

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Social Justice Advocacy in the Classroom Through Service-Learning in Public Relations: Welcoming Students With Legal Refugee Status

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Abstract

This study uses classroom ethnography to position service-learning pedagogical approaches in the context of social justice advocacy in public relations. The research focuses on public relations (PR) teaching and learning processes while implementing an advocacy project to welcome students with legal refugee status at a Portuguese university. Findings provide longitudinal evidence that improves the understanding of 1) Students' challenges in linking theory and practice, 2) Pedagogical approaches that promote greater engagement in social justice advocacy, and 3) Students' perceptions of the skills acquired in the context of service-learning in PR.

Keywords: Service-Learning, Social Justice, Advocacy, Public Relations.

1. Introduction

At a time of multiple crises and the emergence of new sources of uncertainty, setbacks were identified in several indicators of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Sachs, et al., 2022). The United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda challenges all social actors to reflect on how it is possible to contribute at the micro, meso, and macro levels to achieve impactful social changes within the scope of environmental and social sustainability. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is one of the fundamental pillars of this process. However, it requires incorporating "teaching methodologies that are able to connect with students and generate enriching experiences" (Martín-Sánchez, et al., 2022, p.1). Therefore, Service-learning (SL) experiences can be conceptualized and practiced as an ESD strategy (Martín-Sánchez, et al., 2022).

Service-learning is a pedagogy that involves students in a structured community service activity that meets

previously identified needs and goals to achieve more profound knowledge of the course content through an increased consciousness of civic responsibility (Bringle, et al., 2011). These educational experiences facilitate University Social Responsibility and can articulate pedagogical practices oriented towards sustainability (Coelho & Menezes, 2021; Cabedo et al., 2018) and improve personal development (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Hardy & Schaen, 2000). However, despite the expansion of service-learning practice internationally, much still needs to be done in Europe to integrate and institutionalize these initiatives fully.

The strategic use of communication and relationships between organizations of all kinds and their stakeholders¹ to achieve predetermined goals related to public interest debates is at the core of public relations (PR) research and practice. In this way,

¹A person, group, or organization that affects or is affected by the decision-making and activities of a business, organization, or project (Broom et al., 2000).

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service learning has been recognized as a fundamental tool in the teaching of public relations, allowing theoretical and practical articulations appropriate to each context and situation (Allison, 2008; Gleason & Violette, 2012; Farmer, et al., 2016). Plus, progress on the SDGs will be equivalent to progress made by public relations scholars, practitioners, and students in understanding and assimilating this discipline's crucial role in this social change collective process (Canel, 2023).

This paper establishes bridges among different fields of study relevant to social justice advocacy, service-learning, and public relations. The research was conducted at the Faculty of Human Sciences of the Catholic University of Portugal (UCP). An ethnographic classroom study was carried out during the 2nd Semester of 2023 with 62 Public Relations students from the Undergraduate Program in Social and Cultural Communication Studies, 2nd year. The service-learning project was called "Welcoming, protecting, promoting, and integrating UCP Refugee Students." The advocacy plan to be developed by the PR students should present strategic communication proposals that help the Catholic University's Initiative Support for Refugee Students² to 1) Establish partnerships to raise material and socio-cultural support and 2) Engage the academic community with the initiative and the promotion of intercultural dialogue.

Findings contribute to a better understanding of 1) Students' specific challenges in linking theory and practice, 2) pedagogical approaches that promote greater engagement in social justice advocacy to welcome refugee students, and 3) students' perceptions of the skills acquired in the context of service-learning in PR. Despite its Portuguese context, the conclusions are helpful to various real-world scenarios involving social justice advocacy in public relations classrooms.

