecturing, counselling, environmental protection, conservation and restoration, animal care and protection of free-living animals. The minimum interest was shown in advocacy of rights of particular groups of people, supporting and helping oppressed or threaten people or people who couldn't get what they were entitled to, getting financial resources, approaching donors, active participation in organizing fundraising events. Thus, the most preferred area is art and culture, education and research. We suppose that this is caused by the above mentioned focus of study of the majority of respondents attending faculties of pedagogical specialization, even though recently (in last 10 years) they tend to choose non-pedagogical study programmes.

Despite the fact that 40% of respondents are interested in helping within the area of social services for children, young people and family, severely disabled people, elderly people, and other groups; 86% of respondents are interested in service-learning; and 46% of respondents are interested in getting to know different culture or having a real experience with a particular target group (young people, children, elderly people, severely disabled people...), they do not have an inclination to work with *diversity*.

Without an effort to discover the reasons respondents are interested in working with healthy people, mainly at the age of 30 or with children and young people from socially disadvantaged environment. One fourth of respondents are interested in working with target group of elderly people, oncological patients and disabled people. The respondents showed the smallest interest in working with drug users, homeless people, people with mental illness, and finally children and young people from Gypsy communities.

Models of application of service-learning at Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica

In academic year 2013/2014 on the basis of identified needs of the students we apply the strategy of service-learning within the scope of three courses. Within the course called *Third Sector and Non-Governmental Organizations* we continue in application of service-learning based on students' experiences and reflections obtained in previous period. Within the course *Methodology of Sciences of Man* we apply service-learning for the first time. A new course created by research

team is a two-semester course called *Service-Learning* responding in a complex way to various identified needs and preferences of the students.

At the beginning of academic year the students are given information about the aims of these three courses, their content and assessment. One part of these courses is carried out in particular community. If a student doesn't want to participate in working in community, she/he can perform an alternative task (except for the course *Service-Learning* where all students are obliged to take part in working in community and they are informed about these course requirements in advance).

There are several kinds of activities offered for communities:

- activities are planned in advance with organizations we cooperate with for some time;
- activities respond to the needs of organizations that were addressed for cooperation but the way of their performance is determined by students;
- activities are planned and created by students on the basis of known needs of community or the needs identified by a survey that was carried out by these students.

We further analyse the system of integration of service-learning elements on particular examples within the scope of above mentioned three courses.

The first one is a two-semester elective course **Service-Learning**. In this academic year 51 students of all degrees in various study programmes enrolled on this course. The aim of this course is a development of students' competences (knowledge, skills and attitudes) necessary for performance of activities to the benefit of other people. The students learn how to work in a team, to plan activities, to propagate, to communicate appropriately, to plan in time, to prepare a budget, to carry out and evaluate an event. Its theoretical part consists of two ten-hour blocks where the students are guided by the research team: What is service-learning?; Work in a team; Planning; Propagation; Communication; Planning in time; Budget preparation; Performance and evaluation of activities. Using creative and activation methods of education the students acquire theoretical knowledge and practical experiences with group dynamics and team roles; they realize the need of thorough planning and planning in time; practical analysis enable them to discover the necessity of correspondence of the target and target group with selection of propagation tool; they practise communication by model situations; they obtain budget preparation skills. The reflection is an important tool of self-image and evaluation of each activity. From the very beginning it is not only about theory but also about practical application (group task after the first block and its reflection in the second block) which leads to realization of the fact that it is necessary to perceive all teaching blocks as an inseparable unit and absence or underestimation of any of them results in failure to accomplish an event/activity.

In the second phase of the course the students form groups and are asked to identify their own needs, the needs of community and school and to create an activity that will fulfil discovered needs no later than at the end of the summer semester of the corresponding academic year. They continue to cooperate with their teachers in the form of tutoring/mentoring and at least twice a month they consult them about suitability of chosen activity, its planning, performance and evaluation. Ideally, they go through all phases (steps) of service-learning in one academic year – preparation, event, reflection, evaluation and celebration. At the end of summer semester all students meet in order to present their accomplished activities and their outcomes, to reflect their own process of learning and to evaluate the whole course.

