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SERVICE LEARNING AS A DRIVER FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION IN BUSINESS SCHOOLS

Bruno Anicet Bittencourt, Luciana Maines da Silva, Claudia Cristina Bitencourt

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ARTIGO

SERVICE LEARNING COMO IMPULSIONADOR DA EDUCAÇÃO PARA O DESENVOLVIMENTO SUSTENTÁVEL EM ESCOLAS DE NEGÓCIOS

BRUNO ANICET BITTENCOURT¹

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6499-3588>
<banitec@unisinis.br>

LUCIANA MAINES DA SILVA¹

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1670-0629>
<lucianamaines@unisinis.br>

CLAUDIA CRISTINA BITTENCOURT³

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9383-6952>
<claudia.bittencourt@puccrs.br>

¹ Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos (UNISINOS). Porto Alegre, RS, Brasil.

² Pontifícia Universidade Católica (PUCRS). Porto Alegre, RS, Brasil.

RESUMO: As escolas de negócios são desafiadas a formar líderes capazes de resolver problemas sociais e ambientais. Movimentos como a Agenda 2030 e os Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável (ODS) exigem que as instituições de ensino repensem as suas ações para contribuir para o desenvolvimento sustentável. Considerando isto, a *service learning* emergiu como uma estratégia promissora, integrando a resolução de problemas locais com o desenvolvimento de competências para a sustentabilidade. Este estudo centra-se em como as escolas de negócios podem implementar a *service learning* para impulsionar a educação e o desenvolvimento sustentável. Realizamos uma pesquisa-ação com o projeto “Liderança em Pequenas Empresas”, no qual os alunos aconselharam pequenas empresas durante a pandemia da COVID-19. Como principais resultados destacamos a apresentação do processo de implementação de *service learning* e a defesa de um framework com os requisitos, fatores de sucesso e desafios enfrentados pelas escolas de negócios.

Palavras-chave: Service learning, educação para o desenvolvimento sustentável, sustentabilidade, escola de negócios, processo ensino-aprendizagem

SERVICE LEARNING AS A DRIVER FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION IN BUSINESS SCHOOLS

ABSTRACT: Business schools are challenged to train leaders capable of solving social and environmental problems. Movements such as Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) require educational institutions to rethink their actions to contribute to sustainable development. Considering this, service-based learning has emerged as a promising strategy, integrating resolving local problems with developing skills for sustainability. This study focuses on how business schools can implement service learning to drive education and sustainable development. We conducted action research with the "Leadership in Small Businesses" project, in which students offered advice to small businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the main results, we highlight the presentation of the service-learning implementation process and defend a framework with the requirements, success factors and challenges faced by business schools.

Keywords: Service learning, education for sustainable development, sustainability, business school, teaching-learning process.

EL SERVICE LEARNING COMO IMPULSOR DE LA EDUCACIÓN PARA EL DESARROLLO SOSTENIBLE EN LAS ESCUELAS DE NEGOCIOS

RESUMEN: Las escuelas de negocios tienen el desafío de formar líderes capaces de resolver problemas sociales y ambientales. Movimientos como la Agenda 2030 y los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible (ODS) exigen a las instituciones educativas repensar sus acciones para contribuir al desarrollo sostenible. Considerando esto, el service learning ha surgido como una estrategia prometedora, que integra la resolución de problemas locales con el desarrollo de habilidades para la sostenibilidad. Este estudio se centra en cómo las escuelas de negocios pueden implementar el aprendizaje-servicio para impulsar la educación y el desarrollo sostenible. Realizamos investigación acción con el proyecto “Liderazgo en Pequeñas Empresas”, en el que estudiantes ofrecieron asesoría a pequeñas empresas durante la pandemia de COVID-19. Como principales resultados destacamos la presentación del proceso de implementación del service learning y defendemos un marco con los requisitos, factores de éxito y desafíos que enfrentan las escuelas de negocios.

Palabras clave: Service learning, educación para el desarrollo sostenible, sostenibilidad, escuela de negocios, proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje.