2. Social Justice Advocacy Within Public Relations

The fundamental role of advocacy communication for peacebuilding is recognized from a twofold central perspective: "its impact on policy and decision-makers, and on media and journalists" (Servaes & Malikhao, 2012, p. 231). Public relations professionals recognize persuasion and advocacy as part of their

primary functions (Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988), and the terms advocacy and advocate are often observed in debates and explanations of both lobbying³ and public relations (Berg, 2009). Lobbying is a "communicative process" that attempts to persuade policymakers on behalf of a client or interest group (Berg, 2009, p. 4). It is a fundamental area of public relations activity, along with 'public affairs' (Davidson, 2015) and media relations (Supa, 2014).

Edgett (2002, p. 1) defined advocacy as "the act of publicly representing an individual, organization, or idea with the object of persuading targeted audiences to look favorably on—or accept the point of view of—the individual, the organization, or the idea." Therefore, for this article, it is assumed that advocacy, and the inherent persuasion associated with it, are central to public relations (Bakir, et al., 2019), and that "persuasion does not have to be unethical" (Reber, 2013, p. 14). Actually, "advocacy, persuasive strategy and facilitation of genuine dialogues" could be used ethically balancing the need to achieve organizational goals while seeking for social change (Toledano, 2016, p. 277).

Activists are the main actors in social movements. Although this is not an inherently good or bad category - it depends on the causes, methods, and power struggles dynamics - they have been involved in historic struggles for civic, human, and environmental rights that generated impactful social changes (Martin, 2007; Della Porta & Diani, 2015). Advocacy is a form of public interest communication, and it is the primary action of all social movements; it turns into activism "when it takes a specific form within a discourse arena" (Johnston & Gulliver, 2022, p. 45). Effective advocacy occurs when advocates can persuade others that their cause is righteous. It is not a matter of rivalry but rather the capacity of various public interest groups to involve and align the objectives and interests of other participants in the arena (Jasper & Duyvendak, 2015; Johnston & Gulliver, 2022). *Social justice advocacy* is a multifaceted concept that involves addressing systemic inequalities, promoting fairness, and ensuring equitable distribution of resources and opportunities within society (Rawls, 1971). Social justice advocacy and human rights complex debates

³Despite being a very fragmented area of research within public relations, the definitions of lobbying tend to converge in terms of its primary objective, which is to influence political decisions through legal means using different communication strategies. However, a fine line separates legitimate lobbying and advocacy from undue influence or influence peddling (Browne, 1998; Davidson, 2015; Coroado, 2016; Simão, 2018).

have been explored by numerous scholars from diverse perspectives (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000; Rajagopal, 2003; Alston, 2022).

Social and political activism and public relations are historically articulated as strategies individuals, groups, and organizations use to foster collective action and social change (Ciszek, 2015; Ciszek, 2017; Dashti et al., 2023). These forms of public interest communication resort to advocacy, promotion, events, lobbying, public affairs (L'Etang, 2016), media relations (Müller, 2023), dissidence, and protest (Adi, 2020).

In the theory and practice of public relations, concerns about responsible advocacy - in the profit and non-profit sectors - are fundamentally linked to ethical issues that have long been debated within the discipline (Edgett, 2002; Fitzpatrick & Bronstein, 2006; Toledano, 2016; Haque, S. & Ahmad, 2017). These ethical principles are well-defined in the international codes of ethics adopted at the local level (Gonçalves, 2019). In summary, they encourage “to avoid all harmful contents, guarantee the public interest, safeguard the human dignity, and maintain justice in communication” (Haque & Ahmad, 2017, p. 147).

Therefore, the connection between public relations and social justice advocacy centers on the ethical, strategic, and communicative aspects of public relations practices that can be harnessed to advance social justice goals and create social change.

3. Reducing the Gap between Knowledge and Practice: Service-Learning

When discussing change, advocacy for social justice, and dealing with uncertainty, socio-cultural theory makes significant contributions by placing imagination at the center of cultural life (Vygotsky, 1978). Imagination plays a vital role as an enduring work to solve the dissonances and problems that occur in daily experiences, representations, or meanings (Pelaprat & Cole, 2011). Advocacy and advocates may “promote community psychology values when efforts are directed toward changing systems that perpetuate social problems” (Jason, Beasley & Hunter, 2015, p. 262). Using different advocacy strategies reduces the gap between knowledge and practice and improves active participation in social change issues (Servaes & Malikhao, 2012).