The second course, where the concept of service-learning is integrated since the academic year 2013/2014, is **Methodology of Sciences of Man**. Here all phases of this concept – preparation, event, reflection, evaluation and celebration – are followed as well. The aim of this course is to obtain knowledge and skills necessary for carrying out a quantitative research in the field of social work. While having lectures on Research Methodology the students are required to prepare and carry out surveys based on the needs of practice. For the analysis of the needs we have addressed several professional departments from the field of social work, regional and local self-government and based on these needs we have compiled a list of research topics. The students are divided into groups and their task in the course of the semester is to prepare a research project, to carry out the research, to make an analysis and interpretation of research findings, and to write a final report for the needs of a particular organization.

The third model of service-learning implementation at Matej Bel University is its application into the course **Third Sector and Non-Governmental Organizations**. This application is being performed for several years now, thus we can present specific reflections of our students.

Within the scope of the course *Third Sector and Non-Governmental Organizations* the students can obtain given number of points for writing and presenting a seminar paper on “*Gaining Resources in Third Sector - Fundraising*” or they can participate in fundraising event organized by various organizations. In last few years the Department of Social Work of Faculty of Education at Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica and the Centre for Volunteer Activities cooperate on fundraising events with several organizations, namely with the Slovak Blind and Partially Sighted Union “White Crayon”, with the League for Mental Health on the event called “Days of Forget-me-nots”, with UNICEF on the event called “Blue Button”, with SOCIA foundation on the event called “Ladybird”, and with The Children’s Hour.

Participation in fundraising event is chosen by 95% of students. Before every fundraising event itself, there is a theoretical preparation consisting of two parts:

- in the first part the students attend a lecture on fundraising – conditions of organizing that an organization needs to fulfil in order to be able to carry out such fundraising activity and what are its duties before, during and after this activity;

- in the second part the students are acquainted with a particular fundraising event, its organization and their duties.

After preparation phase the students participate in fundraising event and after that they reflect on their experiences through seminars and written self-reflections. The reflection is aimed at gained knowledge and skills, positive and negative experiences. At the same time we deal with the topic of donation focusing on who are donors, what motivates people to donate, what factors make people donate money.

The students evaluate participation in fundraising events very positively. They appreciate mainly particular knowledge and skills gained as volunteers such as organization of such activity and communication with potential donors. While during theoretical preparation the students can't imagine organizing such activity on their own, after participation in fundraising event they have a real idea of it and they feel they could manage it. Collected money for people who need them is an “added value”. The sum of money collected at each fundraising event is always revealed to students and announced at the end.

The assets of service-learning implementation into education on third sector are documented by students' feedback in the form of final evaluation of the course Third Sector and Non-Governmental Organizations that is also related to reflection of assets of service-learning activities:

- “I have found out how many people need help.”
- “I like the connection between theory and practice.”
- “We could try some of activities performed by NGOs.”
- “I have discovered lots of important information on NGOs through practical experience.”
- “I have obtained lots of new experiences.”
- “Alternative tasks are great experiences for life.”
- “I am glad you have mobilised us.”
- “I am happy I could participate in practical tasks.”
- “I have learnt to cooperate with people I don't get along with well.”
- “I have found out that many people are egoists, with few exceptions, but it didn't discourage me.”
- “I have learnt to accept refusal.”
- “We always do something, some activities. I need a rest.”
- “Everything we had learnt at school we have applied in practice and on seminars. It helps to remember.”
- “This course has aroused my interest in third sector and in my further options.”
- “I liked activities that made us think not only passively receive information.”
- “I don't like the fact that some people participate in these activities not because of their own conviction but for credits.”
- “I feel good about work I have done and help to other people.”

Our experiences with implementation of service-learning concept at Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica show that service-learning strategy presents one of possibilities how school can get closer to community and respond to its needs and how students can obtain competences necessary for their future profession, develop key competences necessary for labour market, get involved, and be active to the benefit of community.

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