INTRODUÇÃO

Developing future leaders with competencies to solve environmental and social problems has greatly challenged business schools worldwide. Considering several initiatives, such as the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME), through practical approaches, international learning programs, incorporation of ethical and social values into curricula and active student involvement in projects and research (Pless et al., 2011; Waddock & Post, 2000), Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have an important role in sustainable development. We highlight Agenda 2030, whose central pillar is the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). Universities have been adapting and redirecting their actions by developing their institutional leadership role in promoting sustainable development (Leal Filho et al., 2020).

One of the main challenges for educators is to design learning activities that allow students to effectively develop sustainability competencies (Moldorez & Fonseca, 2018). Key competencies such as problem-solving skills and collaborating with experts and stakeholders can be stimulated in real-world learning opportunities (Brundiers et al., 2010) while gaining insights into civic engagement activities (Gerholz et al., 2018). Real-world experiences focus on solving real sustainability problems and involve hands-on activities (Bielefeldt, 2013; Remington-Doucette et al., 2013). These practical and interdisciplinary activities help students develop ethical and strategic skills, preparing them to face real sustainability challenges and contribute as change agents. These skills are essential to promote critical thinking, interdisciplinarity and ethical action on socio-environmental issues, aligning with global sustainability objectives, for which pedagogical approaches still need to be developed (Remington-Doucette et al., 2013). In addition, these real-world solving activities develop systemic thinking and the understanding of interconnectedness (Clevenger & Ozbek, 2013).

A more practical educational experience is based on active learning pedagogy. It involves close collaboration between universities and external actors, enabling students and other learning actors to engage in real-world problems in their learning process (Hermann & Bossle, 2019). Therefore, to develop this experience, the classroom's borders must be left open and different stakeholders involved

in the teaching-learning process must be involved (Figueiró et al., 2016). The aim is to enhance the well-being of the communities (Longmuir, 2021).

The service learning approach emerges as an alternative that connects solving local problems and developing competencies for sustainable development. Service learning is a pedagogy that promotes educational experiences in which students participate, provide meaningful work, and reflect upon organized activities that meet identified community needs (Clevenger & Ozbek, 2013; Shephard, 2008). Service learning objectives include academic enhancement, personal growth, and civic engagement (Gibson et al., 2011). Students participating in service learning develop more sophisticated metacognitive abilities, strategic planning, and task-analysis skills. At the same time, they develop a better ability to discriminate useful from insignificant information and better understand client needs and constraints (Clevenger & Ozbek, 2013).

Service learning – solving real-world problems - contributes to developing managers with sustainable development competencies (Halberstadt, 2019). Service learning is also connected to SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), developing students' skills based on the context in which they are inserted. However, it is known how difficult it is for business schools to implement these practices since reasons to develop students as civil actors, mainly from private higher schools (Sheat et al., 2023), to redistribution of responsibilities based on involvement in critical reflection and the construction of critical consciousness (Freire, 1968/2013). Thus, the question that has oriented this research is, "How can business schools implement service learning as a driver for education and sustainable development?" To answer this question, we conduct action research based on the project – Leadership in Small Business (LSB), in which undergraduate students in management from a university in Brazil provide online consultancy to small companies under the mentoring of professors and graduate students.

The economic effects of isolation policies resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic have led small companies to seek alternatives to survive. In this scenario, the LSB (based on action research) arises. The project offers focused management consultancy proposing possible solutions, contributing to business continuity and, often, job maintenance. The project involved 90 students at different levels in four months and impacted 120 companies. As the main result, we pointed out that the service learning experience (1) helped small companies during the pandemic, (2) brought the university closer to the community, (3) allowed students to experience and solve real problems based on practical learning, and (4) stimulated students to develop social awareness. As a theoretical contribution, we also identified the requirements, success factors, and challenges for a business school to implement service learning. In addition, we highlight two categories of benefits related to sustainable development: solving a real social problem and training future managers.

