

'Ears to the Soul': A volunteer programme based on the principles of service-learning as an alternative to the professional practice of student social work placement during the pandemic

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to present an example of professional practice in the form of a programme based on the principles of service-learning in the period of crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in social work education at Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Slovakia. The practical training of social work students is an integral part of their education and is focused on the development of those competencies that can only be developed through direct work with target groups. As it was not possible to complete the placement in the field at the time of the pandemic, it was necessary to look for new opportunities to meet the objectives of the placement. The 'Ears to the Soul' volunteer programme was created in response to the pandemic situation and its main goal was to help overcome people's feelings of loneliness by creating student-client contacts and providing regular telephone support. The programme was built on the principles of service-learning. The evaluation of the programme has shown that it can meaningfully meet the needs of target groups and has considerable potential as a form of education in social work.

Keywords

Service-learning, professional practice, social work, COVID-19.

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"Oídos en el alma": Un programa de voluntariado basado en los principios del aprendizaje-servicio como alternativa a la formación práctica de estudiantes de Trabajo Social durante la pandemia.

Resumen

El objetivo del documento es presentar la formación práctica basada en los principios del aprendizaje-servicio, desarrollada en el grado de Trabajo Social en la Universidad Matej Bel de Banská Bystrica, Eslovaquia, durante la crisis causada por la pandemia COVID-19. La formación práctica de los estudiantes de Trabajo Social es una parte integral de su educación y se centra en aquellas competencias que sólo pueden desarrollarse mediante el trabajo directo con los grupos destinatarios. Dado que en el momento de la pandemia no fue posible completar la formación práctica, se buscaron nuevas oportunidades formativas. El programa de voluntariado 'Ears to the Soul' ("Oídos en el Alma") se creó en respuesta a la situación de la pandemia y su principal objetivo fue ayudar a superar los sentimientos de soledad de las personas mediante la creación de contactos entre estudiantes y usuarios y la prestación de apoyo telefónico regular. El programa se basó en los principios del aprendizaje-servicio. La evaluación del programa ha demostrado que puede satisfacer de manera significativa las necesidades de los grupos destinatarios y tiene un potencial formativo considerable en el ámbito del Trabajo Social.

Palabras clave

Aprendizaje-servicio, práctica profesional, trabajo social, COVID-19.

1. Introduction

The crisis caused by COVID-19 has brought challenges to all areas of life in our society, including higher education. In the university environment, it is necessary to respond not only to current challenges in the field of education and research, but also in fulfilling their third mission. Adaptation to the changed situation and the transition from full-time teaching to the online environment took place differently at each university. The specificity of this transition is undoubtedly determined by the study programmes themselves, their concept and the competence profiles of their graduates.

In the study programmes, an important component of which is also professional practice implemented directly in organisations, many universities faced the question of how to ensure this practice in order to fulfill their goals. Social work is one of the study programmes in which significant attention is paid to the practical training of students in cooperation with practice.

In our paper we offer an example of professional practice in the form of a programme based on the principles of service-learning during the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in social work education.

We present a specific programme and evaluation of its selected aspects from the perspective of students and the target group.

2. Theoretical framework

The university training of social workers can generally be divided into two basic components: theoretical and practical. The aim of the theoretical component of education is primarily to provide students with knowledge from the scientific field that is the subject of their study, or from related fields. The task of practical training is to prepare students to perform a wide range of activities required by specific practice so that they can fully perform their tasks from commencement of their employment.

Professional fieldwork means an organisational form of university study in which students apply theoretical knowledge and develop their own practical skills necessary for the performance of a future profession.

In the education of social workers, professional internships have been one of the important components from the very beginning. In individual countries and universities, we find differences in terms of quantity, i.e. the number of hours that students complete during their studies as well as the quality and system of professional practice.

In Slovakia, the basic requirements for professional practice are defined in the Minimum Standards of Professional Practice in the Study Field of Social Work, developed by the Association of Educators in Social Work in Slovakia (2014). According to these standards, the minimum number of hours of professional practice in a bachelor course is 180 hours and in a master's course 120 hours. The general goals of

professional work experience in the study field of social work according to the standards are:

- contribute to the development of cooperation between academia and work experience;
- develop social work as a profession and a scientific discipline;
- to increase the quality of education in social work and the performance of social work in practice.