John Dewey's (1859- 1952) philosophy of education emphasizes experiential learning and the importance

of connecting classroom education with real-world experiences (Dewey, 1988), namely as a central path for the development of democratic activity (Dewey, 1980). In the same pedagogical line, and as a way of overcoming obstacles between theoretical learning and practical experiences, Paulo Freire's (1921-1997) approach to *critical education* presupposes that “the learner becomes an active participant in the appropriation of knowledge concerning lived experience” (Torres & Morrow, 2002, p. 1).

Service-learning is a pedagogy that involves students in a structured community service activity that meets previously identified needs and goals to achieve more profound knowledge of the course content through an increased consciousness of civic responsibility (Bingle, et al., 2011). Service-learning principles, benefits, and applications in several contexts have been analyzed (Zlotkowski, 1995; Furco, 1996; Eyler & Giles 1999; Brody & Wright, 2004; Butin, 2005; Thomson, et al., 2011). Plus, there is evidence that service-learning has impacts on increasing understanding and analysis of complex problems, on stimulating students' critical thinking (Eyler & Giles, 1999), and on reducing stereotypes, enhancing cultural awareness, and racial understanding (Astin & Sax, 1998; Christaldi-Sullivan & Bodzio, 2022). However, despite the expansion of service-learning practice internationally, much still needs to be done in Europe to join communities and universities (Ribeiro, Aramburuzabala & Paz-Lourido, 2021).

Service-learning has been recognized as a fundamental tool in the teaching of public relations, allowing theoretical and practical articulations appropriate to each context and situation (Allison, 2008; Gleason & Violette, 2012; Farmer, et al., 2016). Plus, progress on the SDGs will be equivalent to progress made by public relations scholars, practitioners, and students in understanding and assimilating this discipline's crucial role in this social change collective process (Canel, 2023). There is “half a century of evidence that pedagogy beyond the classroom is required to broaden learning and stimulate change” in public relations (Macnamara, 2023, p.7). Previous works contribute to the understanding of the role of service-learning in public relations education, addressing aspects such as student expectations, motivation, assessment of outcomes, and the impact of contingency management on positive outcomes in the learning process (Werder & Strand, 2011; Muturi, An & Mwangi, 2013; Harrison & Bak, 2017).

In the specific context of social justice advocacy, service-learning can be a gateway to reducing the gap between theory and practice. However, due to the pressures and needs of industry, in the context of neoliberalism (Demetriou, 2022), teaching strategic communication in universities often focuses on technical skills such as writing and creating web content and videos (Macnamara, 2023). Nevertheless, from a pedagogical point of view, achieving strategic objectives implies an interdisciplinary articulation with behavioral science – like sociopsychology, sociology, phenomenology, rhetoric, dialogue, and systems theory - that allows a deeper understanding of fundamental human motivations and psychological mechanisms (Seiffert-Brockmann, 2018; Macnamara, 2023).

Furthermore, better training in ethics could strengthen the preparation of a new generation of professionals who will work in environments where truth and democratic values may not prevail (Commission of Public Relations Education, 2017⁴). Critical and practical communication pedagogy, as the one provided by service-learning could ‘work’ as an entryway to position advocacy, activism, and social justice in public relations education (Aghazadeh & Ashby-King, 2022). The need to deepen knowledge about forms of activist communication that use dialogue rather than aggressive tactics is recognized (Toledano, 2016), and this is also a helpful approach for industry, companies, and brands that want to understand and engage with increasingly interactive and influential activist publics (2020 Global Communication Report⁵) and advocacy groups (Müller, 2022).

