

Quality of participation in Service-Learning projects

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Abstract

This paper presents a Service-Learning project implemented through the partnership between the University of Bologna and the Public Agency for Services to the Person, a community organization. The main aim is to evaluate the quality of participation experience in a Service-Learning project for university students and professionals working in community services.

The focus of the paper is on *reflection* and *action*, that have been defined as two features that contribute to good participation and that have been identified as core dimensions of Service-Learning. The projects were developed as part of the lab in Community Psychology, and they involved 30 master's students who participated in 6 projects of community service. 30 field diaries written by students individually and 6 semi-structured interviews with the professional tutors were analyzed with the help of T-Lab8 software. Results show that the involvement of students in S-L projects, enhances reflective processes and opportunities to act on the local context.

Key words: Service-Learning, action-reflection, quality of participation, partnership, civic engagement, institutional engagement

Riassunto. *Qualità della partecipazione in progetti di Service-Learning*

Il presente articolo descrive un progetto di Service-Learning implementato grazie ad una partnership tra università e l'Azienda Pubblica di Servizi alla Persona, un'organizzazione comunitaria. L'obiettivo principale è la valutazione della qualità della partecipazione nei progetti di Service-Learning per studenti universitari e operatori professionali dei servizi comunitari.

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L'articolo si focalizza su *riflessione* e *azione* che sono state individuate come due caratteristiche che contribuiscono a definire una partecipazione di qualità e che sono dimensioni centrali del Service-Learning. I progetti sono stati sviluppati all'interno del laboratorio di Psicologia di Comunità e hanno coinvolto 30 studenti del corso di laurea magistrale che hanno preso parte a 6 progetti di servizi comunitari. 30 diari di campo individuali scritti dagli studenti e 6 interviste semi-strutturate con i tutor professionali sono stati analizzati con il supporto del software T-Lab8. I risultati dimostrano che il coinvolgimento degli studenti nei progetti di S-L innesca processi di riflessione e opportunità di agire nel contesto locale.

Parole chiave: Service-Learning, azione-riflessione, qualità della partecipazione, partnership, impegno civico, impegno istituzionale

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions are becoming more sensitive to the needs of community organizations and to the necessity of co-creating positive and fruitful partnerships with them. Partnerships for a common purpose or a project offer opportunities to maximize impact, increase resources, provide more links to community-based organizations, and leverage the support of local corporate, government, or foundation interests. Indeed, universities have a civic mission that implies a role in the education of citizens by preparing responsible students, committed to being active participants in a democratic society, and by developing students' competencies for the improvement of communities (Jacoby, 2003). This is known as "third mission", which means that universities, beyond their core tasks of research and teaching, have a complementary mission to generate knowledge outside academic environments to the benefit of the social, cultural and economic development, in a way that connects teaching and research to everyday problems of the people (McIlarth, Lyons & Munck, 2012). It has been nearly two decades since community psychologists argued that universities should embrace community engagement and community-academic partnership by creating «lose mutual cooperation between parties having common interests, responsibilities, privileges and power» (Israel *et al.*, 2001). For an educational institution in the process of creating partnerships with community organizations, it is of outstanding importance to emphasize the relevance of improved access to community organizations and consider them as valued partners. Partnerships entail shared responsibilities, mutual respect and distributed power: partners work together to create something new and valuable.

Campus Compact Benchmarks for Campus/Community Partnerships (Torres & Schaffer, 2000) define *genuine democratic partnerships* as founded on a shared vision and shared values that are beneficial to both partnering

institutions. They emphasize the importance of interpersonal relationships based on trust and mutual respect, sustainability over time and need to integrate the mission and support systems of the partnering institutions.

2. Theoretical background

Service-Learning (S-L), sometimes referred to as community-based or community-engaged learning, is an «innovative pedagogical approach that integrates meaningful community service or engagement into the curriculum and offers students academic credits for the learning that derives from active engagement within community and work on a real-world problem»¹ (McIlrath *et al.*, 2016, p. 5). Service-Learning brings together students, academics and the community whereby all become teaching resources, problem-solvers and partners (Aramburuzabala, McIlrath & Opazo, 2019).

In the US, the National and Community Service Act of 1990 defined Service-Learning as a method that enhances the academic curriculum of the students, or the educational components of the community service program in which the participants are enrolled and provides structured time for the students or participants to reflect on the service experience (Furco, 1996). Service-Learning integrates service for the community and learning for the students with the aim to enhance the civic responsibility of the student and to strengthen the community resources (Aramburuzabala *et al.*, 2019). On one side, students have the opportunity to acquire new competencies and skills relevant to their learning through direct experience in the community and to be involved in an organization located in a specific context. On the other side, community organizations can create and develop partnerships with educational institutions, expand their social networks and promote reciprocity (McIlrath *et al.*, 2012).

In Italy, the term Service-Learning is not used often (Acquadro Maran *et al.*, 2009). Vigilante (2014) refers to the difficulty of discriminating S-L from other services existing in the Italian context and abroad, such as volunteering, National Civic Service and European service. In the academic institution, S-L is often mixed up with professional training, apprenticeship and curricular internship (Guarino & Zani, 2017).

«As a form of experiential education, Service-Learning is based on the pedagogical principle that learning and development do not necessarily occur as a result of experience itself but as a result of reflection explicitly de-

¹ Definition of S-L from Europe Engage – Developing a culture of civic engagement through Service-Learning within Higher Education in Europe, funded by the European Union under the programme Erasmus +, [Reference 2014-1-ES01-KA203-004798]

signed to foster learning and development. Reflection and reciprocity are key concepts of Service-Learning» (Jacoby, 2003, p. 4).