This paper presents five sections in addition to the above. The first section presents the literature review about Education for Sustainable Development and Service learning. This section follows the methodological approach, analysis, discussion, and conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Education for Sustainable Development

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is considered proactive and transformational (Department of Education and Skills, 2014). It requires moving away from traditional, educator-led, textbook-centered learning (Moore et al., 2019). Although teaching and learning have become more student-centered over the past decades, a significant shift in teaching, learning, and assessment is required, considering ESD is central to the education systems (Remington-Doucette et al., 2013). Skills, values, and behaviors must be considered alongside knowledge acquisition. Discipline-based and transmissive approaches must give way to more multidisciplinary, participative teaching styles. The vision and principles of ESD challenge conventional educational practices within the wider community, promoting a partnership-based approach within schools that goes beyond traditional boundaries. It encompasses reevaluating school structures, curriculum content, and teaching methods to inspire change in society's

social and economic structures rather than perpetuating the status quo. (Kadji-Beltran et al., 2013). Therefore, business schools must critically reflect on their ethos and practices and collectively decide how to move forward (Moore et al., 2019).

Learning for Sustainable Development involves acquiring key competencies (Tilbury & Wortman, 2004), including systemic thinking, envisioning, partnership building and critical thinking. In addition to these competencies, UNESCO (2016) clarifies that other competencies are also required (Cottafava et al., 2019): normative competencies, to understand norms and values that root individuals creating potential conflicts and competing logics; strategic thinking, to develop innovative actions; self-awareness to reflect on the role of everyone in their local community; and integrated problem-solving to apply and to propose workable solutions to the complex problems addressed by SDGs (Cottafava et al., 2019). These concerns have shaped academic interest in the subject over the last decade with publications addressing how sustainability can be incorporated into HEIs (Setó-Pamies; Papaoikonomou, 2016), the importance of more inclusive methods (Emblen-Perry, 2018), the learning experiences (Sidiropoulos, 2014) and the competencies development, for both educators and students.

Solving real problems has proven to be the leading way to develop leaders for sustainable development. Moreover, it is an effective way to put competencies into practice since competency only makes sense in practice. As Le Boterf (1997) states, nobody is competent a priori. Only in action does competency reveal itself. "Real-world learning opportunities" can take multiple forms, including project and problem-based learning, service learning, and internships. Students are exposed to challenges in real-world settings, such as communities, businesses, and governments (Brundiers et al., 2010). Real-world settings are inspired by action learning, experiential learning, critical reflection, and reflectivity principles. These approaches support the idea that knowledge is gathered through sense-making rather than content (Jennings et al., 2015). This paper will explore service learning as an approach capable of developing leaders for sustainable development.

Service Learning

Service learning refers to experimental education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs and structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote learning and development (Halberstadt et al., 2019). Service learning combines service and learning objectives to change both the receiver and provider of the service (Jacoby, 1996).

This pedagogical approach has been proven efficient at engaging students in real-life and meaningful learning and experiences (Godfrey et al., 2005). Previous research has advocated this approach as a "partial solution to the significant problem of narrowness in business education" (Godfrey et al., 2005, p. 309). Service learning helps balance academic rigor with practical relevance (Vega, 2007), reinforces students' ability to reflect critically on their own experiences (Giles et al., 1998; Kolenko et al., 1996), and provides opportunities for students to develop an orientation to productive civic engagement beyond the university timeframe (Waddock & Post, 2000; Godfrey, 2000). Service learning demonstrates the orientation toward a globally responsible humanism (GRH) vision, contrary to the criticism that business schools are excessively market-oriented (Mousa et al., 2023).

Real-world experiences solve sustainability problems and involve hands-on activities (Bielefeldt, 2013; Remington-Doucette et al., 2013). Moreover, these hands-on activities foster normative and strategic competencies that still need to be developed (Remington-Doucette et al., 2013). In addition, real-world solving activities develop systemic thinking and the understanding of interconnectedness (Clevenger & Ozbek, 2013).

Service learning can be seen as a robust pedagogical approach to fostering sustainability stimulated by the team's leadership style (Traver-Marti et al., 2023). It implies an experiential educational method that can promote substantial changes in learners and be integrated into business schools as an alternative to the mainstream education of future managers (Brower, 2011). Service learning has a variety of definitions. The one most frequently used presents service learning as a branch of experiential education with active engagement as a foundation component. This article focuses on students' engagement, where they are involved in activities that address community needs.

