



Unpacking service-learning: An Ipsedixitism according to the lenses of students and lecturers

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ABSTRACT

Studies show that Service Learning (SL) has a positive influence on student learning outcomes regardless of how learning is or was measured. However, literature makes it clear that, as a pedagogy, SL lacks a common definition and therefore has been described in various ways by different authors. This paper explored the knowledge and understanding of SL by third-year students and their lecturers in the Faculties of Engineering and Built Environment, Information and Communications Technology, and Humanities at a University of Technology in South Africa. Following a qualitative research design, three focus groups were held with ten students per group, and the qualitative questionnaire was administered to eight lecturers. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data. The study found that SL is not well known to both lecturers and students, even those who attempted to impart their knowledge and understanding. Both lecturers and students likened SL to other programmes such as experiential learning, Work-integrated Learning (WiL), and in-service training. The study highlights the critical disconnect amid the multifaceted academic discourse on SL and the definite, practical understanding of the concept among lecturers and students by providing clear, practical recommendations that contribute to the effective implementation of SL. Institutions can benefit from SL by implementing awareness and training programs to build a foundational understanding among all stakeholders. This shifts the scholarly focus from simply defining SL to the prerequisite step of educating the academic community about its core principles, distinguishing it from other pedagogies.

Keywords: Service-Learning, Students, Lecturers, Ipsedixitism, Pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

Service Learning (SL) can be traced back to the 1800s when it was embedded in the social-reform movement led by Jane Addams and Hull House. In the early 1900s, theorists on learning and educational reform, including John Dewey, Jean Piaget, Kurt Lewin, Donald Schön, and David Kolb, emerged to

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establish the intellectual roots of SL and engrave it through their progressive education movement the notion that students learn through a combination of actions and reflections.¹

John Dewey and other proponents of SL believed that education should be relevant to the lives and experiences of students, thereby emphasizing learning by doing as opposed to traditional teachings of imbibing theoretical information without practical application. The emphasis herein is that SL should enable students to understand their actions in the context of social justice and social change.²

According to Preradovic SL has five major stakeholders: (i) the students, (ii) teachers, (iii) Universities/Schools (iv) community partners and (v) community members who can be identified as individuals, groups or organisations.³ Integration among the stakeholders is achieved through SL partnerships. One of the critical benefits of research is the problem-solving ability engendered by critical thinking, engagement, and inquiry-based learning. The author alludes that SL causes significant improvement in problem-solving skills, communication skills, teamwork skills, intercultural competency, leadership, and career decision-making skills.

Literature lays bare the milestones trudged by scholars in pursuit of SL as a topic and concept of interest. SL is defined as many things by many authors. To this day, there is no universal definition for SL. How SL is defined and implemented is based solely on the objectives (the intended outcomes) of the SL project. The debate on SL is so deep that authors have different views of the meaning of the hyphen between the words “service” and “learning.” Chong argues that the hyphen symbolises the reflection that occurs in the learning process,⁴ whereas Flecky argues that the hyphen signifies the balance between the service and learning emanating from the partnership experience.⁵

In building and promoting future researchers, critical thinkers, problem solvers, and the promotion of inquisitive minds, the application of learning in real-life contexts should complement the objectives of students’ future careers. SL integrates goals and actions that benefit both individuals and communities.⁶

There has been greater confusion in academia regarding the concept of SL and its intended outcomes. Four misunderstandings about academic SL have confused among scholars for many years, in trying to define academic SL. Howard extended his craft and formulated what has become a demystifying influence on SL. According to Howard, the four myths are as follows:⁷

Myth 1. The terminology - academic SL is the same as student community service and co-curricular SL: academic SL is distinct from student community service, let alone co-curricular SL. In clarifying this, the author posits that the learning agenda of these concepts is what distinguishes them from the each other. In their learning agendas, the concepts vary according to their intentions. For example, the author’s argument is that student community service seldom involves a learning agenda while both SL and academic co-curricular programs engage students in a planned and purposeful learning experience related to the service. Co-curricular SL is raising student awareness and familiarity with various issues related to different communities whereas academic service learning uses the service experience as a “text” for both academic learning and civic learning, integrated into an academic course.

Myth 2. Academic SL is a new name for internship: due to many internship programmes that involve community service, the two pedagogical models are not the same. Internships are not about civic learning; their purpose is to develop and socialise students for a profession, and they are very different from the typical forms of civic development. They focus more on student benefits than community benefits. In contrast, SL is a combination of both.

Myth 3. Synonymy - experience, such as that in a community, is synonymous with learning: Howard, who lamented that experience and learning are not the same. Although experience is required for

¹ Kathleen Flecky, “Foundations of Service-Learning,” in *Service Learning in Occupational Therapy Education*, ed. Kathleen Flecky and Gitlow Lynn (Sudbury: Jones and Bartlett, 2011), 1–2.

² David Busch, “A Brief History of Service Learning,” *Social Change* 101 (2018).

³ Nives Mikelic Preradovic, “Service-Learning,” *Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory*. Singapore: Springer, 2015, 1–6.

⁴ Cho See Chong, “Service-Learning Research: Definitional Challenges and Complexities,” *Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education* 15, no. 4 (2014): 347–58.

⁵ Flecky, “Foundations of Service-Learning.”

⁶ Preradovic, “Service-Learning.”

⁷ Jeffrey Howard, “Service-Learning Course Design Workbook,” Education Resources Information Center, 2001, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED457774.pdf>.

learning, it is not enough because learning requires more than just experience. Therefore, student participation in the community cannot automatically signify learning.⁸

Myth 4. Marginality - Academic service learning is not just the addition of community service to a traditional course. Attaching community service prerequisites to an unchanged academic course does not result in academic SL. The argument here is that, to realise SL and its full potential as a pedagogy, community experiences must be considered in the context of and incorporated in the planned learning strategies and resources of the course.