4. Methodological Approach

4.1 Classroom Ethnography

Ethnography is a qualitative research method (Erickson, 1977, p.58) “concerned with *social fact* as *social action*.” It analyzes and describes what people usually do in a specific place or context. It aims to understand the meanings they attribute to what they do, and that description will concentrate on the consistencies involving cultural processes (Wolcott, 2008, p. 73). Data collection in ethnography focuses on

“participant observation (experiencing), interviewing (enquiring) and studying materials organized by others (examining)” (Wolcott, 2008, pp. 48-49).

Classroom ethnography resorts to “ethnographic and sociolinguistic or discourse analytic research methods to the study of behavior, activities, interaction, and discourse” (Watson-Gegeo, 1997, p. 135). Classroom ethnography applies varied qualitative social research methods (participant observation, conversational engagement, field notes, journaling, and document analysis) in formal and semi-formal educational settings (Hammersley, 2022). Ethnography can assist researchers in understanding the complex environments of classrooms (Kervin et al., 2016). In line with Paulo Freire’s pedagogical approach to “Education for Critical Consciousness” (Freire, 2021), it highlights the socio-cultural dimension of teaching and learning processes, incorporating participants’ perspectives on their behaviors and perceptions. Classroom ethnography has evolved significantly since the first systematized studies in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It has included several methods and analysis levels within a critical framework (Watson-Gegeo, 1997).

Classroom ethnography has the particularity that researchers have spent time in some classroom context since childhood and includes the following characteristics (Erickson, 2010, p. 322): 1) Close observation and participation in routines over time; 2) Consideration of the scenario and its various interactions and mutual influences, whether in fieldwork or in the way of reporting it; 3) Identification of all characters in the scenario and their formal and informal roles; 4) Identification of all activities and social situations that occur in the scenario (locating activities in time and space, reporting verbal and non-verbal communication dynamics) and, 5) Detection of the “meaning perspectives” that are involved in usual routines.

Although Erickson (2010, p. 322) considers that the context of higher education, in which students are only in the scenario for a specific time per week, may not be the most conducive to this type of observation, the author recognizes that there are particular contexts in which this can be useful, as when we look at “local notions of fairness and due process.” In Portugal, there has been critical observation of teaching in the experiences of two high school and college professors in their respective classrooms (Auretta & Simões, 2020). The type of classroom ethnography used in

⁴ Commission of Public Relations Education (2017). Fast Forward: Foundations and Future State, Educators, and Practitioners, Available at: <http://www.commissionpred.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/report6-full.pdf>

⁵2020 Global Communication Report USC Annenberg’s – <https://annenberg.usc.edu/news/research-and-impact/study-predicts-growth-and-democratization-activism>

this study is categorized as “ethnographies of the classroom,” supporting the “knowledge base in the social sciences” (Bloome & Beauchemin, 2018, p.1).

This research was conducted at the Faculty of Human Sciences of the Catholic University of Portugal (UCP). The author carried out an ethnographic study in the roles of researcher and professor.⁶ - with 62 Public Relations students from the Undergraduate Program in Social and Cultural Communication Studies, 2nd year. Participant observation lasted four months during the spring semester (three hours a week between February 6th and May 26th, 2023). Classes were held on Mondays between 3:30 pm and 5:00 pm and Wednesdays between 2:00 pm and 3:30 pm. Students carried out activities outside the classroom, such as document research and attending relevant events. The students who participated were between 19 and 23 years old, 46 women and 16 men. The nationality of the majority of students was Portuguese (57), but there were two students from Brazil and three from Spain. All moments, events, interactions, and observations were documented in the field diary, this article’s primary data source.