Service learning can be considered a driver for ESD since it generates transformation in the student and the community in which he/she is inserted. However, although there is a consensus about the importance of implementing this type of activity in Business Schools, there still needs to be a gap in the theoretical and managerial field regarding how to implement service learning in HEIs (Leal Filho et al., 2020). Due to its complexity (involvement of different stakeholders and change in the teaching approach), Business Schools must implement service learning (Brower, 2011). In this scenario, this paper discusses how to implement service learning as a driver for ESD in Business Schools. Thus, in the next section, we discuss how the methodological procedures were involved in our experience.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

To understand how business schools can implement service learning as a driver for ESD, we conducted action research based on the project – Leadership in Small Business (LSB). Action research is a practice-changing practice through learning by doing practice (Kemmis et al., 2014). LSB is a service learning project in which undergraduate and graduate students offered management consultancies for small companies during the pandemic caused by COVID-19. The project contributes to sustainable development as it arises to solve a real social problem caused by the COVID-19 pandemic: the failure of small businesses. Thus, we understand that the project contributes directly to SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), developing students' skills based on the local context in which the students are inserted.

This method was chosen due to the project's transformative action within the community (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2007). Furthermore, this methodology has no separation between subject and object since the researchers are also subjects of the research and collaboratively participate in its construction. In addition, this type of research brings together theory and practice, as it takes theory into the field so that action can be carried out with the research participants (Brandão, 1984; Thiollent, 2003; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2007). Additionally, the research is characterized by educational and social transformation since everyone involved learns together.

It also includes an emancipatory aspect since, by becoming aware of their situation, the participants began to act more critically concerning the environment in which they are inserted (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2007). For analysis and discussion of the results, the steps proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart (2007) were followed: (1) planning - consists of collecting the necessary data and, jointly, planning the action to be carried out; (2) acting and observing - the moment of the action itself, which must be carefully observed in order to generate data that will serve to feed the reflection; and (3) reflecting - involves reflecting on the action taken and, if necessary, planning a new action. One of the authors, the head of the undergraduate program, interviewed students, faculty members, and company representatives during the project implementation from May to July 2020. A semi-structured interview guide was used during the interviews. The respondents were identified by code to preserve their identities. Thus, we used "S," followed by a number for students. The same applies to professors, identified by "P" and companies by "C." A data content analysis process showed how to implement service learning in Business Schools, inspired by the literature review presented in this article. More details about the methodological procedures will be presented in the following steps.

The execution of two cycles increased the rigor of the research. Considering that at each cycle, the knowledge acquired and the actions carried out underwent new critical reviews reduced the chance of the researchers involved in biasing the analysis. It is important to highlight who the students and teachers involved in the project were. There were 90 students, 60 undergraduates in Administration – with an emphasis on Management, Innovation and Leadership. 60% were women, and 40% were men. 10% were in the first year, 20% in the second year, 40% in the third and 30% in the fourth year. The average age is 20 years old. In addition to the undergraduate students, there were 30 postgraduate, master's and doctoral students in the business area. Of this group, 60% are master's students, and 40% are doctoral students. 90% were from the administration course, and the others were from the accounting and economics courses. We had 6 students drop out, 4 undergraduates and 2 postgraduates, throughout the first and second cycles.

From the initial publicity campaign, 120 small companies were interested in consulting. The majority were micro and small companies with a maximum of 10 employees. The lockdown policies impacted businesses, commerce, and services. The group was organized to serve 60 companies in the first cycle and 60 companies in the second cycle. There were two dropouts in the first cycle and ten dropouts in the second cycle.

The undergraduate students (60) were divided into twenty groups, with 3 students and one postgraduate student in each group. Thus, each group of four students (3 undergraduate and 2 postgraduate) would serve 3 companies per cycle. The other ten postgraduate students were divided into project management and technical support for the groups. There were three technical groups: marketing/sales, finance and innovation/business models. Each group had two postgraduate students who had knowledge and experience in the area. These technical groups aimed to produce materials and support the other groups in their services. The other postgraduate students (4) organized the meetings and work methodologies.