Although Howard made significant efforts to demystify the concept of SL many years ago, to this day, there is no common definition with solid concurrence among scholars on what SL is, since these scholars base their objectives (the intended outcomes) of SL solely on how it is defined and implemented.⁹

As stated in the preceding paragraphs, the debate surrounding SL is complex, with authors holding diverse perspectives on the significance of the hyphen between the words "service" and "learning". Eyler and Giles contend that the hyphen represents the reflective component integral to the learning process.¹⁰ In contrast, Flecky argues that the hyphen indicates the balance and interdependence between the service and learning aspects, which arise from the collaborative nature of the experience.¹¹ The purpose of this study was to explore the knowledge and understanding of SL of third-year students and their lecturers in the Faculties of Engineering and Built Environment, Information and Communications Technology, and Humanities at a University of Technology in South Africa as an instrumental tool to foster a deeper and more engaged learning experience that integrates academic knowledge with real-world application and community impact.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding Service-Learning from Literature

The common understanding of SL remains a gap in literature; however, what is crucial is that in whatever way it is defined, one must not take away its key elements, i.e. reciprocity which is a give and take approach between the student as a service provider and the community as the service recipient and reflection which distinguishes SL from all other forms of experiential learning.¹²

Some researchers refer to SL as a programme, while others consider it a pedagogy or even a philosophy. The authors have made clear that the lack of a common definition of SL is a problem that needs to be probed more deeply. In the quest to fully understand the concept, the researchers explored and examined the definitions available in the literature.

Anderson and Pickeral described SL in two ways: as a philosophy of education and an instructional method. As a philosophy of education, SL reflects the belief of the authors that education should help students develop personally while also enhancing their social responsibility in preparation for active citizenship in a democratic society. On the other hand, as an instructional method, SL blends service activities with the academic curriculum to address real community needs while allowing students to learn through active engagement and reflection.¹³

According to Koslowsky, Lorenzen, Anjos, Silva, and Matraka, SL is an amalgamation of both academic content and community service, with both elements being equally important. In this case, the academic content is designed to bolster and augment the community service, while the community service is established to advance students with prospects to apply and critically reflect on their learning.¹⁴

⁸ Howard, "Service-Learning Course Design Workbook."

⁹ Howard, "Service-Learning Course Design Workbook."

¹⁰ Janet Eyler and Dwight E Giles Jr, *Where's the Learning in Service-Learning? Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series*. (ERIC, 1999).

¹¹ Flecky, "Foundations of Service-Learning."

¹² Titus Pacho, "Service-Learning: An Innovative Approach to Education in Africa," *The Good Education and Africa's Future: Concepts, Issues and Options*, 2019, 232–59.

¹³ Jeffrey B. Anderson and Terry Pickeral, "Challenges and Strategies for Success with Service-Learning in Preservice Teacher Education," *Service Learning, General 17*, 1998.

¹⁴ Jens Koslowsky et al., "Understanding Service Learning as a Student-Centered Experiential Learning Activity and Versatile Teaching Strategy: An Introduction into the Field of Service-Learning Based on the Experiences of the USL Project," European Commission, May 2023.

Othman, Rajagopal, Rehman, and Pathil defined SL as “an innovative teaching methodology where students apply what they have learned in the classroom to serve a community.” The only limitation to this definition is its lack of practical reflection on what is taught in the classroom and the expected service in the community. The emphasis is on innovative teaching methods that are primarily instructional and classroom-based. It does not adequately address the active engagement of students in practical or real-world settings, which is crucial for their development.¹⁵

For Morin, “SL is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility and strengthen communities”.¹⁶

For Speck, SL goes beyond volunteerism, as it combines community work with classroom instruction while emphasising both reflection and action. It empowers students by making them responsible in real-world contexts and by providing them with the support, encouragement, information, and skills they need to succeed.¹⁷

Patcho present SL as “an approach of educating and encouraging learners to actively partake in society by engaging in activities which meet the needs of the community while reflecting upon the services and learning from those experiences.”¹⁸

Although there is no common definition of SL, literature shows that there are commonalities among definitions from which authors believe that SL should be connected to the curriculum and must address community needs while enriching students with practical experience of their course content.¹⁹

Having explored the literature on SL as a phenomenon, the researchers considered various connotations to suggest a more practical understanding of what SL should be.

First, SL should apply to all fields of study to reinforce the social responsibilities that underpin these disciplines. The flexibility of its application should be evident in its adaptability to various, ongoing, and constantly changing real-world contexts.

This view is reinforced by Vygotsky’s theory on the social construction of knowledge. It is a flexible pedagogy because knowledge is not fixed: It varies across different social contexts and historical times, and it is built up and passed on through social interaction.²⁰

Second, it is developmental in the sense that higher education institutions (HEIs) have a responsibility to groom and prepare socially responsible students who, as envisioned by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU), are knowledgeable about their democratic systems of government and the multiplicity of religious, cultural, and social forces that shape the world. These students can apply their information literacy and communication skills to practise political action. They value democratic ideals such as tolerance and equality and engage in collective action to address political and social issues.²¹

Third, inquiry is based on a quest for truth, information, or knowledge. From early childhood, we all go through a process of enquiry to make sense of our surroundings and feed on our curiosity. In essence, inquiry is the activity of generating meaningful questions that lead to relevant answers. For this reason, this process shows students how knowledge is generated and transmitted and how they can acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to become life-long learners and knowledge creators through research.²²

¹⁵ Othman Moomala et al., “Debate as Service Learning,” *Middle-East Journal of Scientific Research* 19 (2014): 181–86.

¹⁶ Emily Lane Morin, “Service Learning Pitfalls: Problems You Didn’t See Coming,” *College Teaching Methods & Styles Journal* 5, no. 1 (2009): 43.

¹⁷ Bruce W Speck, “Why Service-learning?,” *New Directions for Higher Education* 2001, no. 114 (2001): 3–13.

¹⁸ Susan J Deeley, “Service-Learning: Thinking Outside the Box,” *Active Learning in Higher Education* 11, no. 1 (2010): 43–53.

