
Service-Learning in Croatia and the region: progress, obstacles and solutions

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Abstract

The goal of the paper is to discuss the possibilities of transforming universities in Croatia and the region into places that take account of the emerging community trends and current challenges that our students should be capable of dealing with once they finish their studies. Service-learning (SL) was introduced in the largest faculty of the University of Zagreb (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences) in 2006-07 through a series of faculty workshops and through academic courses. The goals and requirements of this teaching and learning method were based upon our U.S. experience, gained at the George Washington University. Since then around 50 SL projects in the IT field have been completed and evaluated. Service learning was also introduced in the Faculty of Economy at the University of Rijeka in 2008. In 2009 it was added as a regulation of the Croatian National Youth program 2009-2013, approved by the Croatian Government. Also, in the same year the Croatian translation of the term “service-learning” (“drustveno korisno učenje”) offered by the author of this paper became accepted as a common term at the JFDP (Junior Faculty Development Program) Regional Conference. Although the workshops were extremely popular both in Croatia and the region, and although SL courses achieved remarkable student enrollment in a short time, the number of faculty who have so far implemented it as a teaching strategy is very low. This paper discusses the reasons for faculty resistance to engage in SL and some possible solutions.

Introduction

In this paper we present the recent development and evaluation of service-learning (SL) in Croatia and the region, explaining the advantages and drawbacks of the application of SL in the Bologna Process in our universities.

The Bologna Process is a European reform process driven by the 46 countries aiming at establishing a European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The Process officially started in 1999, when 29 countries signed the Declaration in Bologna (hence the name of the whole Process). The Declaration states the following objectives: adoption of a system of easily comparable degrees based on two main cycles, undergraduate and

graduate; establishment of a system of credits – European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance.

Croatia joined the Bologna Process in 2001, in Prague, where the ministers adopted the so-called Prague Communiqué, introducing several new elements in the Process: students were recognized as full and equal partners in the decision making process; the social dimension of the Process was stressed and the idea that higher education is a public good and a public responsibility was highlighted.

The purpose of this paper is threefold. The introductory part gives an overview of the most important problems facing higher education in Croatia today and presents a remarkable solution to these problems – service-learning. The second part identifies the problem of integration of service-learning in the curriculum and provides suggestions to advance service-learning in Croatia and to improve student confidence and knowledge of the world by combining service learning and e-learning teaching methods. Finally, the third part of the paper describes the progress of service-learning in Croatia and the benefits it brings to students and the whole educational system.

Challenges to the Croatian Educational System

The two most important educational issues facing higher education in Croatia and the region¹ today are: theoretical knowledge without skills and a weak connection between the university and the community and between the university and the labor market. Higher Education (HE) institutions in Croatia and the neighboring countries have worked for many years on their curriculum to keep pace with the scientific advancement of the field. The community, on the other hand, has its own development, emerging trends and problems that our students should be capable of dealing with once they finish their studies. The development of community, labor market and HE institutions each has taken a different track.

The London Communiqué, with the working title *Towards the European Higher Education Area: Responding to Challenges in a Globalized World* is a document of the Ministers of Higher Education in the countries participating in the Bologna Process. It reviews the progress made in their countries since meeting in Bergen in 2005. The ministers emphasized the need for an attractive and competitive labor market in Europe and pointed out the major problems faced by higher education

institutions: preparing students to become active citizens in a democratic society, as well as preparing them for their constantly changing future careers, enabling their personal development and stimulating research and innovation.

All the above mentioned issues are far more complex in Southeast Europe than they appear to be in other European countries. A detailed insight into those educational issues in Croatia results from a surveyⁱⁱ on the implementation of the Bologna Process carried out at 5 Universities in Croatia (University of Zagreb, University of Rijeka, University of Zadar, University of Split and JJ Strossmayer University of Osijek). The survey involved a total of 3261 students in their second year of study.