High quality Service-Learning that is beneficial to all parties involved must be built on a solid foundation of carefully developed partnerships. This type of S-L is defined by 4 basic characteristics, which have been given the name “The 4Rs:” Respect, Reciprocity, Relevance and Reflexivity. Respect brings the focus and the attention on the needs, resources and people that are involved in S-L project. Reciprocity regards the challenge of satisfying actual community needs in ways that will be meaningful to student participants as well. Reciprocity also eschews the traditional concept of volunteerism, which is based on the idea that a more competent person comes to the aid of a less competent person. Indeed, Service-Learning projects encourage students to do things *with* others rather than *for* them, by focusing on collaboration and cooperation. Everyone (students, academics, community organization members) should expect to receive feedback during the process, to improve and change (Karasik & Wallingford, 2007).

Relevance means that S-L is linked to the curriculum, that is to say, it is relevant to the program of study. This requires the active involvement of teachers/academic staff, systematic integration into, and recognition by, the official programs of study of students.

Reflexivity refers to regular and ongoing student reflection guided by teaching personnel and/or community partners. Reflection should lead to the understanding of diverse perspectives inherent in the community challenges students are experiencing. Reflection and experiential learning strategies underpin the learning process and the service is linked to the academic discipline (Aramburuzabala *et al.*, 2019).

Reflection in Service-Learning can be defined as the «intentional consideration of experience in light of particular learning objectives» (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997, p. 153). The goal is to help students acquire and use complex information and then develop abilities to identify, frame, and resolve ill-structured social problems. Hatcher and Bringle (1997) provided a set of guidelines for effective reflection: link experience to learning objectives; give guidance for the activities; schedule activities regularly to expand the service experience over the course of the students’ development; allow feedback and assessment; and include clarification of values. When meaningful reflection was incorporated into Service-Learning, critical thinking performance and reflective judgment increased in comparison to courses with service and little reflection.

Literature on Service-Learning (Chupp & Joseph, 2010; Eyler, 2002; Hatcher & Bringle, 1997; Jacoby, 2003; McIlrath, 2012) shows the importance of reflexivity in different moments of Service-Learning projects. In

particular, reflection is conceived to be a form of practice that shapes the quality of projects. It contributes to a deeper understanding of social problems and makes it possible for students to identify, frame, and resolve them as engaged citizens in communities (Eyler, 2002). Experiential learning gives the opportunity to combine active engagement and reflection, developing competencies of critical thinking and global mindedness on social issues. A cyclic process of action and reflection is activated, which involves continuous changes of one's understanding with more experience, information and thought. Reflection is a core element, which defines the quality of participation experiences that can produce positive outcomes for students and community organizations (i.e., individual and community development). The combination of opportunities for action and reflection in a supportive environment where pluralism and dissent are valued seems not only to characterize many current civic and political experiences, but also to foster relevant participatory attitudes, dispositions and behaviors (Barrett & Zani, 2015). Additionally, recent research reviews regarding the impact of Service-Learning on students (Chupp & Joseph, 2010) also reinforce the idea that critical reflection is essential for positive developmental change. Similar results come from work in higher education and community development (Campbell & Jovchelovitch, 2000; Zimmerman, 1995), where action, reflection, collaboration and community participation are recognized as essential elements.

Ferreira and colleagues (2012) proposed a theoretical perspective on the quality of participation experiences. Solving real-life problems, expressing views and, interacting with diverse others within a context that values pluralism and allows for analyzing the personal meaning of the experience are considered as important processes to improve civic engagement. «The relevance of real and meaningful action allowing for role-taking experiences and for reflection in a supporting and yet challenging relational context are considered as meaningful issues for the development of quality civic and political experiences» (Ferreira *et al.*, 2012, p. 601).

They operationalized the concept in two dimensions: the action dimension included items referring to opportunities of real action in real contexts, and of interaction with different others; the reflection dimension focused on the atmosphere experienced and the presence of pluralism, openness to difference and dissent, and opportunities to reflect on the action. Regarding Service-Learning, opportunities for discussion, listening to different opinions, perspective-taking were assumed to be the enablers of reflection. Active engagement in “real world” activities, like the analysis of community/organizations’ needs and resources and the elaboration of “specific answers” (i.e., development of new services, implementation of specific activities), were assumed to be enablers of action.

2.1 Methodology of the Service-Learning projects

A S-L program was developed as part of a Community Psychology lab in the Master's degree at University of Bologna, from November 2016 to January 2017. The lab, consisting of 30 hours, involved students who participated in SL projects under the tutorship of community practitioners. Students received 3 credits for participating in the laboratory, as part of their class practicum (supervised practical application of a studied theory/method/approach) during their Master's degree course. The services involved were "Red Marmot" Community Center for homeless, Safe Nights Prevention Project, Social Mediation Service, Street Unit service named "Stars Way," Harm Reduction Service, and Protection Center for Asylum seekers and refugees. They were chosen because they provided opportunities for students to meet relevant academic competencies through working directly with community members in outreach, mediation and assistance services. The project development followed three basic phases.

The planning phase consisted of contacting and meeting the stakeholders in the University Campus of Cesena to identify topics of interest and social issues and to elaborate the six projects with the professional tutors. In the implementation phase, students were divided into six groups according to their project preference and started to work in the field for twenty hours. Finally, the evaluation phase was composed of constant monitoring activities by the professional tutor and the responsible academic teacher, who organized class meetings to discuss the activities performed by the students, giving them constructive feedback.

3. Aims and research questions

In this paper, we explored if action and reflection were reported in tutors and students' accounts of their experiences of Service-Learning, and how these dimensions were linked to the promotion of civic engagement and participative actions.

The main research questions were the following:

1. What are the main characteristics of S-L projects, from tutors' and students' perspectives?
2. How are the two dimensions of quality of participation (action and reflection) described by participants in S-L projects?