Each professor was a reference for an area of activity: marketing/sales, finance, and innovation/business models. Thus, this professor was responsible for assisting the technical group of postgraduate students in developing materials and guiding the service groups that focused on this topic. The professors met weekly with the technical groups and the postgraduate students who led the service groups. The meetings were intended to accompany and guide the groups. Furthermore, every week, all professors met with the group of postgraduate students responsible for the methodologies and management of the project. The twenty service groups (with undergraduate and postgraduate students) met weekly to plan meetings with companies. Whenever there was any doubt, the reference teacher was contacted. At the end of each service (4 meetings with the company), the teacher spoke to the group and discussed the feedback. The entire project group (undergraduate students, postgraduate students, and teachers) met every two weeks to evaluate the project. Professors and postgraduate students in charge of project methodologies and management led these meetings. Due to the pandemic, all meetings were held online via Microsoft Teams.

LEADERSHIP IN SMALL BUSINESS (LSB)

Before presenting the project, it is necessary to contextualize the university located in Brazil. With over 50 years of history, the institution is one of the largest private institutions in Brazil, with more than 90 thousand graduate students and around 25 thousand students registered in undergraduate and graduate courses. The university seeks to promote the human person's integral training and professional practice training from values such as the global perspective, academic excellence, extension and community integration, and sustainability.

Based on this, the institution has been rethinking its curriculum and performance to better prepare its students for global challenges and expand its social impact. For example, undergraduate students can choose the Social Innovation track, where academic and practical projects related to the SDGs are solved. Furthermore, partnerships with governments, companies, and NGOs are highlighted to connect teaching and research activities with local social demands. The University's Technology Park, Business Incubator, and Innovation Institutes also seek to promote local development.

Planning: The emergence of Service learning in the Business School

The LSB project emerged in a pandemic scenario derived from COVID-19. The lockdown policy, economic instability, and health insecurity have influenced small businesses in different parts of the world. Thus, for small businesses to survive, they must adopt creative strategies. In this context, a real socioeconomic problem could serve as a basis for building a service learning and training students from the Business School for sustainable development.

After identifying the basic problem - helping small businesses survive, we designed the service learning proposal. As a first step, we set up a committee with four professors from the Business School. We seek to approximate companies and students to propose an experience that contemplates a

practical business solution and transforms learning for students. We realized that small businesses were looking for quick solutions to adapt to the imposed crisis from conversations with some companies. In contact with the students, we found they were willing and interested in helping. In addition, they had a demand for experiential activities in which they could be protagonists and apply the knowledge obtained in classes.

Thus, we proposed to offer management consultancy based on four meetings free of charge to small businesses in the university community. The first meeting focused on a diagnosis to understand the main business problems and align expectations concerning the service. In the second meeting, students would present possible solutions and discuss strategies with entrepreneurs. The third meeting focused on monitoring the actions and the first results. Finally, the fourth meeting was intended to evaluate the efforts made and outline the next steps for the business. The meetings took place online, and there was one week between them.

Based on the number of interested students, we organized working groups of three students supervised by a professor to assist the companies. The disclosure to the participating students and the businesses served was based on forms of interest linked by the school's social networks. Since the urgency of business was high, the planning time was short. We planned the project and validated the proposal with the university in one week.

Acting and Observing: The project implementation process

After planning and publicizing the project, it was time to practice and verify students' interest and business in service learning development. After three days of communication about the project, 60 students were interested in offering management consulting services, and 120 small businesses were interested in receiving this consultancy. The number of interested parties exceeded our expectations, showing that the project proposal met the demand from both audiences.

In the form of interest, we had asked both students and businesses to signal the areas of management they needed or could help with marketing and digital positioning, finance and financial planning, and business modeling and innovation. Based on this information, we divided and allocated the working groups. Thus, we organized twenty groups of students, containing three students each. Therefore, each group would have six businesses to serve.

