Reciprocal Empowerment Through Remote Service Learning:
How to Create Learning Opportunities That Embrace Difference and Foster Social Justice

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter presents a novel pedagogical approach of "remote service learning" (RSL), which was applied in an undergraduate health degree program at an Austrian university. Remote service learning is a form of active blended learning that combines academic learning with practical experience and social commitment, using a range of tools and methods from online didactics. Drawing on emancipatory pedagogies such as transformative learning, an RSL-focused course pursues the ambitious goal of promoting reciprocal empowerment, that is, the promotion of mutual educational processes. "Reciprocal" refers to all stakeholders involved in the course, directly or indirectly: university students, the local community, the Austrian NGO, and the educator. Survey and qualitative data results have shown that the fundamental triad of learning, acting, and reflecting in remote service learning not only leads to a deeper understanding of the course content and discipline but also increased self-awareness, empathy, and a heightened sense of the highly complex social realities in different parts of the world.

INTRODUCTION

Much has been written on the essential role that higher education plays in solving some of the world's most pressing issues. After all, education helps develop the skills and knowledge base of future leaders and policymakers who decide on the fates of millions and even billions of people. However, there is a

growing concern that mainstream higher education "leaves us ill-equipped to address complex global challenges" (Ryan & Murphy, 2018, p. 5) and has become more part of the problem than the solution (e.g., Brookfield, 2005; Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 2000; Phillips & Phillips, 2019; Sterling, 2010). Increasingly, the discussion around education has focused primarily on increasing economic outputs, efficiency and employability. This is problematic, as such learning can foster questionable values. In fact, it has been shown time and again that there is no correlation between high educational performance and socially responsible and environmentally sustainable behavior and decision-making (Orr, 2004; Sterling, 2010). This is clearly seen in the many mistakes made by decision-makers during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The epistemic ignorance (i.e., inability to position oneself in the place of other people and to recognize vulnerabilities and privileges) and aporophobia (i.e., an aversion towards the poor) of these policymakers have resulted in widespread suffering and death, especially among minorities, migrants, women, persons with disabilities and the poor (Timmermann, 2020).

In these challenging times, the fundamental questions to ask are: What epistemic changes in our thinking are necessary to guarantee future life on this planet? How can education contribute to a socially just and ecologically sustainable future in a meaningful way? Which pedagogical approaches and learning theories can guide possible ways forward? To answer these questions, institutions and educators must first ask themselves what the purpose of education is. After all, as noted by John Dewey (1915), education is a social process that is void of meaning without a clear definition of the kind of society we would like to live in. In an effort to address these questions and take into account growing social injustice and global challenges, many universities around the world have embraced the *third mission* (i.e., addressing societal challenges/service to society) and have anchored this mission in their policies and development plans. The third mission goes beyond the two traditional core missions of education and research but is also an integral part of these other missions. For example, many universities are exploring ways to integrate the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into teaching and research.

This chapter is premised on the assumption that rather than sustaining and strengthening dominant social norms, values and behaviors, university education should foster inclusivity and empathy by encouraging students to develop a profound understanding of global problems, to question their worldviews and thinking habits, and to develop an awareness of their own epistemic gaps. Therefore, university education should be disruptive and provide learning opportunities that encourage students to transform previously unquestioned beliefs and assumptions. Such education requires a didactical repertoire that differs greatly from the "banking" concept of education (Freire, 1970), which views students as passive, empty containers into which educators deposit knowledge, which is then memorized and regurgitated for assessment (Phillips & Phillips, 2020). Alternative pedagogical approaches, such as Active Blended Learning and critical-reflective pedagogies, are needed to overcome this narrow view of education, and this chapter presents one such alternative approach.

This chapter describes an evidence-based, transferrable framework for an Active Blended Learning course which I have called *Remote Service Learning* (RSL), featuring various student-centered pedagogies, including inverted classroom (i.e., pre-class engagement with core content followed by in-class discussion, analysis and consolidation), critical-reflective practice and transformative pedagogy. After a brief discussion on the theoretical underpinnings of RSL, the chapter presents a case study and draws on insights gained from the implementation of the course "Global issues in healthcare", which was held for the first time in the fall of 2019 at an Austrian university and which has since been adapted to other programs both within and beyond the University. The chapter also presents outcomes and draws on an in-depth evaluation of the course comprising an anonymous online survey, written reflections and quali-

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