¹⁹ Deeley, “Service-Learning: Thinking Outside the Box”; Vilasache Balakrishnan, Yong Z. Zubari, and Wendy Y. Tien, *Introduction to Service Learning in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 2022); Othman Moomala et al., “Debate as Service Learning.”

²⁰ David Donald et al., *Educational Psychology in Social Context* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 2020).

²¹ Danielle R. Leek, “Policy Debate Pedagogy: A Complementary Strategy for Civic and Political Engagement through Service-Learning,” *Communication Education* 65, no. 4 (2016): 397–408.

²² Noriah Ismail, S Alias, and I Albakri, “Inquiry Based Learning: A New Approach to Classroom Learning,” *English Language Journal* 2, no. 1 (2006): 13–24.

Fourth, SL is solution-oriented because it produces future-ready graduates who are agile and constantly striving to find solutions to ever-evolving social problems. There are always new challenges, whether unforeseen or obvious. These may range from economic, technological, natural, political, to social issues, all of which have direct or indirect impacts on societies. Therefore, when general abstract concepts are taught, SL exposes and harnesses students' cultural background in the classroom by drawing on Vygotsky's work, which recognises that one can make an abstract concept meaningful by linking it to the students' everyday experience, enabling them to solve real problems in their lives.²³

Lastly, SL is a reflection-based curriculum because, without reflection, it amounts to mere volunteerism, lacking the depth of learning and personal transformation. Reflection is one of the key pillars of SL as it bridges the gap between doing and understanding. After engaging in SL activities, students need to intellectually and emotionally reflect on their service experiences to discuss how their service activities help them to learn and apply their course goals.²⁴

Profoundly, Felton and Clayton argue that SL fundamentally reshapes the ordinary roles and identities of students, urging them to journey beyond consuming knowledge but to actively engage in its production.²⁵

Unpacking the key elements of Service-Learning

There are several characteristics required for an effective Service-Learning programme, and they are:

Service that is Connected to the Curriculum: SL is linked to the course content and is credit-bearing.²⁶

It is important that the SL programmes reflects the course content and are designed in a way that benefits both those served and those who are learning. In this context, service involves implementing activities that combine classroom learning with addressing real community needs. Therefore, service is an integral part of juxtaposing both theory and practice, helping learners transfer knowledge and skills to meet real community needs.²⁷

Student Reflection During and at the End of the Service: Reflection is a critical component of SL and connects community experiences to academic learning. As an experiential learning component, students should reflect on their experience in the field to facilitate deeper learning and reflexivity.²⁸ When students act and subsequently reflect on the outcomes of that action, their worldview is enhanced through this entire process, which includes observations and repeated explanations.²⁹

Integrating Community Needs into Student Learning: Courses that include SL recognise community service as a tool for achieving specific academic goals and objectives. Through SL activities, classroom content is enriched while simultaneously providing meaningful service. Addressing genuine community needs should be considered a key element of effective SL.³⁰

Reciprocity for Learning and Serving: It is important to recognize that the communities served through SL do not always lack resources, knowledge, or expertise. Students enrolled in SL strongly advocate for university-community partnerships, acknowledging that communities possess valuable knowledge and assets. These partnerships enable both the university and the community to collaborate to create solutions to social problems. In this way, it becomes a win-win situation where both the university and the community benefit equally. SL provides opportunities for students to explore and gain a deeper understanding of the service while fostering a more mature and respectful relationship between themselves as service providers and the recipients of the service. This is not charity but rather a reciprocal exchange—a give-and-take type of service. Simply put, reciprocity in the context of SL refers to the

²³ Donald et al., *Educational Psychology in Social Context*.

²⁴ James Dubinsky, "The Role of Reflection in Service Learning," *Business Communication Quarterly* 69, no. 3 (2006): 306–11.

²⁵ Peter Felten and Patti H. Clayton, "Service-learning," *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 128 (December 8, 2011): 75–84, <https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.470>.

²⁶ Tara Barton, "10 Creative Service Learning Projects to Inspire Your Students," *Serve Lean Blog*, March 6, 2020, <https://servelearn.co/blog/10-creative-service-learning-projects-to-inspire-your-students/>.

²⁷ Shanti C Sandaran, "Service Learning: Transforming Students, Communities and Universities," *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences* 66 (2012): 380–90.

²⁸ Faith Valencia-Forrester et al., "Practical Aspects of Service Learning Make Work-Integrated Learning Wise Practice for Inclusive Education in Australia," *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning* 20, no. 1 (2019): 31–42.

²⁹ Sandaran, "Service Learning: Transforming Students, Communities and Universities."

³⁰ Sandaran, "Service Learning: Transforming Students, Communities and Universities."

relationship between the service provider and the service receiver, highlighting the mutuality between their needs and outcomes.³¹

Working with Community Partners to Serve and Learn: in SL, building communities requires meaningful partnerships among educational institutions, businesses, and organizations. The term “community partner” in SL emphasises the active collaboration of groups that work alongside faculties, acting as mediators between the university and the community to address identified community needs in alignment with the SL course objectives and/or projects. Such groups may include NGOs, faith-based organizations, charity organizations, and other institutions or groups.³²

There is no general approach to implementing SL. The objectives and intended outcomes of SL determine the projects and activities in which students and lecturers participate. There is consensus in the literature that SL projects allow students to connect what they have learned in the classroom with practical community experience. Barton argues that it is crucial to assess the needs, challenges, issues, and problems within the community to be served before deciding on the SL projects to be implemented.³³

According to Sandaran, SL learning activities can take different forms and can be classified in four ways. Firstly, *direct service*, which involves face-to-face interaction between the service provider and the service receiver. In this sense, the student, as a service provider, visits the service site and directly interacts with the community being served. Secondly, *indirect service*, in this case, students do not directly serve individuals in the community; rather, they serve the environment within which the community exists. For example, refurbishing a community library or clearing an illegal dumping site.

