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Service-Learning Flourishes in Argentina

Students in the outskirts of Buenos Aires coordinate Books on Wheels, reading books at senior homes, schools and homes for children who are blind.

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The Political and Economic Context

Service-learning has been growing quickly in Argentina over the last 10 years. An almost unknown pedagogy in the early 90s, service-learning is now practiced by about 5,000 Argentinian schools (13 percent), and almost 100 universities.

Before considering the characteristics of this phenomenon, it is important to understand the country's social and economic context. After half a century of fragile civilian governments and strong dictatorships, Argentina reacquired democracy in 1983. The military had left the economy in crisis after the Malvinas-Falkland war, and in spite of the efforts of Alfonsín Administration (1983-89) the 1989 hyper-inflation ended his government with riots and hunger. Only five years later, President Menem solemnly announced Argentina had “gotten into the First World.”

The “Argentina miracle” had, however, serious side effects. The market was opened without restrictions to inexpensive goods coming from Asia and new technologies coming from Silicon Valley, but fragile national industries could not resist that competition. Unemployment rose from six percent to 22 percent. The gap between the richest and the poorest grew 72 percent during the 1989-1999 decade. In the once middle class country of South America, now 70 percent of children under 14 are poor. Almost half of youngsters aged 15 to 19 looking for a job are unemployed.¹

The 90s illusions found a dramatic end during the 2002 crisis: Foreign investors rushed away; a law froze all bank accounts; there were riots; two were dead in Plaza de Mayo; the fallible De la Rúa presidency fell; then there were five presidents in 12 days, followed by a dramatic currency devaluation.

Now Argentina prices are competitive enough, but industries are broken, and it is difficult to find credit to re-open them. Decades of political and economical corruption are not helping, nor is the international context after September 11, nor is the Iraq War. In a country that used to be called “the world's grain barn,” now children are dying of malnutrition.

National, provincial, and local governments are less and less able to attend to the population's basic needs. The crisis of the old welfare state has pushed many communities to create survival strategies. But, in the face of this, the so-called “civic society” seems to be blooming, and non-governmental and community organizations are taking a leading role in solving social problems.

The Role of the Schools

What is the role of schools in this context? Maybe they are the last public institution that people trust. Even in the middle of the crisis, public schools are still doing what they are supposed to do: offering free education to poor and rich alike. In fact, they are doing much more. Schools are usually the only place where the poorest kids can get a square meal, and many teachers feel they spend more time struggling as un-official social workers than fulfilling their educational mission.

So, service-learning is helping schools to find a balance between the old “Crystal Dome,” isolated from social problems, and the new, risky role of community center. Democracy may be at risk in a country where politicians' credibility has sunk to the lowest point ever. Everybody is tired of empty speeches, and service-learning is about facts: It is about learning meaningful things, and making them work in the real world.

The Growth of Service-Learning

The Latin American educational system has a strong tradition of service, even if service-learning pedagogy is only beginning to be known in the region.

“Solidaridad” is key to understanding this service tradition. Solidaridad means helping others in an organized and effective way, working together for the common cause, standing as a group or as a nation to defend rights, to face natural disasters or economic crisis. It is a word strongly related with the concept of “fraternity” or “hermandad” — recognizing humankind as a family. It is one of the values Latin Americans cherish most, and it is the common flag of all the new and old volunteer organizations in Argentina's emerging civic society.

Argentina is not an exception to this solidarity tradition. Both public and private schools are used to running “campaigns” to gather food, clothes, or toys for needy people, and adopting rural or poor schools during the winter recess.

Engaging youths in social activities was not safe during the military government (1976-1983). But it is interesting to note that some school-based services were among the few exceptions to the rule. Many schools continued gathering food to be distributed in soup kitchens, and the military government even launched service program, *Marchemos hacia las Fronteras* (March to the Frontiers), aimed to help rural schools along Argentina's borders. Even if it had a propagandistic side (in those years, military governments in Argentina and Chile were on the brink of war because of border disagreements), many

Escuela Solidaria



urban schools are still helping the rural schools they came to know through this program.

After recovering democracy in 1983, civic enthusiasm and social concerns found their way in a growing number of “solidarity” projects in Argentina’s schools. As the social and economic conditions worsened, some institutions began to develop more sophisticated service projects. Many of them could be defined as service-learning.

In W. Brynelson’s words, “Service-learning is the only educational reform that usually grows down-up.”² Argentina is not an exception: service-learning emerged from school practice. Trying to solve urgent community problems, even without knowing its international theoretical and methodological framework, schools “invented” service-learning.

Such is the case of Ramona High School, in Santa Fe. In 1995, eighth-graders discovered in the school lab that the water they were drinking was poisoned with arsenic. They began a public awareness campaign, showing their research on the local water. By the time they were twelfth-graders, they had developed a potabilization plant for their little town, had the local administration build a new water system, and had organized a health research and prevention plan to treat people with symptoms of arsenic poisoning with the local hospital and two national universities. They also won the International Junior Prize of Water (given by an international NGO backed by the Swedish crown) because of the academic quality of their research.

Students help improve the area’s water quality with local farmers.