In the context of focusing social work on services and empowering and applying practice to the training of students, education in social work is perceived as a historical contributor to the development of service-learning (Zieren & Stoddard, 2004). On the other hand, several authors (Lemieux & Allen, 2007; Phillips, 2011) state that education in social work suffers from a lack of real understanding of the essence of service-learning and very often confuses service-learning with work experience and volunteering, ignoring the focus of service-learning on activities conducted in cooperation with the community and the development of competencies in the field of civic engagement.

In the professional literature we find examples of the implementation of service-learning into various subjects in the study of social work. The authors offer theoretical anchors, pedagogical models and discussions in order to present and promote a common language, goal and research on service-

learning in social work education. Many of them see the connection between service-learning and social work in the topic of social justice. Burke (2011) states that social work has a share in social justice and that the means of achieving it is also service-learning. Campbell and Bragg (2007) argue that social work should be a leader in service-learning because of its long-term commitment to social justice. Lemieux and Allen (2007) provide an overview of the application of service-learning and its assessment in social work education. Nadel, Majewski, and Sullivan-Cosetti (2007) offer service-learning models applicable to social work curricula. Petracchi, Weaver, Schelbe & Song (2016), based on a national survey of accredited undergraduate social work programmes in America, state that service-learning is a compulsory component in at least one course of study.

Studies on 'experiential learning', 'community learning', 'participatory action research', 'practical learning', 'social change interventions' and 'service-learning' also appear in the social work literature (Phillips, 2007). The author Green (2009) sees great potential in the inclusion of service-learning in social work curricula due to several benefits, which she perceives especially in improving community interaction and strengthening social development.

Social work, also due to its mission and values, creates an ideal environment for the application of service-learning in education. Its individual dimensions are part of the

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mission of social work and contribute to the development of such values of social work as service, social justice and human relations (Skyba & Šoltésová, 2014, p.63).

Another aspect that service-learning brings in social work is contributing to the fact that students become active citizens, are interested in what is happening in the community and are civically engaged (Skyba & Šoltésová, 2014).

When defining service-learning, we often encounter its distinction from other forms of participation and learning of students (Brozmanová Gregorová, Bariaková & Kubealaková, 2013; Fiske, 2001; Furco & Holland, 2005; Lipčáková & Matulayová, 2012), such as volunteering, professional work internship, public benefit activity, etc. As stated by Lipčáková and Matulayová (2012), these forms can be distinguished on the basis of goal, focus and time perspective.

While volunteering is more service-oriented, professional work experience focuses more on educating and developing the specific competencies needed to practice the profession. In service-learning, there is a combination of service and education. The difference between service-learning and professional work experience as part of the preparation for the profession is mainly in reciprocity (gained not only by the student, but also the community / organisation) and focusing on the development of civic engagement of students. Another factor that distinguishes service-learning from

other forms of experimental learning (such as internships, cooperative learning or work experience) and from volunteering is critical reflection. Reflection combines community service with course materials, as well as with lectures and the study itself.

3. Description of experience 'Ears to the Soul'

Like other educators, in our case at Matej Bel University in Slovakia we had to deal with the way of professional internship during the crisis caused by COVID-19. In the situation caused by the coronavirus crisis, among the first institutions to be closed in an effort to protect service users were the facilities in which students' professional practice in social work is carried out. Although the presence of people providing field services was necessary, due to the security measures taken by the university, it was not possible to officially involve students in it. For this reason, we had to look for other alternatives in how to provide professional practice for students who had not managed to complete it. We therefore used the experience we have at the university with the development of volunteer programmes in cooperation with the regional Volunteer Centre (since 1998) and with the service-learning application (since 2005).