Advocacy: Here, students educate community members about issues of public interest. This can be achieved through awareness campaigns and by promoting understanding of issues of public interest. Lastly, there is *research*. In this regard, students are actively involved in collecting and reporting on information of public interest. They play an important role in conducting research on matters of public interest and reporting their findings to communities.

Fertman argued that variety is crucial when identifying service activities. The author emphasises a mix of activities and states that having different groups of students working on each topic increases the students' experience, thereby providing different perspectives and ways to apply their knowledge to resolve identified issues. The time and duration of SL activities are determined according to the learning objectives.³⁴

Contradictions, Disagreements, and Criticism on Service-Learning

SL as a phenomenon has been widely debated, as scholars do not seem to be reaching an amicable consensus on what SL is. Different definitions, which have significantly different meanings, are depicted in the literature, which signifies the different lenses through which different scholars view the phenomenon. Chong argued that the hyphen between service and learning signifies the reflection that occurs in the learning process.³⁵ The hyphen is countered by Flecky, who perceives it as a significant balance between service and learning emanating from the partnership experiences.³⁶

The contradictions and ambiguities in SL extend beyond its definition to how it is conceptualised. In Table 1 below, Chong provides a Service and Learning typology, which provides a comparison of the different types of service programs based on the learning goals and service outcomes.³⁷

³¹ Laura Hammersley, “Community-Based Service-Learning: Partnerships of Reciprocal Exchange?,” *Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education* 14, no. 3 (2012): 171–84.

³² Sandaran, “Service Learning: Transforming Students, Communities and Universities.”

³³ Barton, “10 Creative Service Learning Projects to Inspire Your Students.”

³⁴ Carl I Fertman, *Service Learning for All Students. Fastback 375*. (ERIC, 1994).

³⁵ Chong, “Service-Learning Research: Definitional Challenges and Complexities.”

³⁶ Flecky, “Foundations of Service-Learning.”

³⁷ Chong, “Service-Learning Research: Definitional Challenges and Complexities.”; Douglas Nyathi et al., “Women’s Vulnerability and Adaptive Capacity to Climate Change in Agrarian Settings of Zimbabwe,” in *Climate Crisis, Social Responses and Sustainability. Climate Change Management*, ed. U. Mukhopadhyay et al. (Cham.: Springer, 2024), 541–59, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-58261-5_23.

Table 1: A Service-Learning Typology

Service-LEARNING	Learning goals primary; service outcomes secondary
SERVICE-Learning	Service outcomes primary; learning goals secondary
Service-learning	Service and learning goals separate
SERVICE-LEARNING	Service and learning goals of equal weight; each enhances the other for all participants

Consequently, Othman et al. view SL as naturally reciprocal because it embeds elements of give-and-take more than just charity.³⁸ Leek, on the other hand, perceives SL as charitable in nature in that students should be situated as charitable providers to the needy others to help and mitigate SL experiences that promote power and inequalities. He does so, bringing forth what is significantly a component of SL, that is, awareness, critical self-development and sensitivity to others.³⁹ However, Mtawa strongly opposes this tactic, believing that SL should focus on transformative remedies, although with its limitations due to its complexities and dynamics, such as inequalities, poverty, power, and privilege between SL partners, and limited sustainability of SL projects.⁴⁰

Mtawa posits that this opens a plethora of critiques from different scholars, as SL only then focuses on affirmative remedies that are more related to the charity approach to SL and does not address the root cause of societal inequalities. This means that SL intends to extract meaning from community service and enforce learning from it, which, in simple terms, signifies learning from those experiences.⁴¹

In his criticism, Mitchell advocates for social awareness and argues that it places an emphasis on community problem-solving through critical thinking that raises questions about the roots of social inequality. In the author's view, SL fails because it only focuses on youth learning through community service projects. Furthermore, the author distinguishes between traditional SL and critical SL, thus equating SL to traditional SL and social awareness to critical SL. The significant distinction made between critical and traditional SL is that the traditional approach to SL provides service to individuals, whereas the critical approach provides service for an ideal.⁴²

SL as a field lacks the thorough critique and self-reflexivity necessary for its own growth. The application of critical and traditional SL projects is very different, and so is the goal of each project. Traditional SL is criticised for its charitable nature, where those who are viewed as privileged should give to those who do not have. This is seen to be more problematic as it does not reach the roots of societal problems, such as poverty and injustice, with the intention of providing a sustainable solution. Instead, it is seen to intensify inequality.⁴³

Bruce highlighted the similarities between traditional and critical SL, which he views as problematic. The author argues that both critical and traditional SL position students as servers and community partners as serving agents. This sends the impression that the student is a knower, expert, or helper, whereas the served person is portrayed as the one who is lacking. Furthermore, both approaches are more about learning about the other to change or help the other, rather than being taught by the other, and therefore, both traditional and critical SL projects tend to use community partners/members for self-betterment and self-cultivation of students.⁴⁴

Critical SL embraces the political dimensions of service and seeks social justice. This approach encourages students to view themselves as agents of change. On the other hand, traditional SL is individually focused and has no intention of transforming structural inequalities.⁴⁵ Leek argues that

³⁸ Othman Moomala et al., "Debate as Service Learning."

³⁹ Othman Moomala et al., "Debate as Service Learning."

⁴⁰ Mtimi N. Mtawa, "Exploring the Role of Service-Learning in Human Development: Perspectives of Staff, Students and Community Members" (University of Free State, 2017).

⁴¹ Tania D Mitchell, "Traditional vs. Critical Service-Learning: Engaging the Literature to Differentiate Two Models.," *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 14, no. 2 (2008): 50–65.

⁴² Mitchell, "Traditional vs. Critical Service-Learning: Engaging the Literature to Differentiate Two Models."

⁴³ Judy Bruce, "Service Learning as a Pedagogy of Interruption," *International Journal of Development Education and Global Learning* 5, no. 1 (2013).