We learned from the survey that 40% of the students study only to pass the exams at the end of the course, not to acquire knowledge and more than 50% of them never engaged in class discussion (either because they never had a chance for it or because they do not feel comfortable expressing their opinions in front of the large class). For one third of the students (31%) the biggest problem is low level or almost no practical work. Many lecturers think that an academic institution is not a place where students should get knowledge at the application level, but rather on a more abstract, theoretical level. Therefore, the majority of them emphasize lecturing and theory rather than application and discussion, and it is not a rare case that a law student never visits a court or that a language teacher never tries teaching a class before he or she gets the diploma.

One of the changes that the Bologna Process initiated was interactive teaching and focusing more on student's skills, competences and the practical implications of course material. The most frequently mentioned student expectations of the Bologna Process in Croatia, which unfortunately have not been fulfilled to date, are: work in small groups, teamwork, fieldwork and practical classes. In addition, the results of the Gallup survey (European Commission: Eurobarometer, 2009) revealed that 76% of Croatian students strongly agree that they need more opportunities to acquire skills to meet the demands of today's workplace - communication skills, teamwork and learning to learn. Also, 66% of higher education students in Croatia strongly agree that study programs should focus on teaching specialized knowledge. Finally, between 70%-78% of students in Croatia also said enhanced personal development was a very important goal of higher education. The survey's fieldwork was carried out from 12 February to 20 February 2009. Almost 15,000 randomly-selected students in higher education institutions were

interviewed in the 27 Member States of the EU, Croatia, Iceland, Norway and Turkey.

Regarding opportunities to find a job after getting a degree, most of the students in Croatia do not have confidence in the current educational system. The biggest and justified concern our students have is linked to the weak connection between the labor market and HE. The fact is that at the moment there are 315,438 unemployed people in Croatia (an unemployment rate of 18.7%).ⁱⁱⁱ This is one of the largest obstacles for the country's development. Unemployment continues to grow annually, with a strong increase among highly-skilled laborers, limiting the competitiveness of the domestic economy and economic recovery. These are the most important problems facing higher education in Croatia today. These issues should be targets for further research and development of the Croatian Higher Education System.

Service-Learning: A Strategy for the Croatian Educational System

This paper proposes service-learning teaching and strategy as a way to address these community and educational challenges. The approach emphasizes the integration of service learning into the curriculum in Southeast Europe and Croatia in particular.

Service-learning (SL), a teaching strategy that integrates meaningful community service with academic learning, is a remarkable solution for bringing community, labor market and HE institutions in Croatia and the region more closely together to satisfy the goals of the Bologna Process.

Through service-learning our students could learn not only how to connect course theory and practice, but also how to help others, give of themselves, and enter into caring relationships with others in their community. The goal of service-learning is to assist students to see the relevance of their new knowledge in the real world. That is what they are missing at the moment.

Although well developed in North America, SL is for the most part still absent in Europe. The Community Learning Program that has been developing since 2001 in the Dublin Institute of Technology was, until recently, the only European example of service learning.

Service-learning was introduced in the final year of graduate study in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, the largest faculty of the University of Zagreb (Croatia), in 2006-07 through a series of faculty

workshops and academic courses. The goals and requirements for this teaching and learning method were based upon my U.S. experience gained at the George Washington University, where I was a Junior Faculty Development Program scholar.

Up to that point, students of information sciences learned the theoretical concepts and applied them to imaginary or simulated circumstances, but rarely managed to apply the acquired knowledge to the real world. The service-learning projects provided them with structured time to rethink and implement ideas that they had during their 5-year study, but never had an opportunity to transform them into “hands-on” experiences and observe the results.

In the first two years, about 50 SL projects in the IT field were completed and evaluated (Mikelic Preradovic, Kisicek & Boras, 2010).

After the successful project outcomes in the test phase, service-learning was introduced into the final year of undergraduate study as well, as a part of a new curriculum under the Bologna Process in the Academic Year 2007-2008. Students were surveyed at the end of that academic year and the results showed that such placement in real (vs. theoretical) learning situations was very important in increasing the confidence and self-esteem they felt they needed once they entered the labor market. These projects will serve as an excellent reference and indication of their creativity and ability to engage intellectually, emotionally and socially.

Regarding the unemployment issue, we believe that an innovative framework to addressing high-skilled youth unemployment would be to combine service-learning, community development, and career development into SL projects that would increase student's levels of personal and social development, core skills and employability and build life-long connections between students and their communities.