4.2 Case Study ‘Welcoming Refugee Students’

The service-learning project was called “Welcoming, protecting, promoting, and integrating UCP Refugee Students.” Within the scope of the theoretical-practical group work foreseen in the evaluation of the public relations course, the advocacy plan to be developed by the students should present strategic communication proposals that help the Catholic University’s Initiative Support for Refugee Students⁷ to 1) Establish partnerships to raise material and socio-cultural support to meet various needs previously identified and 2) Engage the academic community with the initiative and the promotion of intercultural dialogue. The Support Initiative for Refugee Students at UCP coordinator, Inês Espada Vieira, represents “the client” and participated in the presentation, evaluation, and celebration sessions of students’ proposals. Public relations practice “involves counseling in the service of a specific client: an individual, company or organization” that needs advice on communication management (Allison, 2008, p. 280). In this context, practical experiences within the scope of service-

learning contribute to better-applying lessons learned in class.

Regarding ethical issues that imply the involvement between the ethnographer and the participants in the field work, all students were aware of and agreed with the context of experimental academic research that involved the project. The photographs presented were authorized, and the students’ names will not be mentioned when presenting the results. The study was conducted to answer three research questions:

RQ1: What were the students’ main challenges in moving from theory to practice?

RQ2: What pedagogical approaches promoted greater engagement in social justice advocacy to welcome refugee students?

RQ3: How did the students perceive the skills they acquired by participating in this service-learning project?

5. Findings

5.1 Students’ Main Challenges in Moving from Theory to Practice

The first main challenge was to stimulate in students a curious mindset for the project beyond the obligation to do graded practical work in the public relations course. This kind of engagement was developed gradually, trying to negotiate balances between coercive regulatory dimensions of the course and liberating humanization processes in which the search for knowledge does not have to serve only to prove something to someone at the end of each semester. A large part of the work of a public relations practitioner comes from the ability to research and gather information about the environment to make appropriate situational diagnoses - the first stages of a communication and advocacy plan - on March 1st, 2023, each student (individually) had to hand over to the professor an individual reading sheet to gather data and insights that would contribute to the group work about the project in the future. This practice also brings students closer to the notion of each one’s practical contribution to each team project in public relations. In contemporary societies full of distractions, misinformation, and disinformation, the motto is ‘Information is power.’ That is, the better-informed professionals are on a subject, the better they will be able to act on certain realities, and this is particularly relevant to issues related to social justice advocacy, where often the prevailing feelings are of impotence, which was no exception in this project.

⁶Autoethnography - a research method that uses personal experience (“auto”) to describe and interpret (“graphy”) cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices (“ethno”) (Adams, et al., 2017, p.1).

⁷ Católica refugee scholarship program - <https://www.ucp.pt/news/catolica-opens-applications-refugee-scholarship-programme>

Handing in the reading sheet also allowed students to do additional grounded research on global wicked problems such as the refugee crisis and the specific challenges regarding their integration into higher education. It was also valuable to clarify some confusion about migrants and emigrants and clarify doubts about who can be formally and legally considered a refugee in Portugal.

The second biggest challenge for students in moving from theory to practice was *adequately planning the tasks in the available time*. Intentionality and planning are fundamental components of a strategic approach to communication and public relations (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007). In this area, students revealed difficulties in their predictive reasoning⁸ ability.

In the evaluation and impact assessment of the proposed activities, the fact that students did not have in-depth knowledge of the reality they were working with also made *it* quite challenging. These challenges felt in practice were particularly useful for addressing in class what Macnamara (2023, p. 2) called “the continuing prevalence of false logics” and the need to transition from media-centric campaign evaluation logics to new audience-centric paradigms focused on social impact.

5.2 Pedagogical approaches that Promoted More Significant Engagement With the Project

It is important to note that the results concerning the second research question are not prescriptive or normative because they are broadly based on the

⁸Predictive reasoning is a daily process in which the decision-making options are learned by chance events in a context of fundamental causal variation (Makar & Rubin, 2018)

specific context in which this study was conducted. However, it was possible to identify pedagogical approaches that helped overcome the main challenges in moving from theory to practice and promoted more significant engagement with social justice advocacy in welcoming refugee students. These approaches were: 1) Motivation assessment, 2) Personal interactions and storytelling, and 3) Sharing with specialized professionals.