4. Methods

4.1 Data collection and analysis

Thirty students, involved in the six projects during the 30 hours of the Community Psychology lab, were required to write an individual field diary of their activities where they had to write down thoughts, considerations, emotions at the end of each day of the experience. Thirty field diaries were collected from students. Six semi-structured interviews with tutors were also conducted to get insight into their understanding of Service-Learning, their level of satisfaction with the project, the mutual benefits for the community and for the student, and the perceived changes and next steps needed to improve the partnership between community organizations and university. Interviews with tutors lasted one hour and were recorded and transcribed verbatim for the purposes of the research. Informed consent was preliminarily collected from students and tutors.

To analyze the textual material from the students' field diaries and the tutors' interviews we used a multimethod approach (quantitative and qualitative). T-Lab8 software² was used to perform a co-occurrence analysis exploring and mapping various types of relationships between key-terms. The software uses a textual word association visualization tool that provides a clear visual logic for understanding the strengths and weaknesses of conceptual relationships between words within a body of text. For each visualization, the shorter the distance between the central term and any other key term, the closer the association (Cortini & Tria, 2014). T-Lab8 was used to identify the core elements of S-L according to students and tutors' perspective, based on the relationships of the central term "Service – Learning" with words included in the text. T-Lab was used also to compare students and tutors' perspective on some key words which were identified on theoretical basis, having in mind the quality of participation conceptual model of Ferreira and colleagues (2012). Thus, we used a top-down approach to detect keywords (Lancia, 2012), identifying keywords associated to the explored features of the quality of participation. Regarding action, we chose keywords indicating the opportunities to have an influence on the context, such as participative activities. Concerning reflection, we selected keywords referring to the moments of reflection occurred during the Service Learning activities. Finally, we chose the same keywords for students and tutors in order to compare the results: Service-Learning or SL, reflection, participation, to improve, territory.

² T-Lab8 software is based on a quantitative textual analysis through a set of linguistic, statistical and graphical tools.

To perform a thematic content analysis, we selected the texts with references to the quality of participatory experience, namely action and reflection. Categories of content were chosen according to the literature and, then, each category was assigned to segments of text. A coding process of categories was developed and discussed by the first author with two members of the research team. This process led to the definition of the final categories.

5. Results

First, we present the keywords associated with the term “Service-Learning”, that contribute to clarify the definition of this methodology in students’ and tutors’ terms (how they define it). Then, we inspect the association with the terms that were identified for reflection and action. For each keyword, we compare the meaningful associations between students and tutors. Finally, we present the content analysis of diaries and tutors’ interviews on the same thematic contents.

Table 1 and 2 report the frequencies (occurrences, OCC) of the keywords selected for the present analysis from the textual corpora of students’ diaries (N keywords = 400, OCC= 485) and tutors’ interviews (N keywords = 325, OCC = 87).

Tab. 1 – Frequencies of keyword in students’ diaries textual corpus (30 diaries collected).

ITEM	OCC
Service-Learning	166
Reflection	89
Participation	91
To improve	43
Territory	15

Tab. 2 – Frequencies of keywords in tutors’ interviews corpus. (6 interviews collected)

ITEM	OCC
S-L	78
Reflection	15
Participation	17
To improve	18
Territory	15

5.1 Keywords associations

Service-Learning definition. Students regarded Service-Learning as a project in which different protagonists are involved such as community practitioners, students and university professors. It is considered a form of experiential learning, as the words “experience” and “to study” were emphasized, and it is offered by university professor(s), through specific projects, that students can join (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 – Service-Learning associations from students' diaries



In addition, tutors considered S-L a significant experience for their organization, useful in addressing the problems and the issues they deal with every day. It is also considered a way to enlarge their network and their partnership with the university (Fig. 2).

Quality of participation: reflection. Textual analysis showed how students and tutors represented their concept of reflection. Students considered Service-Learning as providing them with opportunities for reflection (Fig. 3), mainly associated with the word “learning”. Indeed, reflection is an important part of the (experiential) learning process, as the associations with the words “experience” and “elaborate” demonstrate. The word “emotion” is strictly associated with the term “reflection”, suggesting that having the chance to express feelings and emotions and share them with the “group”, was a key phase of the reflective process. This process happened during

“meetings” where tutors and students came together and had the opportunity to reflect on the activities, in which they were involved.