Service-learning can assist our students with developing work/life skills, knowledge and career passions which could improve their future work prospects through increased community awareness. Furthermore, it can increase their ability to develop and match specific and transferable skills with the requirements of today's labour market. Finally, service-learning can help (at least as a partial solution) to meet the educational needs of long-term unemployed people and to develop learning opportunities in response to identified need.

Despite the obvious benefits SL brings to students and the whole educational system, it is not yet popular among the faculty in Croatia and

the region, at least not as popular as e-learning.^{iv} In the next part we offer potential explanations and examine how we might overcome the barriers to the adoption of service-learning in Croatia and Southeast Europe.

Service-Learning: Challenges to Integration in Croatia

With so many obvious benefits, one might think that faculty members in Croatia would universally embrace service-learning with great enthusiasm. Unfortunately, that is not the case.

Although the service-learning workshops in Croatia were extremely popular and received strong support from the Dean in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, the number of faculty who have since implemented SL as a teaching strategy is very low.

Perhaps the reasons for this can be found in the workshop exit surveys. When asked if they plan on incorporating SL into their teaching, a certain number of attendants expressed worry that this teaching strategy is more time-consuming and requires more devotion than traditional seminar teaching. They also mentioned logistical difficulties in implementing SL, since their class is usually big and it is hard to organize students in groups with similar levels of motivation that will work productively at the same pace.

Regarding the logistics, teaching loads in Croatia are really heavy. By way of comparison, a single bachelor course at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Zagreb has 60 students enrolled every year on average, while for the same course at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, there are up to 10 students enrolled per year.

Apart from the SL issues, another issue is that our faculty teachers lack autonomy in curriculum design. The Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sports designs the curriculum and dictates what shall be taught and, unfortunately, the faculty members have a relatively minor role in that process. Consequently, faculty teachers have less freedom to innovate in their teaching, but also little tradition and motivation to innovate.

Although integration of service-learning into curricula affects Eastern European areas on a larger scale, the problem is not geographically limited. Although perceived as a successful and innovative teaching strategy by many practitioners in the field (Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker & Donohue, 2003; Marullo & Edwards, 2000; Bringle, Games, & Malloy, 1999), barriers against its integration in the U.S.

curriculum include: scarce administrative support, faculty participation, and budgetary constraints (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000; Holland, 1997; Ward, 1996).

We posit that the above mentioned reasons are not strong enough for Croatian faculty to avoid engagement in SL projects and teaching strategy on such a large scale and that they only need an excellent enticement to recognize service-learning as a research and teaching tool worth the time and the effort.

Our five-year service-learning research and experience shows that faculty who replace the seminar part of their course with SL projects (in other words: those who replace imaginary problems and solutions with real community experience) never give up this teaching method, no matter how scarce the budget or administrative support may be. On the contrary, they enthusiastically continue to motivate students to enroll and they emphasize that every year it becomes less time-consuming, more meaningful and definitely more than a setting to teach theoretical concepts in a hands-on manner, once they get past the initial logistics.

The obvious benefits of SL for faculty members is taking on new roles, seeing students excited and the classroom energized, building personal connections with students, learning from our students and seeing greater student involvement in discussions and the relevance of the subject. These benefits outweigh the logistical problems.

Therefore, we believe that we need to discover the key motivators to raise Croatian faculty's interest in service-learning. We also believe that combining service-learning with new and successful e-learning methods that are still not used in Croatia (such as introduction of e-Portfolios) would make the faculty more willing to engage in SL.

E-portfolios are digitized collections of text-based, graphic, or multimedia artifacts including demonstrations, resources, and accomplishments that represent what a person has learned over time on which he/she has reflected. They are designed for presentation to one or more audiences for a particular rhetorical purpose and can be used for final assessment as well as for reflection, deep learning, knowledge growth and social interaction.

The faculty could first start using e-portfolios as a tool for student reflection in their e-courses; while later it can be employed as a tool for connection of the service experience to learning in their courses.

Therefore, we plan to explore the possibility to connect SL course design with e-course design, so that Croatian faculty members get the opportunity to combine the elements of two educational innovations (e-learning and service-learning) in a thoughtful way.