As the number of registered businesses was higher than imagined, we divided the service into two cycles, with half being served in the first two initial months (April and May) and the other half in the final months of the semester (June and July). From the first to the second cycle, there were some lessons learned:

- 1) use of project management tools. Slack and Trello were used to manage the teams.
- 2) construction of models/frameworks for consultancies. The technical groups began to develop/assemble management tools to assist students in their services.
- 3) design of student roles and their deliverables. The requirements for participation and delivery for each group were outlined, facilitating the level of engagement and the quality of deliveries.
- 4) Student training. Two training courses, communication and project management, were promoted for the entire student team. The training was given by university professors who were not directly involved in the project.
- 5) We improved communication with companies. We developed standard messages and meeting confirmations, which facilitated using the same language for all services and reduced absences from meetings.

At the end of the first cycle, the idea of using a questionnaire to assess companies' satisfaction with the service provided also emerged. This questionnaire was developed and sent on Google Forms.

In parallel with the groups of students, we received contact from the coordination of the graduate program in business (master's and doctorate) with interest in participating in the project. Then, we identified that it would be interesting for graduate students to play a role as mentors for undergraduate students and help us to manage the project. Thus, the project received more than 30 graduate students: 20 were allocated to the working groups and 10 to the organization of the project.

As a project organization, we hold virtual meetings with everyone involved to align expectations and build customer service. However, we noticed that the students needed clarification about attendance. Then, we involved more professors from the university to present management tools and make suggestions concerning business. In addition, the mentoring role of graduate students was essential due to their extraordinary market experience.

As management consultancy meetings took place, we held biweekly follow-up meetings with the groups. The graduate students who worked on the project's organization with us developed support materials and helped communicate and monitor the working groups. We use Microsoft Teams tools for meetings and Slack for service management and communication.

Following the monitoring of some meetings, we observed that the feedback received by the businesses was positive and that they perceived benefits in the services received. Moreover, in the follow-up meetings with the groups of students, we realized that they were satisfied and happy to help businesses. Still, we had a decrease of 10% in the number of businesses attended concerning those registered, basically due to needing an agenda for the meetings. Six students also dropped out because they needed more time to maintain attendance. Thus, after four months of the project, we finished with 108 businesses served and 84 participating students.

Reflecting: The impact and learning of Education for Sustainable Development

As a reflection of the project, we developed two analyses, the first in the field of service offered to the community and the second concerning the learning and development of future managers. First, to understand the impact of the management consultancy service on business, we send an evaluation survey to the companies to measure their satisfaction. Second, to understand the effects of the experience on the student's development, we conducted in-depth interviews and a final meeting with everyone involved to share the lessons learned.

After the project, we surveyed all companies to understand their perceptions and recommendations. In this survey, we asked about the quality of the service received, the service's satisfaction, the service's impact on the business, and suggestions and comments. Thus, entrepreneurs should list from 0 (least important) to 10 (most important) in the three quantitative questions and add comments (not mandatory) in the last qualitative question.

As a general result, we obtained 94 responses, totaling 87% of the total business served. In the matter related to the quality of care, we obtained an assessment of 93%. As for satisfaction with the service, the percentage was 91%. Finally, the assessment of the service's impact on the business was 86%. These figures reflect that the proposal overcame our expectations and significantly contributed to the businesses served. In the field of suggestions and comments, we noticed many messages of thanks. In addition, we noticed that many of the respondents' testimonies highlighted the solutions proposed by the students, as can be seen in the following messages: "They gave a great idea," "I met new tools," "I was almost giving up, and they showed me that it was still possible."

Regarding student learning, it was possible to perceive the development of some competencies aimed at sustainable development. The first is related to the ability to work as a team. The students pointed out that their experience working with other students from different semesters and receiving mentoring from graduate students allowed them to work collectively. To illustrate, there is the following speech of a student: "We learned to work with people we did not know before; it was an excellent challenge!" (S1).