Fig. 2 – Service-Learning associations from tutors’ interviews

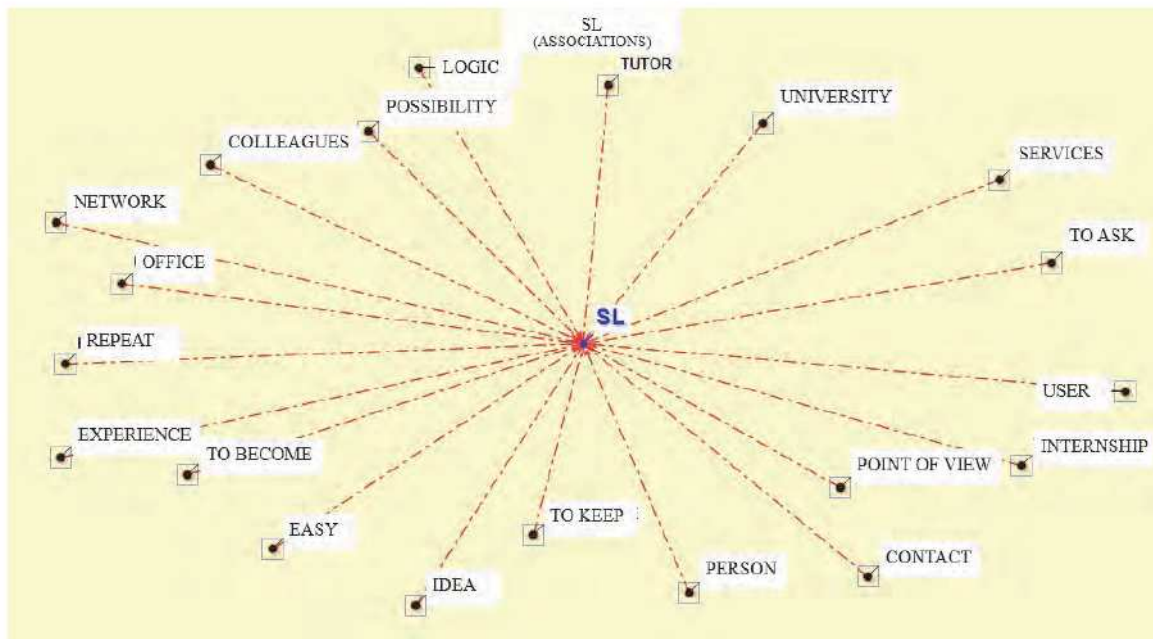


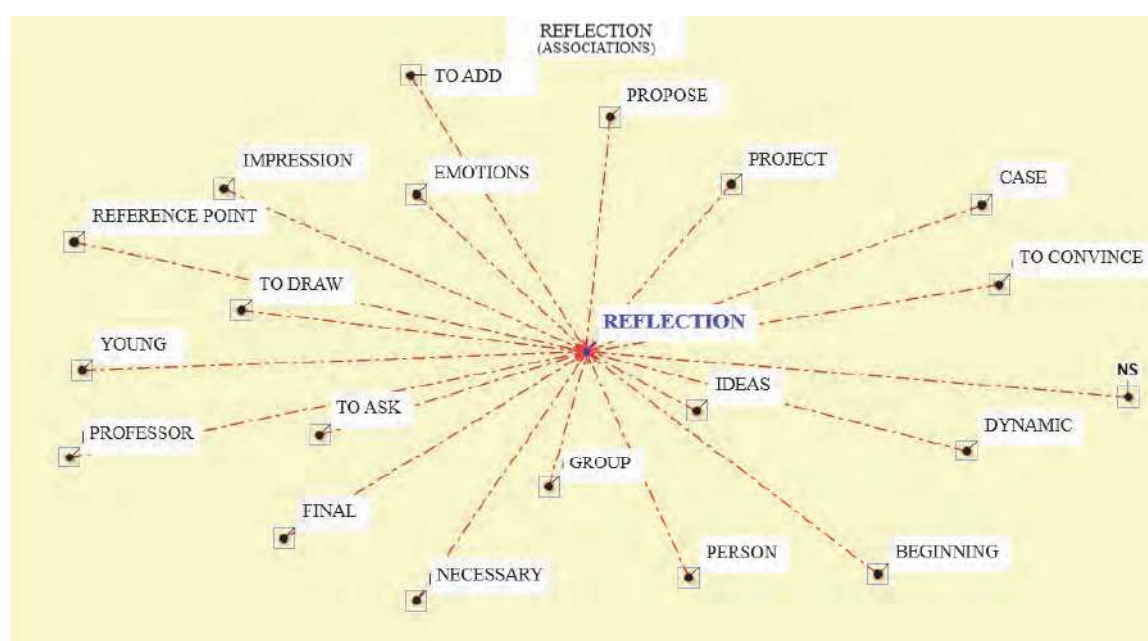
Fig. 3 – “Reflection” associations from students’ diaries



Reflection is not a solipsistic activity, it is boosted by discussion for students and it is included in tutors’ words (Fig. 4). The term reflection in-

dicates how the relationships between students and tutors promote mutual benefit. The words associated with the main word “reflection” indicate the importance of “group” reflection, thus meaning that students and tutors use the group as a playground for reflection and as “a platform” where they can share and create new “ideas”, debrief on some unsolved question by students and monitor the project. Moreover, for tutors, reflection is also considered an opportunity to express and share emotions linked to their activities. It is important to create spaces for reflection from the first phases (“beginning”) of the S-L projects to the last ones (“final”).

Fig. 4 – “Reflection” associations from tutors’ interviews



Quality of participation: action. It is described by the students and the tutors with the word “participation” (Fig. 5 and 6). Through participation students could become active within the Service-Learning project. Also, for tutors, participation can be considered a perspective through which it is useful to consider the role of students in their services. For students, participation is enacted in the project of Service-Learning, which brought together learning and service, specified by the words “learning”, “laboratory”, and “service”. Moreover, students recognized themselves as being active members in “meetings” and in elaborating “proposals”.

For tutors, action was “implicit”, it “took place” when students participated in interventions that are part of their services. Participation was a form of active citizenship that could be promoted and sustained over time (“to continue”). It had to do with “capacity” and success (“succeed”) and

could develop into volunteering, as an opportunity that services could offer to students from S-L experiences.