⁴⁴ Bruce, "Service Learning as a Pedagogy of Interruption."

⁴⁵ Mitchell, "Traditional vs. Critical Service-Learning: Engaging the Literature to Differentiate Two Models."

traditional SL is not enough to promote political learning and that students must engage in effective political engagement.⁴⁶

Key Agreements on Service-Learning

The underlying consensus from trudging the road on SL is that SL does not approve of an education model in which the downward transference of information is conducted from knowledgeable teachers to passive students. It promotes the active pedagogy of connecting both theory and practise, schools, and community, cognitive and ethical.⁴⁷ The latter infers deep thinking that at the centre of it all, SL is meant to change an individual's perspective, transform classrooms and communities, and agreeably enhance student outcomes, foster more active citizenry, promote a scholarship of engagement among lecturers and institutions, support a more equitable society, and rejoin universities and colleges together with their local and regional communities. Mungo echoes this sentiment, who believes that SL is well poised as a transformative strategy in the classroom setup needed to position higher education as the great equalisers of the societies they ought to uplift.⁴⁸

In a study that attempted to determine whether SL increases student learning, it was found that SL has a positive influence on student learning outcomes, regardless of how learning was measured.⁴⁹ Mungo also posits the same thing in his study assessing the use of SL as a strategy to increase retention and graduation rates; the study herein corroborates; thus, SL has a significant effect on student retention, grade point average, and graduation. Students who took courses in SL performed much better than those who did not.⁵⁰

Institutions with well-crafted or combined faculty-led classroom learning with hands-on experiences can have a positive impact on retention and graduation. By this combination, one believes that SL can help universities to improve their quality and productivity more than just a way to increase retention and graduation rates because it combines classroom engagements with educationally meaningful and purposeful activities.⁵¹

A study investigating whether student enrolment in an SL course in the fall semester of college was related to intentions to stay on that campus found that re-enrolment at the same campus was mainly related to enrolment in an SL course. Noteworthy of the proclamation is that success was aided by the quality of the SL courses compared to the non-SL courses.⁵²

The overarching use of the concept of SL is the result of the emphasis on the integration of community service with teaching and learning within the pattern of collaborative, participatory knowledge creation, which is much needed and bestowed as a responsibility to the HEI. The integration of both research and SL opens opportunities for the transformation of HE in South Africa and positions HEIs to be more democratic, responsive to community challenges and conducive to partnership-building with a plethora of stakeholders. This aligns very well with South Africa's HE transformation agenda, which outlines the three pillars.⁵³

Greater Responsiveness: This alludes to the willingness and capability to react to a wide variety of social and economic needs, and the commitment to the pursuit of solutions to societal problems that ultimately lead to adaptation in relation to teaching and learning methods and curricula.

Increased cooperation and partnerships: This is carried out to encourage mutual trust and increase accountability and transparency in the HE sectors.

⁴⁶ Dan Butin, *Service-Learning in Theory and Practice: The Future of Community Engagement in Higher Education* (Springer, 2010).

⁴⁷ Monita Hollis Mungo, "Closing the Gap: Can Service-Learning Enhance Retention, Graduation, and GPAs of Students of Color?," *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 23, no. 2 (2017): 42–52.

⁴⁸ Jami L Warren, "Does Service-Learning Increase Student Learning?: A Meta-Analysis.," *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 18, no. 2 (2012): 56–61.

⁴⁹ Warren, "Does Service-Learning Increase Student Learning?: A Meta-Analysis."

⁵⁰ Mungo, "Closing the Gap: Can Service-Learning Enhance Retention, Graduation, and GPAs of Students of Color?."

⁵¹ Mungo, "Closing the Gap: Can Service-Learning Enhance Retention, Graduation, and GPAs of Students of Color?."

⁵² Robert G Bringle, Julie A Hatcher, and Richard N Muthiah, "The Role of Service-Learning on the Retention of First-Year Students to Second Year.," *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 16, no. 2 (2010): 38–49.

⁵³ Mabel Erasmus, "Introduction: Community Service Learning and the South African Research Agenda," *Acta Academica* 2005, no. sup-3 (2005): 1–23.

Increased participation: In the quest to eradicate the inequalities of the past, democratisation and increased participation in the HE system from the ever-increasing diversity of interest groups are of paramount importance.

According to Bringle *et al.*, students who have SL-infused courses have educationally meaningful community service experiences that enhance their personal and civic development during their undergraduate education and beyond.⁵⁴

There is consensus from the literature on what SL is not. Koslowsky et al; Jadric, and Lin, Ngai, Kwam, Chan, Lo agree that SL is not any form of volunteerism, nor is it an extracurricular pursuit. The authors define SL as a learning approach that integrates the course content with community service and is credit-bearing, which then emphasises that it is not voluntary.⁵⁵

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore the knowledge and understanding of SL of third-year students and their lecturers in the Faculties of Engineering and Built Environment, Information and Communications Technology, and Humanities at a University of Technology in South Africa. A qualitative research approach was used to carry out the study, which allows access to the thoughts and feelings of the research participants, allowing the development and understanding of the meaning that people ascribe to their experiences.⁵⁶

Population and sampling

The population of this study was third-year students and their lecturers from the Department of Electrical Engineering in the Faculty of Built Environment, the Department of Computer Science in the Faculty of Information and Communication Technology, and the Department of Mathematical Sciences and Business Education in the Faculty of Humanities. The selected faculties and departments were motivated by the belief identified in the National Development Plan that science, engineering, technology, and mathematics are key fields of study to position South Africa as a leading innovator. A non-probability sampling technique was used to conveniently sample 30 third-year students and 15 lecturers. Non-probability sampling is mostly used when it is almost impossible to establish who the entire population is or when it is not easy to gain access to the entire population.⁵⁷ The convenience sampling method allowed the researchers to access the necessary groups of participants within the three selected departments who were available at the time of data collection.⁵⁸ In total, 30 students participated in the focus groups, and eight lecturers completed the qualitative questionnaire.