The first pedagogical approach that facilitated engagement with the project and helped stimulate students’ curiosity and interest was precisely the *assessment of motivations*. Understanding why we - professors and students - were doing this was necessary. Even though there are diverse definitions and motivation theories in the literature, it is consensual that motivation “is an internal condition or state that serves to drive or direct an individual towards completing a task or goal” (Russell, 2014, p. 104).

We started the class on February 27th, 2023, with a brainstorming session about our personal motivations (in addition to those foreseen in our institutional roles as professors and students) for this project. The motto to start this dynamic was the famous statement by German dancer and choreographer Pina Bausch (July 27th, 1940 – June 30th, 2009): “I am not interested in how people move but what moves them.”

The professor wrote on the physical board in the room the various motivations that emerged, and we quickly filled two boards (Figures 1 and 2).

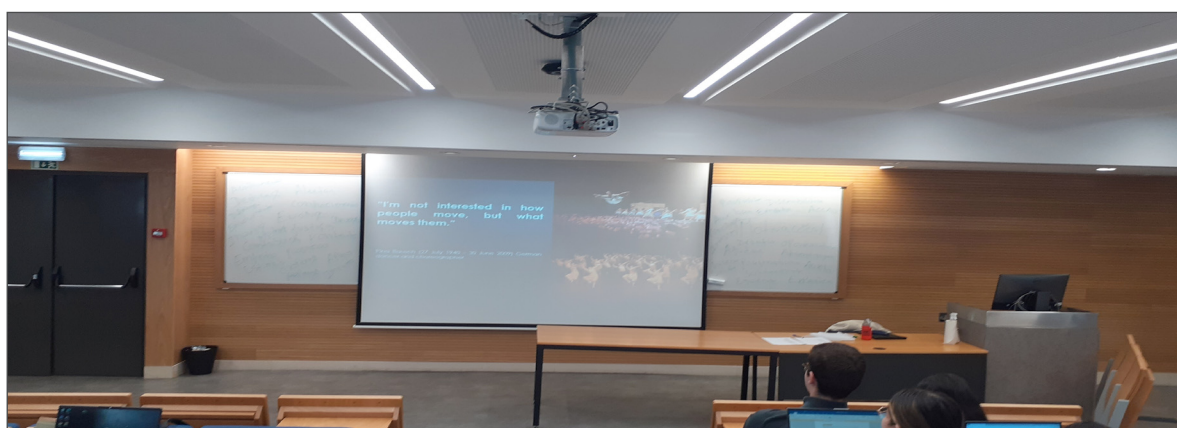


Figure 1. Class brainstorming session - Motivation assessment (Field diary February 27th, 2023)

The words/motivations that emerged (written in Portuguese on the images) were purpose, availability, assistance, empathy, action, conciliation, integration,

opportunity, challenge, to help, learning, success, unity, solidarity, pragmatism, equity, and experience, among others.

Diogo Sousa, Head of Communications & CSR¹ at Galp Portugal, was invited to share his knowledge and experience in a class on March 29th, 2023, to establish bridges between theory and practice and keep students engaged. At that time, Galp Portugal was

implementing a humanitarian aid program worth 6.5 million euros to Ukraine. In-class exercise planning training and strategic thinking about the service-learning project were carried out with the support of this specialist (Figure 4).