Fig. 5 – “Participation” associations from students’ field diaries

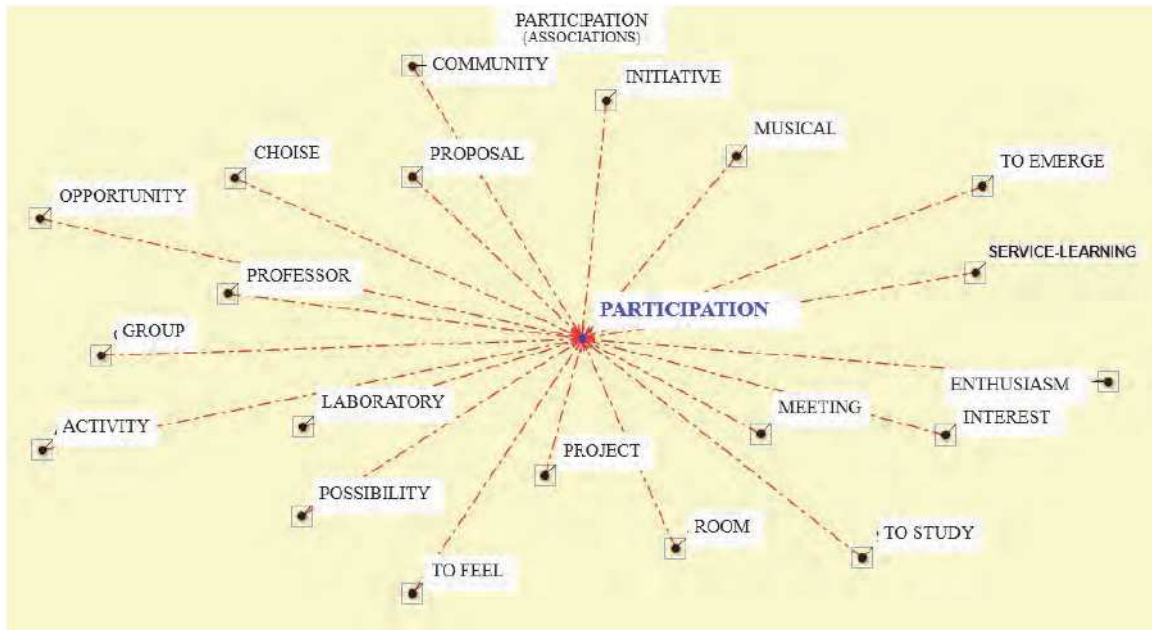
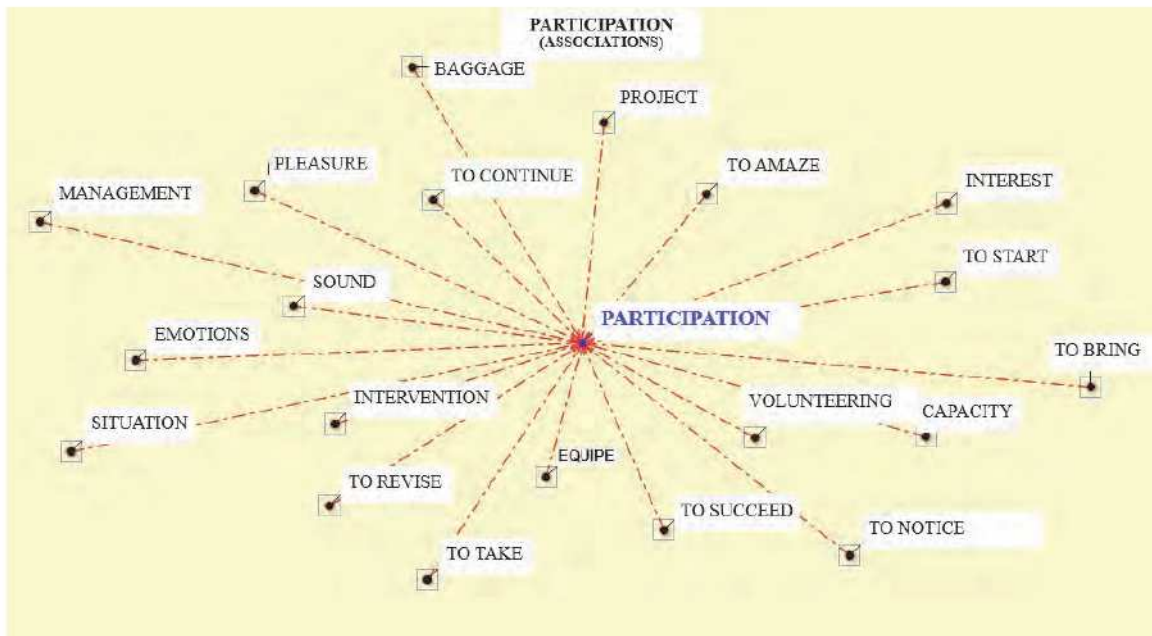


Fig. 6 – “Participation” associations from tutors’ interviews



The definition and the understanding of action among students was associated to the verbs “to improve” and “to achieve” a shared goal (Fig. 7).

Students acted to improve the project they were involved in, but they were aware that any change they might want to achieve couldn't happen without reflection. It required them "to think", "to ask", in order to clarify their "idea" and define a "project", emphasizing the circularity between action and reflection as two key features of participatory experiences.