At the same time, teachers began to realize that their students were more willing to come to school, to work in class, and do research if they were engaged in service projects. The first province to introduce this kind of experience in the curriculum, a mandatory “service project” course, was the Province of Santa Fe in 1986.³

In 1997, in the context of an ambitious national educational reform, the Federal Ministry of Education launched new “Common Basic Content” for all provinces. Among other innovations, CBC included service-learning recommendations for high schools with human or natural sciences focuses.⁴

A New Chapter for Service-Learning

The first International Seminar on Service-Learning was organized by the Ministry in Buenos Aires in September of 1997, inviting service-learning experts from Costa Rica, Germany, Mexico, Spain, and the U.S. A hundred of the provincial education officers, principals, and teachers attended, and the procedures were published and distributed at no cost to all Argentinian high schools.⁵ By distributing that initial service-learning material, ministry officials had opened the door for thousands of schools to feel for the first time they were not isolated in their efforts to articulate learning with effective service to the community. The service-learning movement had begun to recognize itself.

In 1998, the Second International Seminar more than duplicated the previous year attendance. In 1999, the Third International Seminar on Service-Learning gathered 700 principals, teachers and students. Most of them had paid their own tickets to Buenos Aires to share their experiences with other schools.

After national elections in 1999, the new government decided to enhance service-learning policy. A “School and Community National Program” was launched. What had been a one-person team in a small office became an agency with budget and staff, and the possibility of spreading service-learning throughout the country.

curricular | connections

- Science
- Literacy
- Civics
- Research

Argentine President Dr. Kirchner gives a Presidential Award to a blind boy whose school developed Braille street signals for its entire city.



President Dr. Kirchner, along with other government officials, give the Solidarity Universities Presidential Award in Argentina's government house.



Argentina, continued ...

The new President of Argentina committed to the task, launching the "Presidential Award for Solidarity Schools." In August of 2000, President De la Rúa personally gave the first Awards to the principals and students of 10 schools, during the fourth International Seminar on Service-Learning, this time gathering 1,000 people.⁶ The award was a way to recognize and gather information about schools doing service-learning in Argentina. Between 2000-2001, 4,400 schools (around 13 percent) presented 6,160 service experiences.

The schools received grants from \$1,500 to \$10,000 to further develop service-learning projects already underway. The political decision was not to fund just good ideas, but already sustainable, quality projects. A network among the schools doing the best service-learning projects began to grow.

During its two-year life, the "School and Community National Program" gave service-learning training to 19,788 teachers and principals, connected 640 NGOs doing service in the education field, and distributed approximately 65,000 copies of service-learning training materials.⁷

Harder Times

In August, 2001, as Argentina was falling in one of the deepest political and economic crises of its history, the Fifth International Seminar on Service-Learning gathered. Among the 1,000 people attending were Ministries of Education from Chile and Venezuela, and teachers from Uruguay, Paraguay, and Bolivia. The Argentinian service-learning model was beginning to spread in the region.

But, after December of that year, the new Duhalde Administration decided to re-organize the Ministry of Education. The National School and Community Program was cancelled, the Presidential Award was discontinued, and service-learning fell off the Ministry agenda.

As a federal country, some state governments are still supporting service-learning, like Buenos Aires City (the Capital District) and Buenos Aires, Jujuy, and Mendoza provinces. But, Argentina's service-learning movement sustainability is probably based more on the appropriation of the methodology by schools than on government support.

CLAYSS

CLAYSS was born as an NGO in February of 2002 to give support to schools and universities already doing service-learning, and to promote the educational strategy in Latin America. In most cases, even if the Ministry is not backing service-learning, old projects and new initiatives are still flourishing. Schools adopt the methodology because it makes sense for principals, teachers, and students. Once service-learning gets into the institutional culture and practices, schools don't care whether it is officially backed or not. They work to get the money they need to develop their projects, seek local support, and in general do extraordinary things with very little or no money.

Only time will tell whether the new Ministry of Education will again be leading the Argentine service-learning movement or not. And only future research may say whether service-learning projects are still growing even without federal government support, or precisely because there is none.

Service-Learning and Democratic Culture

Service-learning philosophy does not consider children and teenagers only as "a hope for the future" or "the citizens of tomorrow," but underlines the need to promote their commitment to the present. If a time of crisis is a time of opportunities, this seems to be the right time for service-learning to grow in Argentina. ■



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¹ Data gathered from Permanent Homes Poll (Encuesta Permanente de Hogares, INDEC, 2002).

² Quoted in: TAPIA, María Nieves. *La Solidaridad como Pedagogía*. Buenos Aires, Ciudad Nueva, 2000, p. 89.

³ Argentina is a Federal country with 24 States (Provinces) and the Capital District (Buenos Aires City). Schools are administrated by Provincial Governments.

⁴ Argentinian Ministry of Education. Federal Educational Board. Basic topics for high school. Argentina Republic, 1997, pp. 284-285; 332-334.

⁵ Argentinian Ministry of Education. "Community service as school learning." Service-Learning First International Seminar Procedures, Argentina Republic, 1998.

⁶ See www.me.gov.ar/edusol for description of the "Premio Presidencial Escuelas Solidarias."

⁷ Service-learning International Seminars Procedures and training materials developed by School and Community are still available at the Argentina Ministry of Education website, www.me.gov.ar/edusol.