Data collection

Data were collected using focus groups and a qualitative questionnaire. The use of focus groups generated deeper and richer data, which may not have been possible in the one-on-one interviews.⁵⁹ The interview of students in a focus group enabled the simultaneous collection of data and observation.⁶⁰ A qualitative questionnaire was administered to 15 lecturers by email, with a response rate of eight. The qualitative questionnaire administered to lecturers generated rich contextual data.⁶¹

⁵⁴ Bringle, Hatcher, and Muthiah, "The Role of Service-Learning on the Retention of First-Year Students to Second Year."

⁵⁵ Koslowsky et al., "Understanding Service Learning as a Student-Centered Experiential Learning Activity and Versatile Teaching Strategy: An Introduction into the Field of Service-Learning Based on the Experiences of the USL Project"; Shuheng Lin et al., "The Impact of Mandatory Academic Service-Learning on University Graduates' Continual Civic Engagement: Evidence from a Curriculum Reform," *Higher Education Research & Development* 44, no.5(2025):1143–57.

⁵⁶ Jane Sutton and Zubin Austin, "Qualitative Research: Data Collection, Analysis, and Management," *The Canadian Journal of Hospital Pharmacy* 68, no. 3 (2015): 226.

⁵⁷ G. Pascoe, "Sampling," in *Research Matters*, ed. Franzel du Plooy-Cillers, Corne Davis, and Rose-Marie Bezuidenhout (Juta Education, 2021), 145–65.

⁵⁸ Chris Welman, Fanie Kruger, and Bruce Mitchell, *Research Methodology* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁵⁹ Manju Gundumogula, "Importance of Focus Groups in Qualitative Research," *The International Journal of Humanities and Social Studies* 8, no.11 (2021): 299-302.

⁶⁰ Felice D. Billups, "Conducting focus Group with College Students: Strategies to ensure success," *Association for Institutional Research* 127, (2012): 2-16.

⁶¹ Michal Tombs and Heather Strange, "Using Qualitative Questionnaire," *Journal of the Netherlands Association of Medical Education* 13, no 1 (2024): 280-287.

Data analysis

The data collected was analysed using thematic analysis, which is consistent with a qualitative research approach. Thematic analysis is about identifying and reporting common themes from the data set, which are then interpreted to form meaning.⁶² The analysis was done following the six-step framework of Braun and Clarke, which focuses on familiarising oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and writing up.⁶³

Ethical considerations

The paper is an extract from a PhD thesis entitled: *Institutionalised Service-Learning: The coherence between Curriculum Goals and Research Throughput Rate in a selected University of Technology in South Africa*. The research received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee (REC) of the university under study. Additionally, the researchers obtained explicit permission from the Heads of Departments (HODs) of the three relevant faculties: Electrical Engineering, Computer Science, and Management Sciences and Business Education (MSBE). The research adhered strictly to ethical requirements at every stage, from proposal submission and committee approval to participant recruitment, informed consent, and data collection. These measures ensured that participants’ rights, dignity, and autonomy were respected throughout the study, and that the researchers met both institutional and broader academic ethical standards.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The paper explored the knowledge and understanding of students and lecturers about SL. The data collected are presented below. Participants were assigned different codes to protect their identity and ensure privacy, e.g. EE-SP (Electrical Engineering- Student Participant), EE-LP (Electrical Engineering-Lecturer Participant), CS-SP (Computer Science-Student Participant), CS-LP (Computer Science-Lecturer Participant), MSBE-SP (Mathematics Science and Business Education- Student Participant) and MSBE-LP (Mathematics Science and Business Education- Lecturer Participant). The themes and subthemes that emerged from the analysis of students' responses regarding their understanding and knowledge of SL are outlined in Figure 1.1 below:

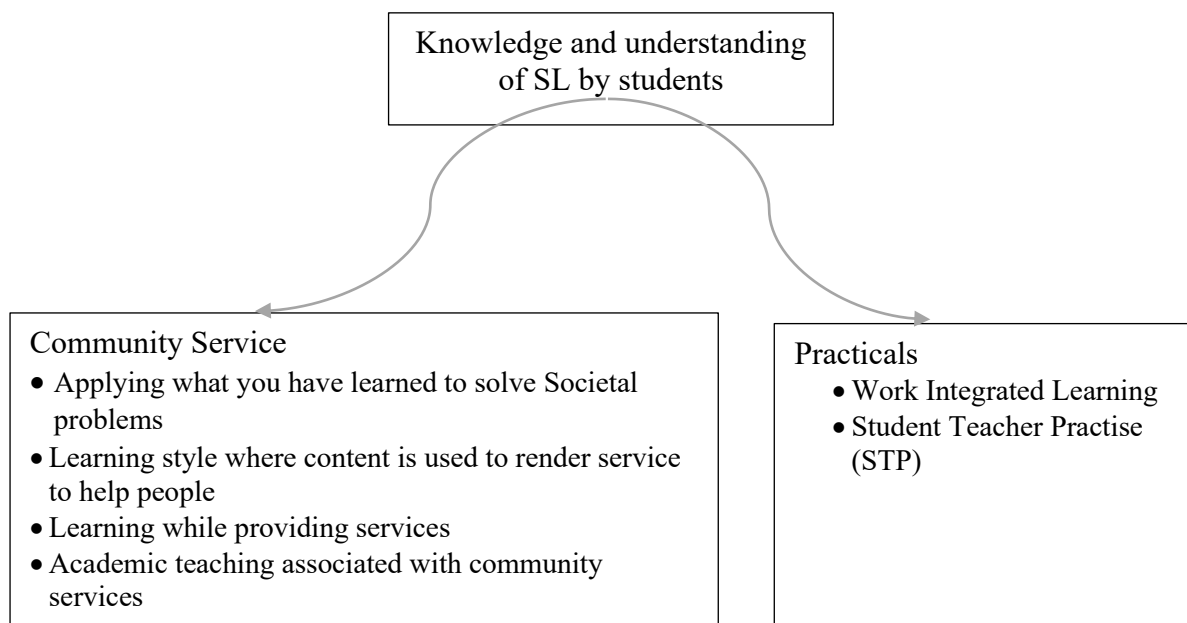


Figure 1: Emergent themes and sub-themes on student knowledge and understanding of SL

⁶² Muhammed Naeem, Wilson Ozuem, Kerry Howell, and Silvia Ranfagni, “A Step-by-Step Process of Thematic Analysis to Develop a Conceptual Model in Qualitative Research,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 22, (2023): 1-18.