Fig. 7 – "To improve" association from students' field diaries

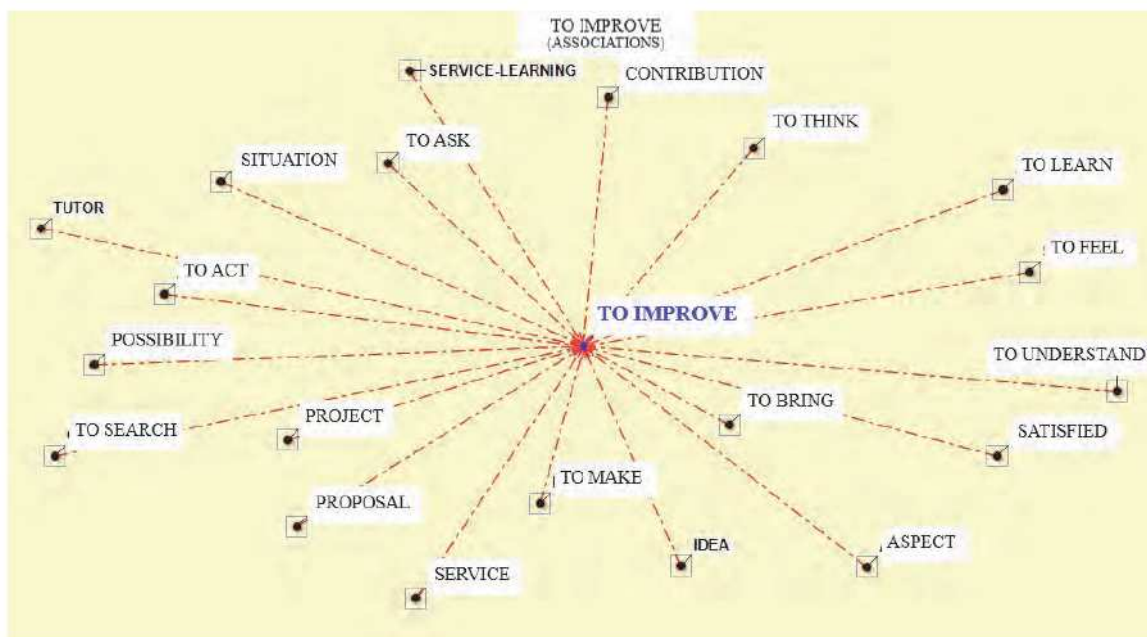
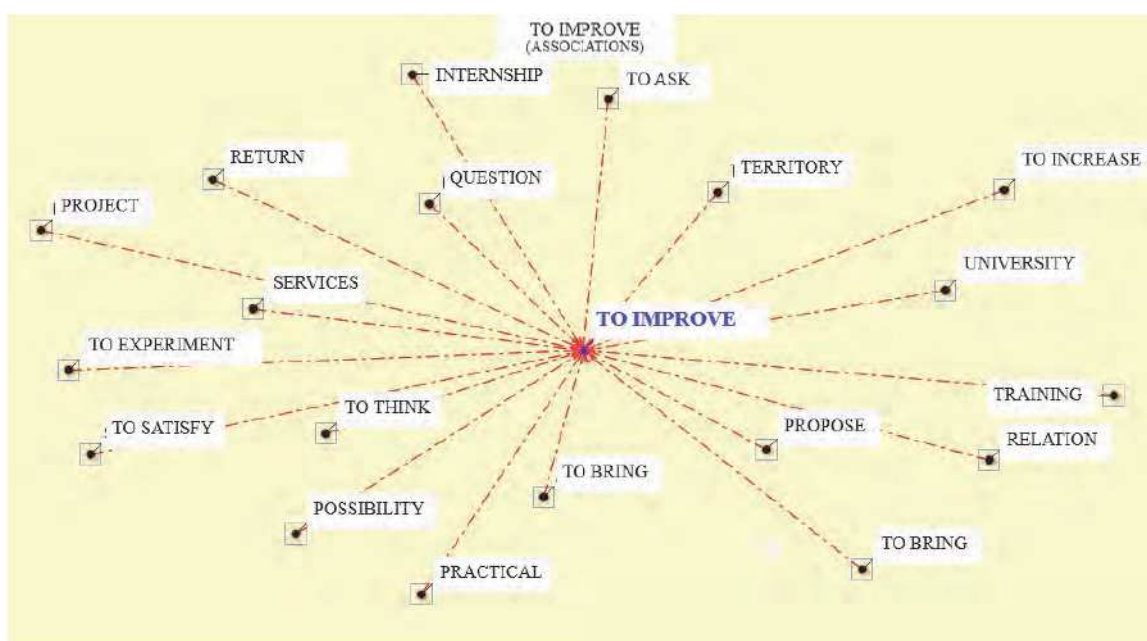


Fig. 8 – "To improve" associations from tutors' interviews



While students identified mainly the process of improvement, tutors (Fig. 8) were more focused on outcomes of the improvement process and associated the word “to improve” most to the terms “proposal,” “demand,” “relationship” and “services”.

Fig. 9 – “Territory” associations from students’ field diaries

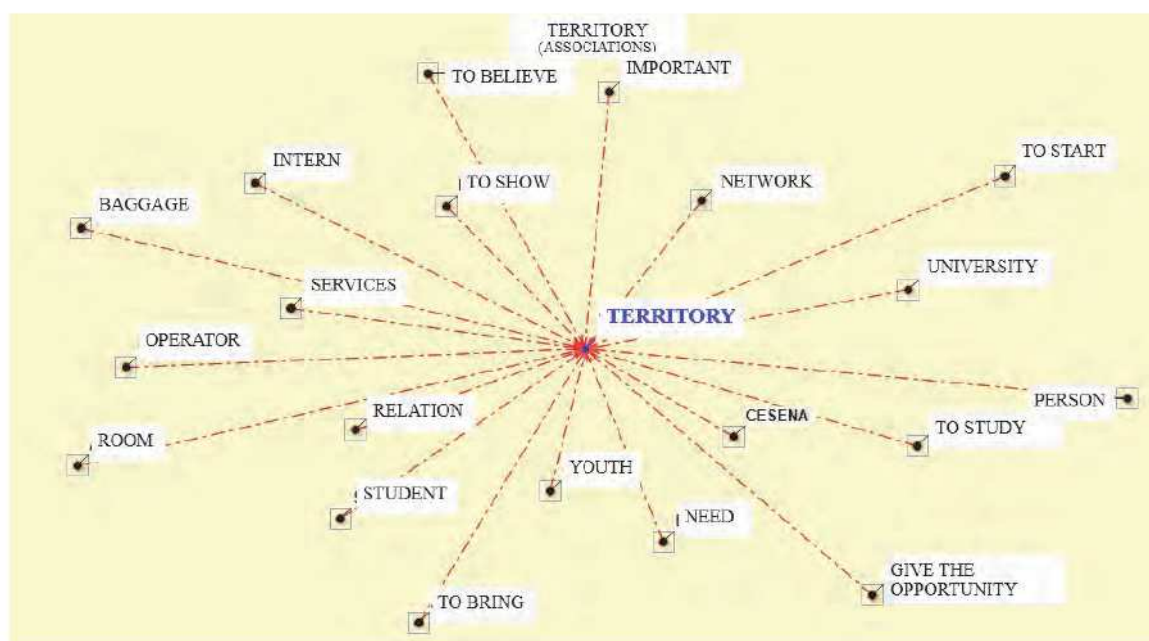
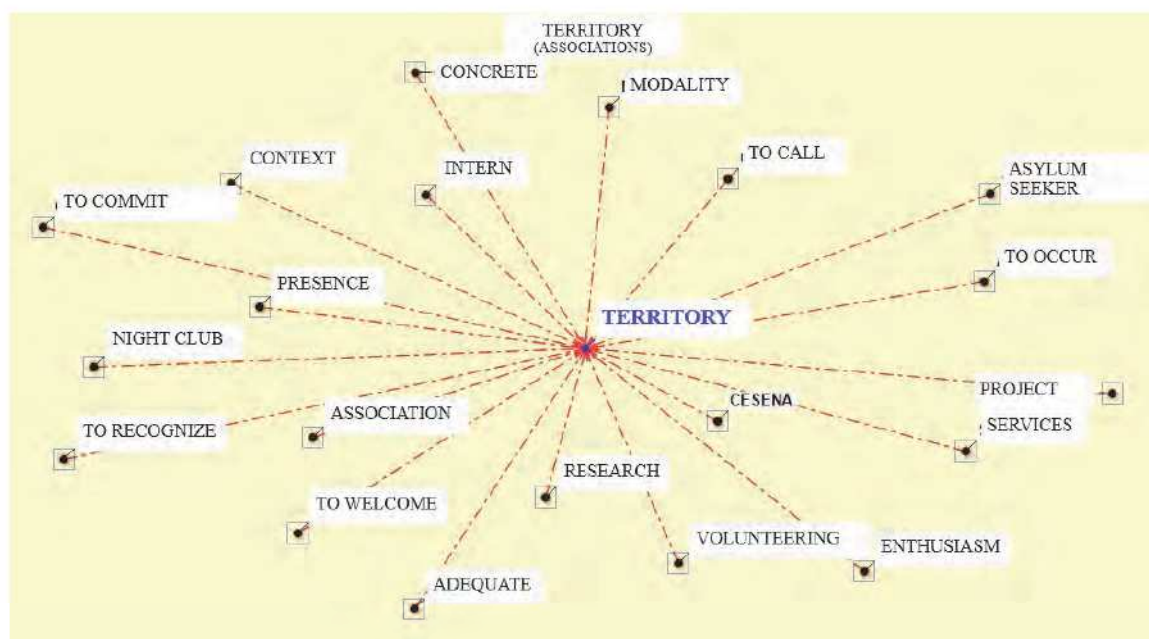


