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Conference Report

Critical Service-Learning Across the Globe: Transforming Teaching Into Social Action

8th International Symposium on Service-Learning

University of Nicosia, University of Indianapolis, Stellenbosch University, and Indiana Campus Compact.

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This bi-annual conference emphasised the need for transformation in higher education through rethinking the role of critical service-learning for social transformation. As a transformative pedagogy, critical service-learning uses the local community as its textbook, out-of-classroom experiences as learning spaces, and theory as real-life application. Learning spaces outside the classroom will probably become more important given that international trends in higher education call for engaged participation and collaboration with community partners.

The International Symposium on Service-Learning online symposium took place in June 2021 and the second, in-person part of this symposium was held at the University of Nicosia in Cyprus in 2022. The programme included 40 presentations in various formats and approximately 90 delegates attended the three-day symposium. The presentation formats included research presentations, interactive storytelling presentations, workshops, and poster presentations.

Themes

The theme of the conference was Critical Service-Learning Across the Globe: Transforming Teaching Into Social Action. The broader conference sub-themes were:

- Integrating service-learning through multicultural and/or multidisciplinary methodologies in higher education.
- The transformation of education and service-learning through global crises and events.

- Collaborative curriculum design and research.
- Emerging theoretical perspectives in higher education and transformation studies from across the globe that link to student transformation into critical and engaged citizens.
- The transformation of students into critical citizens.
- Service-learning conceptual frameworks that enhance transformation.
- Collaborative research.
- International service-learning.
- Inter- multi- and transdisciplinary transformation initiatives.
- Societal impact of service-learning.
- Institutional transformation through service-learning.
- Integrating service-learning and multicultural education in academia.

The conference addressed critical issues related to emerging global perspectives in higher education: to enable transformation, critical citizenship, collaborative and inter-disciplinary curriculum design with local community partners; integrating critical service-learning into coursework and research; engaging in conversations about ethical goals of universities to foster social responsiveness; and lessons learnt when integrating critical service-learning into higher education coursework. The conversations that arose from the conference presentations kept circling back to crucial questions concerning the role of academics in including community partners as co-researchers in teaching, learning, and skills development in higher education. Part of the focus of the conference was to determine how faculty members can transform their teaching practices to enable agency.

Welcome and Keynote Address

Rector of the University of Nicosia, Philippos Pouyioutas, placed emphasis on the key role universities play in creating just societies that contribute to democracy, social and economic equality, and the embodiment of their constitutional values. Delegates were challenged to reflect on how their universities respond to the modern global challenges of green and digital transitions in their quest to work towards the United Nations Strategy for Sustainable Development 2030. Senior Vice-Rector of the University of Nicosia, Constantinos Phellas, further highlighted that the key objective of education, especially higher education, is to become agents of change in our local communities.

The keynote address was delivered by the CEO of the Centre of Social Innovation, Demetris Hadjisofocli. This address challenged the status quo of working in silos, and highlighted the need for collaboration, integration, and global interaction between stakeholders across the various industries and disciplines in society. This addressed offered a fresh perspective on how we, as academics, understand service-learning as two concepts of service and learning. Real-life application, skills development, and agency were highlighted as the drivers of service and the cornerstones of learning.

Research Presentations

Common themes from the presentations included critical conversations regarding frameworks for critical service-learning, restorative justice through service-learning, reflections on community needs and expectations during service-learning, integrating service-learning with teaching components of

coursework, service-learning in post-graduate studies, and service-learning in trans-, inter-, and intradisciplinary projects. The reflexive nature of service-learning also encouraged reflection during the presentations where scholars shared their experiences and new ideas to ensure academic rigour, ethical conduct, inclusiveness, and transformational learning during service-learning opportunities.

Assessing students' learning remained one of the challenging topics in the presentations, given that measuring learning is a subjective concept. There is a need for scholars to reflect on how service-learning can be formalised to serve as credit-bearing components of coursework.

Storytelling Presentations

This refreshing presentation method offered presenters opportunity to be creatively expressive during their presentations. The inclusion of dramatisation, visual art, and open dialogue opened the floor for critical reflection and personal association for delegates. These presentations highlighted themes of transformational thinking, diversity and inclusion, enabling agency through service-learning, theoretical underpinnings for critical service-learning engagements, and active community engagement as some of the transformational learning objectives of service-learning in higher education.

The focus of these presentations also spoke to one of the pivotal elements of education for sustainable change—equity. The importance of a changing narrative from equality in education to equity and justice in education became apparent during the presentations.

Workshops

The workshops presented during this conference highlighted the need for global citizenship and international service-learning projects, online possibilities of service-learning projects, enabling the development of praxis in service-learning, multidisciplinary engagement, and how to monitor the ethical conduct of researchers, students, and community partners during service-learning projects. The fourth industrial revolution calls for international collaboration and a move toward digital learning.

One aspect that cannot be overlooked in developing learning opportunities to prepare students for this digitised world is the importance of humanity, ethical action, and critical responsiveness. The workshops addressed some of the challenges we can face in higher education by moving too rapidly towards industrial digitisation without being cautious of neglecting humanity, ethical action, and critical responsiveness in our quest to keep up with the status quo.

This conference challenged delegates to rethink teaching, learning, research, and community engagement activities in a post-pandemic world. The discussions and presentations offered opportunity to critically reflect on the need for more engaged learning for students, the importance of including community partners as co-researchers and co-decision makers in service-learning, for academics to engage in service-learning as equal partners to enable life-long learning, and for universities to be challenged to rethink their inclusion of service-learning as a pedagogical tool in higher education.

Apart from the critical conversations we could engage in during this conference, we had opportunity to learn about interdisciplinary projects and we could reflect on how teaching, doing research, and working in communities during a global pandemic made us think differently about the role of critical service-learning in higher education. It was refreshing to participate in presentations where the embodiment of values of care, ethical actions, transparency, and justice were pivotal in service-

learning engagements. The different theoretical frameworks that can underpin service-learning projects for academic rigour could enable scholars to integrate critical service-learning as a credit-bearing pedagogical tool into coursework and research activities.