In cooperation with a regional volunteer centre, we launched the Ears to the Soul volunteer programme - a telephone helpline for lonely people. We built the programme on the principles of service-learning. The volunteer programme was created in response to the current situation caused by the

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spread of coronavirus. In this situation, we encounter both increased stress and a sense of helplessness from current events, but also an increasing sense of loneliness and social isolation. Elderly people, in particular, in this situation have limited social contacts due to the increased risk of infection when meeting their loved ones, acquaintances, neighbours, etc. The service aim of this programme was to help people overcome the feeling of social isolation, maintain social contacts with other people and share their feelings. The programme was primarily aimed at the target group of lonely people (senior citizens, but also people who are among at-risk groups such as patients with chronic and oncological diseases, people with cardiovascular and respiratory problems) who feel isolated and need to make contact with another person. The programme took the form of "one-on-one". Volunteer-lonely person pairs were created, which guaranteed an individual approach, better mutual knowledge and consideration of the person in need. The volunteer regularly telephoned a specific person (three times a week). We offered students of social work the opportunity to complete the programme as a substitute for completing professional internship, which they could not complete during the summer semester. The educational goal of the programme in relation to the students was the development of communication competencies with the client, empathy and personal and social responsibility. These competencies represent one of the basic competencies defined in the profile of a social work graduate.

The actual launch of the programme was preceded by a preparatory phase during which teachers from the university prepared a manual for program coordination in cooperation with the regional volunteer centre, in which they defined the individual steps of programme management and roles and responsibilities of those involved, its manual for volunteers - students, training for the programme and the necessary documentation and contracts. The tasks of the university were aimed at the students - volunteers and the tasks of the volunteer centre towards clients and the promotion of the programme among the target group.

Within the implementation phase, the work with students was based on the individual steps of the management of volunteer programmes. After the recruitment, students were selected for the programme on the basis of a completed registration form and an introductory interview. After completing the interview, they participated in online training. The training was focused on the introduction of the main rules of operation of the volunteer programme and individual positions in the programme (student, client, tutor, supervisor, university, volunteer centre) and clarification of the rights and obligations of individual parties. The training space was also devoted to the specifics of the target groups of the programme and communication with this type of clients and problematic communication situations and their management. A manual was prepared for students, which contained a summary of information from the

training. After completing the training, client-student pairs were gradually created. The main task of the students was to be in telephone contact with a lonely person, optimally 3 times a week, while the contact was always initiated by the student. Each week, students filled out a record of the calls they made. These also included a brief reflection and evaluation of contacts with clients. Each student was assigned a tutor, who was a teacher from the Department of Social Work. The tutor was in regular contact with the students and provided consultations if necessary. The meetings with tutor also served to reflect on the process of developing or deepening communication skills. The programme also included mandatory group supervision aimed at reflecting on the experience of the relationship with the client and problematic situations. Working in the programme was set for a period of 3 months from the training.

In the final phase of the programme, students attended the last online supervisory group meeting. Their task was also to end the cooperation with the clients, to fill in the written final self-reflection and the evaluation questionnaire. Evaluation interviews were also conducted with clients after the end of the cooperation.

From May to July 2020, a total of 12 social work students took part in the programme. 14 clients showed interest in the programme, of which 12 people were involved in the programme. The students made a total of 4,178 minutes of calls, with an average of 348 minutes per student. In terms of hours, the programme does not meet the

prescribed number of hours for completing professional practice in social work in the field or facility, but nevertheless the evaluation in the next section proves that it has fulfilled the defined educational goals and goals of the service.

4. Evaluation of experience

The aim of the programme evaluation was to find out whether the programme met the goals of the education and the goals of the service, how the students evaluate their experience in the programme and what challenges they encountered. The aim of this evaluation is also to identify the potential and limits of this type of professional practice in the education of social workers in the future.

To evaluate the programme, we used inputs from several tools: continuous records of calls made associated with reflection, final self-reflection of students, final evaluation of the programme by students and final evaluation of the programme by clients - a record of the interview. A total of 18 people participated in the evaluation of the programme, including 9 students and 9 clients. Students and clients were informed about the purpose of using their reflections and evaluations.