Fig. 10 – “Territory” associations from tutors’ interviews



Another keyword that was inspected is “territory”, which identified the local community where the partnerships for Service-Learning projects were established, and consequently where students’ experiential learning took place. For students (Fig. 9), “territory” included relationships, social networks, young people, university and the local community “Cesena”, which has “needs” and where there was a relationship between educational institutions and community services that increased their opportunities “to study”.

For tutors (Fig. 10), the word was strictly and clearly related to the local community and to the word “research” that valued the learning and collaborative process of creating knowledge enhanced by the partnership with students and university.

5.2 Content analysis

Results from content analysis illustrated the conditions and the opportunities of reflection and action that have been identified by our participants based on their experience during the implementation of Service-Learning projects. Particularly, results highlighted how reflection and action are strictly related to each other in a virtuous circle.

Reflection. The category of reflection emerged also from the content analysis of the students’ field diaries and tutors’ interviews. Focusing first on students’ writings, we report some statements from students that were involved in the project “Stars Way” (SW), a street unit service.

«Our tutor, with another social worker, were interested in understanding our impressions, worries and expectations about the experience we were facing». (SW_04)

«Finally, I talked with my tutor about my evaluation of this experience and I was aware that, even if it was a short time, I recognized what makes me feel satisfied. So, I decided to continue as a volunteer in this service». (SW_05)

Moments of reflection served to students to share impressions, worries and expectations about the experience and to be recognized by their tutors. The latter fragment showed how a good link between action and reflection brings to the intention to be involved in a volunteering experience and create a virtuous circle of quality participatory experience. The relation between the tutor and the students in this project, was fundamental to improve the reflection on the experience and to recognize the value of the feedback received, which allowed the students to be aware of their role within the project.

A student who participated in the project of Social Mediation (SM) reported feelings and emotions linked to their relation with the tutors.

«I'm more confident compared to the beginning and I think that most of the things I learned were thanks to feedback from the tutors and moments of reflection» (SM_01).

A statement by one student from the Protection Center for Asylum seekers and refugees (PCAS) during the evaluation of the experience, underscored the value of reflection in reframing social situations within the Service-Learning project.

«Getting in contact with the reality outside the university and the theories in the books and trying to establish relationships and managing challenging situations was certainly one of the goals of Service-Learning. For this reason, once again, I could consider myself extremely satisfied with the development of this experience» (PCAS_04).

The valorization of the experience was possible thanks to the continuous feedback from the tutors that emphasized and deepened their understanding of theoretical concepts in community psychology. One student from Harm Reduction Service (HRS) wrote that tutors care about their experience.

«It was great seeing tutors who were interested and happy for what we were saying, thus I understood once again that what we do for them is important and that they care about what they can teach us and transmit» (HRS_04).

The interest shown by the tutors in the experience of the students adds value to the learning experience within the service and gives students the possibility to work in a group.

The importance of reflection was strongly emphasized by tutors during their interviews. Tutors considered an important benefit of the mutual relation discovering a new perspective on the organization's services thanks to the projects developed by the students.

«It was a good challenge because it was the first time for our service and we were unsure. A take home message is the opportunity to receive an external point of view on our work. Students were very careful, and they felt free to speak and this allowed us to re-think our way of working and the added value was that someone opened new doors on my job» (tutor 1).

Action. It is strictly connected with experiential learning, which provided opportunities to learn and to establish relationships. Students of the Community Center for Homeless (CCH), valued the opportunity to work in groups and to learn in practice by working as a team.