⁶³ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, “Using thematic analysis in psychology,” *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, (2006): 77-101

When students were asked to share their understanding and knowledge of SL, themes such as community service and the practical component emerged. The students in the Department of Electrical Engineering understood SL as a community service. The following comments from these students were noted:

- EE-SP1: *“I think I could liken it to what doctors do “com-serve” community services, whereas they are practising what they have learned throughout their study career but, on the other hand, they are giving back to the community, supporting the community, they want to see how far they can go in solving the social plights”*
- EE-SP8: *“It is when you apply what you have learned to the community where they can tell how much you have learned, and you know and how much you still have to learn”*
- EE-SP2: *“I think Service Learning has to do with applying what you have learned to societal problems outside the qualification you are enrolled on. And also, to add on, I think it has to do with enabling students to have an interest in doing research on how to solve societal problems.”*
- EE-SP10: *“I would say it’s a type of learning style that, or in which the content which you have been taught or the content you are learning can be used later as a service rendered to other people or to help people.”*

On the other hand, students from the Computer Science department understood SL differently. They viewed it as practical exposure to the world of work or industry, applying what they learned in class. They also associated it with teaching practice, which is conducted in the Faculty of Humanities' School of Education. The following comments were made by these students:

- CS-SP11: *“I think SL is more of exposure of what you have learned in class to the world of work-exposure in the industry.”*
- CS-SP5: *“You know we have... in humanities we have teachers or student teachers, people who are studying teaching, and they have to do practicals for like six months, from my understanding, that could be an example of SL. Learning while providing service.”*

The approach to students from the MSBE faculty was like that of the previous two groups. They also had their own understanding of SL, likening it to WiL, community service, and STP. These components are prerequisites for completing their degree in education. The following comments were made by these students:

- MSBE-SP-11: *“I think SL is more like WiL, where, for instance, we as B. Ed students go for teaching practice where we offer service more like we teach, and, in that sense, we are also learning how the school is working. We teach and we learn the dynamics of the school.”*
- MSBE-SP-1: *“SL I can define it as an academic teaching approach that is incorporated with community service. In essence, now, what they teach us in class, the students are able to deal with real-life situations using whatever they have in class. Like he said, we get taught, we are given didactics and whatever, then we go to school, face real-life problems using what... general knowledge? But it’s not a matter of general knowledge, it’s a matter of going an extra mile, expanding and applying.”*

The responses indicated that the participants had limited knowledge of SL. Although most acknowledged that it was their first encounter with the concept, their attempts to define it were not too far from the truth.

From the researcher's perspective, these were believed to be genuine attempts, particularly from students in the MSBE programme. Their course modules require annual teaching practice from the first year of their Bachelor of Education degree programme. The researchers were surprised that, given their regular teaching practice and their status as third-year students, the students were expected to have a better understanding or at least be able to differentiate between WiL and SL.

The themes and subthemes that emerged from the analysis of the responses of the lecturers regarding their understanding and knowledge of SL are listed in Figure 1.2 below:

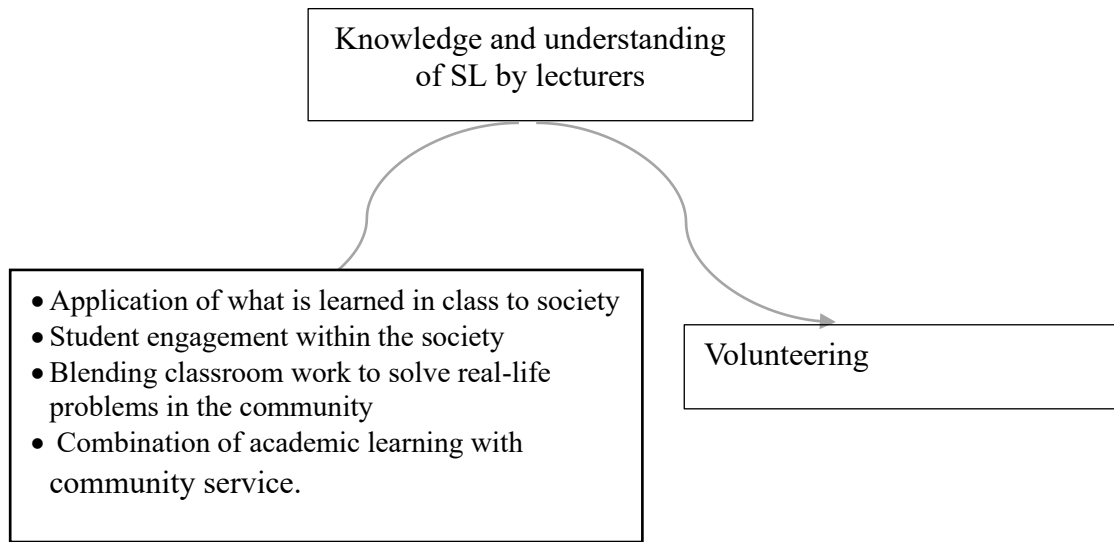


Figure 1: Emergent themes and sub-themes on the lecturer’s knowledge and understanding of Service Learning’s

When answering the question about their knowledge and understanding of SL, lecturers showed more insight into the phenomenon than the students. In their responses, sub-themes such as application of what is learned in class to society, student engagement within the society, blending classroom work to solve real-life problems in the community, a combination of academic learning with community service and volunteering emerged.