In addition to interacting with other colleagues, we pointed out a second competency developed - empathy. Students reported that from conversations with entrepreneurs, they had to put themselves in their shoes to understand the real problem of the business. "The project allowed me to understand what an entrepreneur is going through. What I have developed in practice, I would never learn in the classroom" (S2).

Since students were solving real problems, the educators did not control the environment. Therefore, they had to adapt to the various challenges that were presented to them. Such situations made the students develop more flexibility and new competencies. Moreover, it was observed that the proposed

solutions had to be adapted to guarantee the meaning of the businesses served. "We saw that there is no magic formula. Therefore, we had to change plans and constantly reevaluate what we were offering" (S3).

Another competency observed was critical thinking. The students showed that the experience of analyzing and proposing an appropriate solution for each business required them to reflect and discuss possibilities. In this way, the students took a leading role in the proposed service and sought to connect the knowledge previously obtained with the observed reality. "We had to think of something that would help that business, but according to its context (...), we had to discuss a lot in the groups to find the best solution" (S4).

By the end of the practice, the authors highlight that the students developed new competencies, like teamwork, empathy, flexibility, and critical thinking. The students also became more confident and developed or strengthened their autonomy capacity.

The authors realize that service-learning projects such as LSB promote two benefits: the development of future managers simultaneously as they generate transformations in the present society by resolving real problems. With that, the role of universities and, more precisely, Business Schools goes beyond teaching and researching activities. Business Schools have the role of transforming the students' realities and preparing and developing managers for sustainable development. Therefore, the authors argue that service-learning projects can position Business Schools as essential change agents.

DISCUSSION

LSB benefitted both the small businesses served and the students involved. On the one hand, students acquire competencies for sustainable development (Molderez & Fonseca, 2018) and knowledge and experience to create a better future (Ahmad, 2012). On the other hand, the project changed the reality of several small businesses, contributing to the sustainable transformation of the context in which they were inserted. (Halberstadt et al., 2019).

The project's limited duration (Papamarcos, 2005) allowed the authors to monitor the students' learning experiences (Godfrey et al., 2005). Understanding the reality, especially in the pandemic, stimulated reflection on the role of students towards the small business served. From experience with entrepreneurs, the reciprocity of knowledge was highlighted, developing a greater sense of responsibility for the work being developed.

Many managers still believe they must gain the necessary skills to make their organizations more sustainable (Fisher & Bonn, 2011). In other words, traditional management education needs to prepare future managers to meet the challenges of leadership and the constant ethical, social, environmental, and political dilemmas in an increasingly complex and interconnected (Pless et al., 2011). The research presented an experience in which future managers developed competencies for ESD in the same way they transformed the context in which they were inserted.

Considering that integrating ESD in a Business School is a complex and non-linear process (Cicmil et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2022), we seek to highlight the essential elements throughout the project implementation. In addition to the benefits acquired with service learning, the study identified requirements for offering this kind of experience, critical factors of this implementation and the project's main challenges. These reflections were obtained from the discussion between the authors and the research participants.

Requirements are the essential elements for implementing service learning. In this sense, two main requirements were identified: students' interest and the Business School's openness to new pedagogical approaches. The authors realized that the students' involvement and willingness to participate were crucial for the project. Such a requirement reinforces what Muff et al. (2013) already advocated when they pointed out that the engagement and openness of the actors are essential to transforming business school education into something more sustainable. In this scenario, the result also reinforces the findings of Figueiró and Raufflet (2015) since the study places the change of pedagogical approach as a driver for ESD.

The critical factors are the elements that contribute to the success of the service learning experience. The authors found that HEI support and co-creation experience ensured the implementation was more successful. The authors note that the initial meetings with the students to create the project

were essential for their engagement. It was realized that the protagonism in the different stages of the project boots students' responsibility (Mulder et al., 2015). In addition, institutional support and validation accelerated and legitimized the proposal. The literature highlights the extent to which institutional support influences the delivery and outcomes of service-learning projects, and that confirms this reference (Baber et al., 2015).