¹Corporate social responsibility

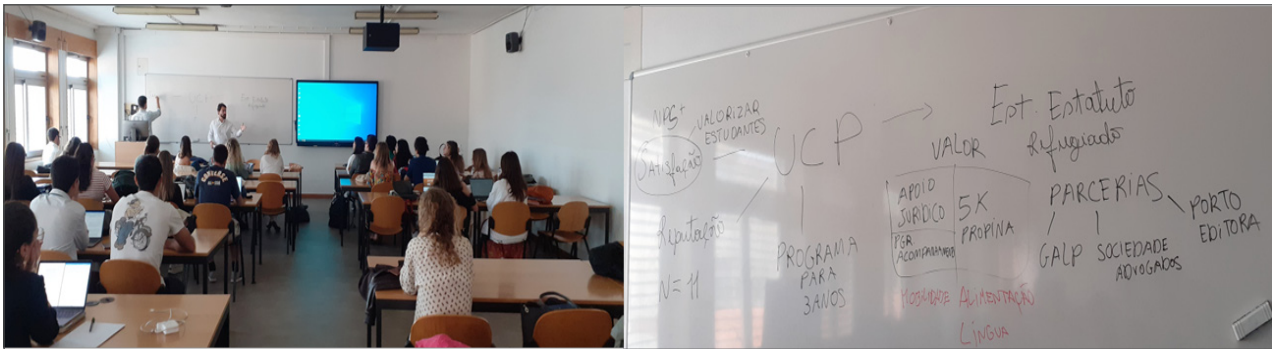


Figure 4. Group work planning in the classroom with a guest communications professional, Diogo Sousa – Galp Portugal (Field diary March 29th, 2023)

5.3 Students' Perception of Acquired Skills

Before the last class of the Semester on May 22nd, 2023 (the celebration class integrated into the methodology for service-learning), students were asked to share with the professor in writing (anonymously) a brief reflection on what knowledge and skills they think they may have acquired by participating in this project. If they felt they did not gain any skills, they were invited to explain why.

Below are some excerpts from the exact translations of some student's feedback. Regarding the capacity for *humanized teamwork*, one student said, "It was with great satisfaction that I developed this project with my colleagues, which ended up making us more human." Another student said, "It was an important experience, as I was in a group that worked normally and without problems." Regarding interpersonal relationship dynamics, the problem with large classes is creating working groups with around eight members with diverse profiles, and only some know each other. This type of service-learning project facilitated teamwork, mainly due to the motivation underlying the service delivery that generated processes of creation and sharing of meanings.

Another competence referred to is *responsibility and planning*. One of the students said, "I had never done such a big and heavy job. I felt a huge responsibility". Another student said a small amount of confusion was felt because "we had never done something so serious and real before." Additional feedback from a student noted that "This project encouraged us to look for partners and the true objectives for this support."

Another testimony mentioned that "I have learned how to structure an appealing plan that combines social responsibility with financial returns – something that is not very common to address."

The students' answers also point to skills such as *problem-solving orientation*. Straightforwardly, a student stated, "With this project, I think I have developed problem-solving skills." Another participant said, "To help, we realized that it was first necessary to understand the real problems these young people face when arriving in our country." Another student said, "I believe I have a more realistic idea of how to implement an advocacy plan and try to solve certain problems in the job market."

Students also reported that they consider they have developed *research and creativity* skills. One of the testimonies obtained stated that: "When addressing issues related to refugee students, such as access to education, basic needs and social integration, creativity and flexibility were required to be able to make informed decisions." Another student mentioned that "through this work and countless research and group conversations, I acquired and absorbed new ideas and new knowledge concerning this topic," another testimony stated that "this project gave me new perspectives and awareness about these problems."

Despite positive student feedback on the skills gained from this project, it became clear that as students better understood the challenges of persuading different audiences on social justice issues, they found it harder to believe that small actions could create social change.

5.4 Implications for service-learning approaches in Public Relations

The results of this study position service-learning as an effective pedagogical approach for PR. However, some challenges must be considered for those receiving the service, mainly the difficulties of operationalizing and carrying out the projects. That said, associations or groups that receive services in this logic should seek to complement students' advice and proposals with more experienced professional consultancy. This experience also highlighted the role of the public relations lecturer in stimulating and maintaining students' motivation throughout the process and in a language that students understand and can identify with. The role of the professor in designing and implementing service-learning approaches is fundamental in three main dimensions: 1) highlighting the importance of reflection about complex social and discursive ambivalences, 2) course design, and 3) the integration of community service with educational goals and the demands of the job market and industry in the context of public relations.