5. Fulfilment of educational goals

The educational goal of the programme in relation to the students was to develop their communication skills with the client, empathy and social responsibility. The students clearly named the development of these skills in their self-reflection:

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- *"I learned to listen actively, to suggest new topics for discussion, to be interested in another person, their life, experiences, etc".*
- *"I learned how to talk to people with disabilities and how to approach them".*
- *"Thanks to working in the programme, I practiced communication, perception, empathy, the ability to listen to other people. I tried possible telephone counselling".*
- *"I acquired the following skills: active listening, the ability to communicate and assertively behave with the ability to respond flexibly to clients' problems and to be able to take a stand, the ability to listen, listen, not judge".*
- *"I have learned to communicate with a client who has a serious speech problem, to be patient when working with a similar client".*
- *"I learned that such selfless help and at first glance, perhaps unnecessary, can really do a lot. For example, motivating a person to take the courage to make important decisions thereby positively influencing other people in their surroundings. Incredible what a couple of connections can make over a mobile network".*

Thanks to the service-learning

experience, students also changed their perception and attitude towards the target groups involved in the programme:

- *"[...] I changed my view of people with disabilities ..."*
- *"I have found that people with disabilities are sometimes the same but also in a more positive mood than people without disabilities. They can enjoy life even more".*

The development of knowledge and attitudes in relation to target groups is also one of the educational goals of practice.

All students perceived that they would use the knowledge and skills acquired while working in the programme in the future, both in their professional and personal lives.

6. Evaluation of service-learning experience in the programme from the students' point of view

To evaluate the service-learning experience, we used the scale of Conrad and Hedinová (1981), which we have been using at MBU for a long time in order to evaluate the service-learning experience in various courses. The scale contains 16 items that students rate on the Likert scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means strongly disagree and 5 strongly agree. We divided this scale into three subscales: quality of experience, instruction and support, and the connection of school and practice.

Table 1. The scale of evaluation of the service-learning experience in the 'Ears to the Soul' programme

Evaluation of experience in the programme	Average	Modus
Quality of experience		
I had the freedom to develop and apply my own ideas	4.33	5
I had the room to express my own interests and ideas	4.22	5
I felt I was contributing something	4.22	5
The activities I did were interesting	4.11	5
It contained tasks that were challenging	3.78	3
It contained important commitments	3.67	4
I had to make important decisions	2.56	3
My ideas and observations were ignored	1.22	1
Instruction and support		
I was trained well enough to be able to perform the assigned tasks	4.22	4
I was given clear instructions on what my task was	3.86	5
The teacher was interested in me	4.33	5
No one helped me when I needed it	1.44	1
I was appreciated when I did a good job	3.44	5
Connection of school and practice		
As a volunteer, I used what I learned while studying at school	4.11	5
At school, I have used or will use what I have learned while working in the programme	4.11	5

Source: own elaboration

As the table documents, the students in the programme had room to apply their ideas, interests and ideas and did not feel that their ideas were being ignored. Despite the fact that the programme itself was planned by the teacher in cooperation with the coordinator from the Volunteer Center, it provided students with enough space for autonomous decisions. We think that this is mainly due to the fact that they had to rely on themselves and their abilities and skills to carry out the telephone conversations themselves. The students also agreed that the tasks in the programme were a challenge for them and contained important commitments, less identifying with the claim that they had to make important decisions. They perceived the experience as interesting and felt the real benefits of carrying out the activities within the programme.

In the students' self-reflections, we also identified the fear and apprehension of this experience before conducting interviews. At the same time, however, the reflection showed that they were overcome and, thanks to that, they moved on.

- *"My biggest challenge came when I had to start communicating with a client with a speech impediment. At first, I had a little respect and also apprehension, another challenge came when I had the first interview with him and found out what the situation is".*

One student describes her experience as a "thorny path", she experienced stress before each interview, but

nevertheless in other parts her evaluation of the whole experience is very positive.