Service-Learning: Progress in Croatia

During the Academic Year 2006-07 the author conducted workshops for the Croatian faculty in different fields and with different Croatian universities, school teachers and NGO's in order to promote SL and share in-class experiences. Service-learning was also introduced in the Faculty of Economy, University of Rijeka (described in detail in the paper co-authored with Jelenc & Mujevic, 2008). As of 2008-09, a stand-alone elective course "Service-learning in Information Sciences" has been offered to all students in the University of Zagreb, and thus achieved remarkable enrollment in a short time.^v

In 2009 SL was added as a regulation of the Croatian National Youth program 2009-2013 approved by the Government^{vi}. Also, in the same year the Croatian translation of the "service-learning" term ("drustveno korisno ucenje") coined by the author of this paper, became accepted as a common term at the JFDP Regional Conference^{vii}. Since 2008 all the service-learning projects in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences are transformed step by step into service e-learning projects, offering faculty and students the ability to apply e-learning technology they adore to service-learning pedagogy through service-learning projects that are (at least partially) conducted online.

Due to the fact that the information technology provides an opportunity for students of information sciences to help community organizations, and since information literacy becomes an important social issue, our students truly have a great field for activity where they can meet different interests and apply specific knowledge and skills.

All of our students who took part in service e-learning projects used email, discussion boards, content management system (Moodle), online journals and Word processor collaboration features for sharing, collecting and organizing their work, as well as their reflection.

Below we briefly describe some of the service e-learning projects that were directly related to a community need. In most of these projects, the students selected the project in consultation with the supervisor in the chosen NGO, school, library or museum.

Project 1. Starting with the school year of 2009-2010, all pupils who complete the fourth grade of grammar school in Croatia take the state graduation exam (based on the Act on Primary and Secondary Education^{viii}). The state graduation exam has two parts: mandatory exams in general education subjects such as Croatian language and elective exams in one or more optional subjects, such as Informatics. Our information science students came up with the following project idea - an online demonstration designed as a preparatory step for the state graduation exam covering the complete information and computer science curriculum of the state grammar schools. The students' partner was the National Centre for External Evaluation of Education that creates paper exams for all subjects in the state graduation exam and delivers exam materials to schools.

Our information science students summarized their knowledge and skills in the field of computer and information sciences and created the application in the midst of turbulence caused by the introduction of the state graduation exam. With this project they aimed to gain for their own benefit, connecting the theory learned during the study with new practical experiences while at the same time helping the pupils to achieve at a high level in the state graduation exam.

State Graduation Online Demo Exam in Informatics^{ix} consists of 50 multiple-choice questions written in ActionScript3 through collaboration with the National Centre for External Evaluation of Education. It was tested and evaluated by the third grade pupils of Velika Gorica grammar school^x, who will take the state graduation exam at the end of the school year 2011-2012. The evaluation was performed as an online survey that aimed to identify the impact of the student project on grammar school pupils and to discover suggestions that could improve the effectiveness of the exam.

The overall rating of the demo test was high. Regarding the service-learning component, this project contributed to the pupils' preparedness for the state graduation exam in an elective subject, informatics, and offered them an insight into new technology and new ways of knowledge acquiring and its evaluation (such as e-learning and online exams). The questions in the demo exam cover the entire content of the subject of Informatics for the 4-year grammar schools, while the simple but interactive online application enables pupils to take the exam and test their knowledge anytime and anywhere, getting immediate feedback.

Project 2. The aim of the project was to develop the educational corner for the elementary school's web page^{xi} that would help the school and its teachers to attract more pupils to visit the web page and learn something new or possibly affirm their knowledge on a familiar topic while browsing through the content and the enjoyable educational activities. Students wanted the pupils to learn in a fun, interesting and different way providing an e-environment where they felt comfortable to learn. Our information science students were given numerous handwritten materials made by the school's pupils during their school year that consisted of anagrams, mental maps, games of logic, quizzes on general knowledge, Croatian language and literature, history, *etc.* Although it took a lot of time and effort to convert these handwritten materials into useful e-activities, students used it as a means to attract pupils. Their basic hypothesis was that e-activities would look more friendly, interesting and engaging to pupils, if their own ideas and materials were implemented in the e-environment.

