

Service Learning Widespread in Latin America



Eighth graders in Argentina began a public awareness campaign, showing their research on the local water.

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Working hand-in-hand for a common cause is characteristic of service learning in Latin America.

By María Nieves Tapia

Service learning is part of a worldwide education reform effort. From the Mexican *servicio social* program to the vast student service programs of India, from the *peraj* tutorial program in Israel to *Lernen durch Engagement* in Germany and National Youth Service in Kenya, the development of youth service programs with educational content has grown exponentially in the last century. Latin America especially has shown tremendous growth and resources.

In Latin America, service learning (or *aprendizaje-servicio*) arises from varied cultural contexts. From a theoretical standpoint, it has been informed and inspired by diverse theoretical influences from John Dewey to Paulo Freire, from constructivism to the theory of multiple intelligences (Tapia 2006).

Often referred to as *aprendizaje-servicio solidario*, the idea of *solidaridad* is a key concept in Latin American service learning. It means helping others in an organized and effective way, working together for the common cause, standing as a group or as a nation to defend rights and face natural disasters or economic crises.

As a pedagogical method whereby students develop *solidaridad*, *aprendizaje-servicio* is meant to serve a real need of the community, improve the quality of academic learning, and spur the formation of personal values and responsible citizenship. But it also strives to “overcome the usual power differentials established in the donor/recipient relationship, distancing itself from patterns of beneficence or patronage” (Tapia 2003: 145). This focus on working hand-in-hand for a common cause is a prevalent characteristic of service learning in Latin America.

Service learning in Latin America generally originated in the education institutions themselves. Pioneer programs arose in higher education (Mexico, Costa Rica, and Colombia), secondary schools (Argentina, Chile, and Bolivia), and also in primary schools (Uruguay). These initial programs spurred the implementa-

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tion of wide-ranging strategies for promoting service learning, with varying degrees of success.

In Argentina, service learning emerged from school practice. Trying to solve urgent community problems, even without knowing its international and methodological framework, schools “invented” service learning. For example, in Santa Fe, Argentina, 8th graders discovered in the school lab that

Service learning projects have included auto repair classes, dealing with contaminated water, and creating a monthly community tango.

their drinking water was poisoned with arsenic. They began a public awareness campaign, showing their research on the local water. By the time they were 12th graders, they had developed a potabilization plant for their little town, had the local administration build a new water system, and had worked with a local hospital and two national universities to organize a health research and prevention plan to treat people with symptoms of arsenic poisoning. They also won the International Junior Prize of Water because of the academic quality of their research.

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Mandatory or Voluntary?

Beginning in the 1970s and through the 1990s, Latin America experienced enormous growth of student social service programs and spontaneous “solidarity initiatives” developed by schools and universities, many of which were compulsory, for example in Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Colombia, Panama, and Venezuela. Sometimes, these policies were accompanied by specific orientation and training programs that encouraged the successful diffusion of community service initiatives. In other cases, the mandatory service requirement became little more than a formal or bureaucratic regulation. In general, the current cultural context of Latin America tends to reject such mandatory service-learning requirements when imposed by military or authoritarian governments or when perceived as a means of using student projects to achieve specific political goals.

In other Latin American countries, incentive-based policies have promoted service learning. Argentina, for example, promoted service learning without establishing mandatory requirements. The *Premio Presidencial Escuelas Solidarias* [Presidential Award for Service Learning Schools] and the *Premio Presidencial de Prácticas Solidarias en la Educación Superior* [Presidential Award for Service Learning in Higher Education] recognized institutions that develop *solidario* projects. The awards increase the visibility of service learning, spread best practices, and promote replication. In 2009, 1.6 million students in

Argentina participated in service learning. About 3,800 schools submitted applications for the Presidential Awards, which were given to four first-place and six second-place schools.

Projects covered a wide range of efforts and subject areas. A trade school organized a monthly community tango, building tables and chairs for the event, preparing the food, and running the sound equipment. A high school built solar panels for local families. Not only did the students who built the panels keep a journal of their experiences, but the families who received the panels recorded data on the number of hours of sun and how they prepared food differently as a result of having a new energy source. Another school created and maintained a green space in the town square. They worked with the local community to agree on mutual responsibilities for the school and town. Those students also led a job-creation effort after a local manufacturing plant closed. They increased tourism by creating promotional resources on the less-well-known beaches in the area.

One of the first-place prize winners included a vocational school in a very poor community that set up auto repair classes. Because they didn’t have any cars to practice on, they collaborated with the local police department to repair police vehicles. This gave teen boys, often with histories of petty crime, an opportunity to work with police in a positive way. Together, the police and students also collaborated to give out “tickets” to cars that needed something fixed, like a burned-out light. The “ticket” would allow the vehicle’s owner to come to the school for the students to repair it. This worked so well that the police asked students to do this quarterly. The community and police overcame negative conceptions of the youth and the school, and the teens felt more connected and engaged with adults.

Argentina’s Ministry of Education also develops materials and teacher training that support service learning through the *Programa Nacional Educación Solidaridad* [National Service-Learning Educational Program]. The *Programa* collaborates with CLAYSS and the Organization of Iberoamerican States to organize an annual International Seminar on Service Learning in Buenos Aires, Argentina. This seminar has been a principal source for service-learning information in Latin America. The necessity of engaging in more formal dialogues and collaborations to strengthen national efforts and generate more effective partnerships led to the conception of the Ibero-American Network of Service Learning, founded in Buenos Aires, in 2005. It is currently composed of 47 organizations, universities, and government bodies from more than 17 countries in Latin America, the United States, and Spain. 

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