Electrical Engineering lecturer participants equated SL to volunteering, which a plethora of scholars in the literature refuted. Although SL has an element of volunteering, not all volunteering is SL. A clear distinction is made between the two by emphasising the key elements of SL. Below are some of the quotes from the Electrical Engineering lecturers:

EE-LP1: *“It is an educational method where students learn the theory in class and then apply what they have learned in society, for example, by joining voluntary groups that help in the community.”*

EE-LP2: *“student learns in the classroom and as a volunteer.”*

With the Computer Science lecturer participants, although one lecturer conceded to having partial understanding of what SL was, most of the attempts from other lecturers showed significant insight, and as a result, themes such as the blending of classroom experiences and community service emerged among other components:

CS-LP1: *“Partial understanding until I had to Google for more insight.”*

CS-LP2: *“SL is a blending of both classroom lessons and experience in order to solve real-life problems.”*

CS-LP3: *“Service-learning is a pedagogical approach that combines academic learning with community service. It provides students with opportunities to apply their knowledge and skills to address real-life needs while developing valuable personal and professional skills.”*

CS-LP5: *“Learning that involves solving real-life problems of the community.”*

of the five sampled lecturer participants in the MSBE department, only one participated and was not too far from what SL should be, lacking only the reciprocity and reflection as key elements of SL in their response. Below is the quote as cited from the participant:

MSBE-LP1: *“It is applying the knowledge the students have learned in the classrooms to their communities.”*

The main objective was to determine the understanding and knowledge of the lecturers and students of SL. The findings of the data collected from both lecturers and students paint a huge divide

among all participants. While students had what may be considered an idea, lecturers, on the other hand, were tiptoeing and giving inconclusive definitions of SL.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

After engaging with students and lecturers from the sampled departments to seek their knowledge and understanding of SL, the study found that students have little knowledge of what SL is. Even those who attempted to explain it confused SL with programmes such as in-service training and STP. Complementing this effect is a study by Bahati, which found that of 50 students who participated in the study, only 58% understood what SL is, while 42% had no clue whatsoever.⁶⁴

Other students likened SL to WiL; however, it is not. Valencia-Forrester, Patrick, Webb and Backhaus argue that SL and WiL are different but related concepts, with WiL focusing on the integration of academic learning with its practical application in the workplace while SL integrates academic learning with community service in a reciprocal manner.⁶⁵

With the lecturers, the study found that most had a commendable understanding of SL based on their given definitions, particularly those from the Computer Science department while one stated having a partial understanding and even had to rely on Google to search for the definition. Two lectures from Electrical Engineering equated SL to volunteering, which Speck refuted, stating that SL goes beyond volunteerism to infuse community work with classroom instruction while emphasising both reflection and action.⁶⁶ This is echoed by Koslowsky, et al; Jadric, and Lin, Ngai, Kwam, Chan, Lo, who agree that SL is not any form of volunteerism, nor is it an extracurricular pursuit.

Therefore, one can conclude that there is no common knowledge or understanding of what SL is among lecturers. This is supported by Jeandron & Robinson, who argue that lecturers are key to the success of SL; however, they have varying degrees of knowledge and experience with the pedagogy.⁶⁷ This finding further confirms what many scholars have argued that SL lacks homogeneity in definition.⁶⁸ In any way SL is defined or put in practice, two elements should always remain central: reciprocity, which is a give-and-take approach between the student as a service provider and the community as the service recipient, and reflection, which distinguishes SL from all other forms of experiential learning.⁶⁹ SL fosters student creativity by applying knowledge and skills learned in the classroom to resolve issues and challenges encountered in the communities. A lack of common understanding of the subject between lecturers and students has serious implications for its effective implementation, thereby limiting the learning and skills development opportunities for students, while lecturers may fail to integrate it into the course content.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the study show that SL is not well known to both lecturers and students. This was evident with one lecturer admitting to having had to search through Google, as they had not heard of SL before. Even those who attempted to impart their knowledge and understanding from both lecturers and students likened SL to other programmes such as experiential learning, WiL, and in-service training. Faculties should prioritise programmes that would raise awareness of the knowledge and understanding of SL. This can be done through research workshops, conferences, and seminars. This is encouraged because literature proves that there are many benefits for both faculties and students when participating in SL-infused programmes, including increased research opportunities, stronger faculty-student relationships and satisfaction, and increased graduation rate, among others.

⁶⁴ Siyengo Bahati, "Contribution of Service-Learning in Transforming University Students and Teacher's perspectives: A Case of St. Augustine University of Tanzania" (Degree of Bachelor of Arts, St. Augustine University of Tanzania, 2020)

⁶⁵ Faith Valencia-Forrester, Carol-Joy Patrick, Fleur Webb and Bridget Backhaus, "Practical aspects of service learning make work-integrated learning wise practice for inclusive education in Australia," *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning* 20, no.1 (2019): 34.

⁶⁶ Bruce Speck, "Why service-learning?,"

⁶⁷ Carol Jeandron and Gail Robinson, *Creating a Climate for Service Learning Success* (Washington DC: American Association of Community Colleges, 2010).

⁶⁸ Cho See Chong, "Service-Learning research: Definitional Challenges and complexities,"

⁶⁹ Titus Patcho, *Service-Learning: An Innovative Approach to Education in Africa*,

CONCLUSION

Whereas a universal definition of SL is elusive, its fundamental characteristics are commonly agreed upon, that is, it must directly connect to course content and address real community needs. This differentiates SL from internships, learnerships, volunteering (as its credit-bearing), and WIL. SL is primarily reciprocal, benefiting both students and the community. Students apply classroom knowledge, developing critical thinking, problem-solving, and citizenship skills, while the community receives valuable service. Though definitions may vary across institutions based on project outcomes, SL must be purposefully integrated into the curriculum from the undergraduate level, aligning with learning objectives rather than being an add-on.

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