6. Conclusive Discussion

This research is intended to establish bridges among disciplines, authors, and approaches relevant to social justice advocacy, service learning, and public relations. This process involves identifying common themes, investigating overlaps in ideas, and assessing how concepts can be incorporated into course design, curriculum development, research projects, and educational initiatives that advance service-learning and social justice advocacy in public relations. Embracing an interdisciplinary approach is vital in fostering a more holistic comprehension of the interplay between apparently different fields, highlighting their contribution to catalyzing positive social change.

By looking at the first question of this research, it was possible to find out that students' main challenges in moving from theory to practice include subjective personal and collective dimensions, such as stimulating a *curious mindset*, with other technical and more objective dimensions of strategic communication, such as *carrying out adequate planning and evaluation and impact assessment* of the proposed activities. The progressive identification of these challenges made it possible to introduce adjustments in class planning and contextualize historical and contemporary debates on the theory and practice of public relations.

In the context of this advocacy project for integrating refugee students, it was noticed that the pedagogical approaches that generated greater engagement were 1) Motivation assessment, 2) Personal interactions and storytelling, and 3) Sharing with specialized professionals. These results highlight additional needs for training in activity planning, including concerns about the motivations of future professionals, which go beyond the 'excellent' and 'efficient' practice of the function and tasks, stressing the need to promote reflections on the cultural and social impacts of public relations activities. These findings align with Witmer, Silverman, and Gaschen's (2009) results regarding the necessity to "include reflection opportunities" on different community engagement dimensions.

Students' contact with a topic that has generated controversy throughout history, such as the emergence of the phenomenon of mass refugees since the end of the First World War and the resulting humanitarian crises (Agamben, 1995), also prepares them for "critical consciousness" (Freire, 2021), about socially constructed realities (Searle, 1995). In the context of an increasingly "toxic" social polarization and fragmentation in several countries (V-Dem, 2022), advocacy for social justice implies practices of recognizing the growing interdependence of humans as a species and finding new forms of coexistence in solidarity and cooperation with those who may have different opinions, preferences, and experiences (Bauman, 2016).

Students' perceptions about the skills they acquired by participating in this service-learning project can be grouped into four main categories: 1) humanized teamwork, 2) responsibility and planning, 2) problem-solving orientation, and 4) research and creativity. These findings regarding the third research question of this study offer valuable information about the effectiveness of service-learning projects, contributions to personal and professional development, and guidance for improvements in educational approaches and curricula.

Pedagogical approaches are constrained to each country's spatial and temporal contexts and each academic institution within the scope of their cultures, practices, and policies. Therefore, the results presented in this paper are not only influenced by these limitations, but the theoretical and interpretative choices of the researcher also influence them. However, classroom ethnography can be a valuable method for future research that provides an in-

depth comprehension of service-learning projects by uncovering implicit practices and unwritten rules that shape these experiences. Ethnography emphasizes the importance of understanding the perspectives of participants. It provides longitudinal insights that help comprehend how the dynamics within the classroom and the project itself change and develop.

In the field of public relations, classroom ethnography proved particularly useful, providing a contextual understanding of how PR practices are employed in real-world scenarios and contributing to a deeper comprehension of social justice advocacy in this specific case. This method allows for identifying and understanding ethical considerations and decision-making processes within service-learning projects. Researchers can also explore how students adapt PR strategies to different cultural contexts within a classroom setting and look for insights into team dynamics. In summary, classroom ethnography provides a comprehensive and immersive approach to understanding the intricacies of service-learning projects in public relations. It allows for a deep exploration of communication strategies, stakeholder interactions, ethical considerations, and the overall impact of PR practices within an educational setting.

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