«What we are doing is not self-referential, but it is something useful for us because we are learning how to work in a group and for the service because we are bringing something new» (CCH_03).

A student from the Social Mediation service reported positive emotions and satisfaction linked to the activity in the services:

«I was happy to have experienced the things I've learned so far, but I am happy to have learned practical things that I will need in other experiences like this or different from this [...]. I was touched by being part of this big family, I felt that I was part of something bigger that works every day to improve people's lives» (SM_03).

The activity was not just a space to try and practice some psychological competencies, but it created the conditions for the constitution of a “family” as one student reported.

Tutors also emphasized the experiential part of the Service-Learning by stressing the importance of giving students the chance to understand real problems by doing practice within the support of a safe student-tutor relation.

«It is necessary to work in the field, linking university and services (...). As psychology students why don't they go to see, to touch some of the practical problems linked to the services? It is necessary to work inside the services to understand what university can do» (tutor 2).

The involvement of the students allowed the professionals to get some new insights into their work, as was shown later in the tutors' interviews. The availability of students to work in the organization is emphasized by a tutor, who recognized this engagement as an opportunity not only to create relationships with people but also to network with the community:

«For me, it is a very interesting opportunity for students, but also for the whole community because these students, beyond their experience, offer their competencies, their beings. They make themselves available» (tutor 3).

Another benefit is the relationship of students with users of the services. This represented a new opportunity both for students and users, thus having

an impact on the whole service and enhancing the goodness and the quality of the action-reflection process.

«Service-Learning, from my point of view, gave some insights for students who have experience, for users on whom they had an influence and for me about the management of services. It was a meaningful experience and I bring with me some reflections that I would carry on concretely in the different projects» (tutor 4).

6. Discussion

Service-Learning can be considered a methodology to improve educational institutions in order to offer the opportunity for academics, teachers, students, social workers and community organizations to experiment with new ways of learning, developing and implementing existing services. The project implemented at the University of Bologna, Cesena Campus, within a community psychology course allowed participants to experience some theoretical concepts from the Community Psychology lab in the practice within community services, demonstrating the quality experience of the whole project where reflection and action are embedded as core-values.

The construction of good and genuine partnerships between university and community organizations is a necessary condition to implement quality Service-Learning experience and offers university the chance to improve its civic or third mission. Indeed, the projects are presented as a form of experiential learning and active participation, in which the role of tutors of the service and the creation of a social network around them are key elements. The description of the main elements of Service-Learning from students and tutors confirmed the main characteristics of relevance and reciprocity, beyond the dimension of reflection (Aramburuzabala *et al.*, 2019). Relevance and reciprocity are based on the experiential learning of students and on the possibility to put into practice theoretical concepts learned during an academic course. For tutors and organizations, the importance of solving specific needs with the help of qualified students is highlighted.

Considering the participatory quality of the Service-Learning projects, the features of reflection and action were analyzed. Reflection characterized the experience as a quality one, both from students and tutors' perspectives. Results showed that students could refine their beliefs and learn new information through discussion, meeting with the other members of the group and the tutors in order to re-organize and elaborate their thinking on the social issues. During discussions, students shared their experience to make sense of it, to link it to the curriculum and to create new knowledge

in continuous support and exchange with the tutors of the services (Ferreira *et al.*, 2012, Eyler, 2002). Tutors considered working with students an opportunity to compare different points of view, to open new spaces for reflection on their job and to value the importance of this exchange.

The awareness about their social role allowed the university to consider Service-Learning as an experience that fosters individual transformation and social change, thus strengthening the principle of reciprocity as a key element of Service-Learning projects. Students were not passive during their educational process, but they enriched their academic learning with experiential learning, participating in a cooperative process of community development, that takes place through active involvement in projects and activities. Students considered their experience as a quality participatory one that could increase their future involvement in community organizations, thus Service-Learning can be promoted as a good opportunity to enhance civic engagement of youth.

Action was related to the local context in which the experience takes place and to the aim of improving the services in which students and tutors are involved. It emerged that the experience exposes students to the root causes of social problems and to opportunities for becoming protagonists of possible changes, thus reinforcing the role of Service-Learning in promoting social justice (Chupp & Joseph, 2010). The awareness in practice that students acquired during the experience led them to initiate a process that is grounded in the real context, is integrated with the theory they learned and impacts the whole community. Moreover, results showed that S-L experiences stood as background experiences for future participation in community services. The context in which the Service-Learning project is developed, the community itself, can benefit from the advantages that come from “genuine and democratic” partnerships. The latter is embodied, for tutors and students in the mutual, respectful relationship that is established between tutors, students, academic partners and service users; these relationships allowed S-L to be at the same time a relevant and meaningful experience for the different stakeholders involved.

Communities and social networks could improve thanks to this mutual (and more effective) cooperation between institutions.

Overall the research, based on qualitative accounts, provides evidence that S-L – as it has been proposed in this pilot experience at the University of Bologna – offered a quality experience nurtured by a reflective process that feeds into action. As such, it seems to have the capacity to foster civic engagement and the development of citizenship competencies.

Some weaknesses can be raised. This study is a rather descriptive and explorative research on a pilot implementation of a Service-Learning project, but

it suggested that S-L could offer quality participatory experiences based on opportunities for action and reflection. Moreover, a more structured evaluation on the quality of participation could be performed, using qualitative and quantitative instruments. A bottom-up approach to textual analysis of co-occurrences could also be used to identify further characteristics of S-L that may be worth including in systematic evaluation of future experiences of S-L.

Future research could explore more systematically the quality of participation, by deepening the evaluation design research and triangulating qualitative and quantitative methods. It could be interesting to understand and to measure competencies for active citizenship that may emerge from quality experiences and analyze the broader impact of Service-Learning programs in the higher education institutions and in the community.

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