The educational corner was also intended to motivate the elementary schools' teachers to realize the importance of communication with their pupils using a different medium, an online environment, and to encourage them to put their educational materials online in order to establish better communication and interaction with their pupils. Many teachers embraced this application, while school pupils were excited to find that their handwritten materials were used for something creative and useful.

Project 3. Another group of information science students designed a multimedia project for the NGO "Friends of Animals.". Although a leader in their field in Croatia, the NGO was at the very beginning of IT usage when we first established contact and offered help. They had computers and a website, but didn't possess the knowledge to use IT as a driver for reaching their goals.

Therefore, they were excited about the students' SL project, which aimed to inform the citizens about the vegetarian products available in our stores, encourage them to a healthier lifestyle using vegetarian recipes and to learning about healthy food in an interesting way (via an interactive database and multimedia applications on a CD-ROM). The NGO was happy to promote their products by distributing this CD application in the community for free at an event organized during World Vegetarian Day.

One of our students received a job offer from the NGO for the position of information technology manager.

Project 4. Museology graduate students found that their colleagues and friends visited museums in Zagreb rarely, and also that it is difficult to find funding for promotion of museums at the University in the form of posters and brochures. Therefore, they designed an e-brochure with appealing design, freely accessible on the website of the Faculty for all students who want to discover the world of museums in Zagreb. Their partners were the following institutions: Archaeological Museum, Croatian History Museum, Croatian Natural History Museum, Croatian School Museum, Ethnographic Museum, Museum of Arts and Crafts, Tehnical Museum and Zagreb City Museum. The number of e-brochure monthly visits is growing, especially in the beginning of the academic year, when freshmen explore the faculty website.

Project 5. Another project group consisted of Museology graduate students and information technology students with teacher orientation, who designed a workbook for children to complete during a visit to the Zagreb City Museum and art workshops to help them acquire knowledge in a museum. Their client was the Zagreb City Museum, where they tested and evaluated the workbook with a group of elementary school pupils. Both the pupils and the museum staff rated the workbook as an interesting and useful tool for children, which they can keep as a souvenir from their visit to the museum.

Each of the above project groups met a real social need, applying the theoretical knowledge gained during their studies and acquiring new skills required for activities that they selected due to their interests. Another 45 groups also successfully completed excellent service-learning projects.

In order to perform a student satisfaction analysis, we conducted a survey in 2010 described in detail in the paper co-authored with Kisicek, S. & Boras, D., 2010. The evaluation was performed as an online survey that aimed to identify the impact of SL on our students and to collect suggestions that could improve the effectiveness of the course. The survey consisted of 20 questions that tried to encourage students to critically reflect on their SL experience, but also to reflect on the community partners and the course itself.

Female students were slightly overrepresented in our sample: 71.4% of students taking the survey were female. Interestingly, 57.1% of the students did volunteer work before taking this course, but most of them did not perceive it as worth mentioning in their CV. All students (100%) would recommend the next generation of students to enroll in the

course. Also, all of them think that the SL project was a rewarding experience and that they expanded their existing knowledge and skills. The survey numbers show that the majority of our students are willing to volunteer in the community after the completion of the project (92.9%).

The overall quality of their service-learning experience was rated high, with 85.7% of respondents stating it was excellent or good. Furthermore, 71.4% think their SL experience was more educational than the traditional seminar at the university. In regards to the relationship with the community partner, 92.9% of the students would recommend the community partner to future students.

Regarding the SL project influence on students, 50% of them strongly agree or agree that they understand better the needs and problems in their society, 57.1% strongly agree or agree that they feel responsible for progress in the society, 85.7% of students strongly agree to encourage other students to enroll in the SL course, while 78.6% strongly agree or agree that the social aspect of the project demonstrated how they can become involved in community activities. Furthermore, 78.5% strongly agree that they learned better the content of the course and study through the application of knowledge to real community problems, while 57.1% strongly agree that this was a chance to reflect on their future career and educational objectives. They consider the most important aspects of service-learning to be teamwork, interaction with the client, references for their CV, communication skills, applying knowledge and being able to give of themselves.