- *"The volunteer journey through this programme was winding and bumpy, but as is true in the proverb that the sun comes out after every storm, so even in this case, the best came after overcoming difficult moments. In my case, the thorny events could mainly include the stress that prevailed before each phone call with the client. Even after two months, the feeling of being amazed still hadn't passed. The beginnings were sceptical and doubtful. None of us knew exactly what putting the phone to our ear would lead us to and what feelings we would speak into the phone. It was palpable. But at one point the enthusiasm and intimacy broke through, and with them the conversations became kind, pleasant, optimistic, and blissful. Now, after the end of the programme, I can say that the programme, on an individual level, undoubtedly reached its maximum emotionally and impressed on the socially sore places and taught me a lot about myself".*

In the area of instruction and support, students assessed that they were clearly instructed and knew what their task was. They felt that the teachers were interested in them and helped them if necessary. Even in the self-reflections and evaluations themselves, the students evaluated the support

from the tutors and supervisor very positively at times when they did not know whether they had responded well or had had negative feelings from the phone calls.

- *"I did not know how to react in this situation. But in the end, after the supervision, I clarified things, they explained the essentials to me, and since then, the conversations have been going on without any problems".*
- *"I don't think there could have been a better tutor in the programme. She required weekly and regular joint meetings that were more than necessary for encouragement, appreciation, and stay. All the problems that bothered us were expressed out loud and solved".*
- *"Supervision helped me to think, to self-reflection, to self-knowledge, to verify the correctness of the approach when working with my client. In my opinion, supervision is very important, in case of ambiguities or complications, where the supervisor can advise and help".*

From the point of view of connecting theory and practice, we also consider it important that students were able to apply what they learned in their study during the programme and on the other hand they also see space for applying the knowledge and skills acquired during the programme in their further study.

All students would recommend

undergoing the programme to other students, because:

- *"A student can be helpful to someone unknown. At the same time, the students can test their reactions in different situations. The students can exceed their limits. The programme can teach the students to communicate with strangers. Alternatively, the students can find out which client they would rather not want, the student finds out on various topics how they can develop communication on common topics. Thanks to the programme, the students realise the importance of active listening".*

7. Fulfilment of service goals

The service aim of the programme was to help people overcome the feeling of social isolation, maintain social contacts with other people and share their feelings. The programme met the expectations for all 9 clients who participated in the evaluation. Thanks to the programme, clients did not feel so lonely, they were able to open up and trust others:

- *"I didn't feel so lonely and I learned to communicate a little more, to open up to others because I'm an introvert, I'm not used to communicating so often".*
- *"It helped me, I sit at home all the time, it went well to chat with the other person".*
- *"I didn't believe it would be so*

pleasant, it was beyond expectations".

- *"It was good to talk to someone, it made me laugh too ..."*
- *"It helped in my solitude, I am alone, I have health problems, the quarantine was here, everything affected me both physically and mentally, everything affected me. I was looking forward to the phone calls".*
- *"I could talk about everything about the theatre, about walking the dog, but also about personal things. Sometimes you need to confide about your problems".*
- *"It certainly helped, I was also happier, she talked, I had back problems - I had been on my back for 2 weeks, then it went well".*

Clients rated the programme positively and all 9 clients stated that they would recommend the programme. 8 out of 9 clients would like to remain in the programme in the future.

8. Conclusion

We are aware that we have not been able to fully fulfill all the principles of service-learning in the programme. However, at a time of crisis caused by COVID-19, the programme responded to the current needs of the community as well as those of the students and schools. Service-learning experience was intentionally integrated into the academic curriculum and clear

connection of service to the objectives of education was established, it provided temporal sequences that allowed students to reflect on their experience and it aimed to develop civic responsibility of students. As a weakness, it can be perceived that the students were not fully involved in the analysis of the needs and design of the programme and that they were implementers rather than leaders of activities. However, the programme fulfilled the educational goals and the goals of the service set at the beginning and effectively connected them to each other.

The evaluation of the programme has shown that it can meaningfully meet the needs of target groups and has considerable potential as a form of education in social work. The students' reflection indicate that this model can successfully fulfill the individual functions of professional internship and engenders the students closer contact with clients, the acquisition of specific communication skills and space for the application of theoretical knowledge in practice. We think that this model of professional internship can be usable not only in the training of professionals in the field of social work, but also in the training of other helping professions.

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