Additionally, students had to define in which areas the project had a positive impact. 78.6% of them agreed that it influenced their attitude towards service-learning projects, faculty where SL projects are implemented, their attitude towards their study and work after study. Also, 85.7% of them agreed the project improved the application and enrichment of knowledge gained in the study as well as the ability to work in teams and increased their feelings of personal achievement. Moreover, 71.4% of them agreed the project fostered the desire to help others and a sense of social responsibility and involvement in the society. Finally, 78.6% of them agreed that it increased their self-confidence and skills such as communication, problem solving and persistence as well as the insight into their personal weaknesses and abilities.

In addition, our community partners evaluated the impact of the project at the end of the semester and 78.6% of them strongly agreed or agreed that the SL project was really useful for society. All of them

expressed interest in future collaboration with our institution and our students.

Based on the above described experience, it can be concluded that service-learning offers students a unique opportunity for recognizing the complexity of the concepts of academic courses and research issues. In addition to the adoption of theoretical knowledge, these projects enabled the students to integrate the knowledge with experience. The projects also enabled the community to solve some problems and to strengthen its connection to the University. Finally, the commitment of students to the idea of service-learning made it possible to satisfy the most frequently mentioned student expectations of the Bologna Process: teamwork, fieldwork and work on student's skills, competences and practical implications of gained knowledge.

Future Work

Communities in which businesses are located today are international, diverse and sometimes virtual. On the other hand, the number of e-courses in the universities is growing at an exponential rate, as well as the challenges of today's rapidly-changing, technology-mediated reality. Therefore, both our teachers and students need to prepare themselves for an increasingly challenging e-linked work environment with diverse participants and modes of engagement and to see themselves as a part of a larger social entity in that global work environment.

We assume that service-learning combined with e-learning tools can be used to decrease faculty challenges of course development and facilitation in this new environment and enhance learning. They will be able to use already available courses and a flexible system, such as a content management system, that will accommodate future growth and technology enhancements.

We strongly believe that the Croatian teaching faculty would show more interest for SL if they were able to be part of a SL project during their own study. Hence, our objective is to design service-learning e-courses that will be offered by the Center for Teacher Education at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences and at the university level so that every future school or faculty teacher gets a chance to try this method at the early stage of his or her teaching career.

Finally, we plan to design a workshop for faculty and school teachers that will combine elements of two educational innovations: e-learning and service-learning and share the pointers for the development

of new courses. We also intend to promote the service e-learning method through e-portal UPraVO^{xii} (the portal deals with curriculum planning and innovative teaching methods) and through the online teaching support center SPONA^{xiii}.

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- ⁱ By region we mean the neighboring countries of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia and Macedonia.
- ⁱⁱ <http://www.unizg.hr/bopro/activities/ankete.htm#>
- ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.moj-posao.net/Vijest/70975/Nezaposlenih-u-prosincu-jos-vise/2/>
- ^{iv} the term e-learning refers to the use of an e-learning platform: Moodle, Blackboard, WebCT, WebX.
- ^v The course is accompanied by a website that serves to promote and archive successful student projects: <http://infoz.ffzg.hr/dku/index.htm>. access through <http://www.ffzg.unizg.hr/infoz/hr/>
- ^{vi} <http://www.propisi.hr/print.php?id=9392>
- ^{vii} JFDP Regional Conference “Teaching methods and Techniques at the Universities in South Eastern Europe”, Zagreb, March, 2009.
- ^{viii} Official Gazette, 87/08.
- ^{ix} http://cal.ffzg.hr/Ispit_informatika_za_drzavnu_maturu/projekt.html accessible through university login
- ^x <http://www.gimnazija-velika-gorica.skole.hr>
- ^{xi} <http://www.skola-retkovec.hr/edu-kutak/>
- ^{xii} http://domus.srce.hr/iuoun/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=37&Itemid=61
- ^{xiii} <http://www.unizg.hr/fileadmin/upravljajnekvalitetom/pdf/spona/spona.pdf>