The challenges, conversely, hinder the incorporation of service learning. The challenges of implementing ESD in HEI have yet to be explored in the literature (Dal et al., 2020). As a result of having conducted action research, the authors were able to experience some of these challenges. The study highlights the main challenges: the engagement of educators, the articulation of actors, and the integration of the curriculum. Additionally, few studies emphasize the role of educators in service learning experiences (Cruz & Pozzebon, 2013). In the case of LSB, educators supported students, especially in the first contact with companies, where they felt insecure about proposing solutions. However, a point that needs to be highlighted is the effort from the coordination of the undergraduate program to raise awareness and engage educators, especially when more educators were needed due to the large number of projects to be attended to. Thus, it is highlighted that engagement is only sometimes fluid and immediate (Rupp et al., 2013; Unger & Lutz, 2019), requiring engagement and participation strategies. Cruz and Pozzebon (2013) highlight that educators must assume an active, proactive, and constant mediation role during projects.

Regarding the articulation of actors, it is emphasized that service learning involves real problems from outside the classroom, and it becomes necessary to orchestrate the demands of all involved. In the case of the LSB, it is needed to align the expectations of entrepreneurs, students (undergraduate and graduate), professors, and HEI. Thus, the challenge was to play the role of articulating the experience. Thus, this paper reinforces the need for better articulation and integration with society to develop ESD and overcome the asymmetries between what is being developed academically and what society and practitioners need. (Rojas et al., 2011).

Finally, the authors highlight the challenge of integrating service learning into the Business School curriculum. In the case of LSB, a project outside the curriculum was developed, which allows more agility but makes it difficult to continue. Incorporating practices such as LSB into the curriculum is a challenge already widespread in the literature (Casarejos et al., 2017). HEIs must take ownership of sustainability-oriented practices and systemically design curricula that contemplate activities such as service learning (Leal Filho et al., 2019; Figueiró & Raufflet, 2015). The SDGs may even support incorporating sustainability into the curriculum (Rajabifard et al., 2021).

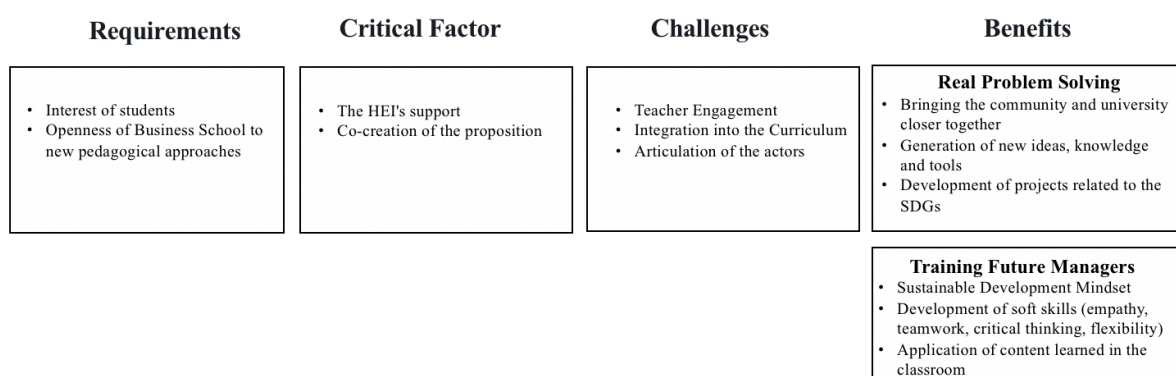


Figure 1: Main element of the process of implementing service learning in Business Schools
Source: The authors (2024)

In sum, it is understood that implementing service learning oriented to Sustainable Development is both linear and the same in all Business Schools. However, some elements are recurrent in the different HEIs. Therefore, the results sought to identify the main requirements, critical factors, challenges, and benefits of this process to fill this gap in the theoretical and practical field and contribute

to business school managers, professors, and researchers. Figure 1 seeks to synthesize these elements. Ultimately, the study reinforces that real-world learning opportunities can be stimulated by key competencies such as problem-solving skills and collaborating with experts and stakeholders (Brundiers et al., 2010).

CONCLUSION

Implementing pedagogical approaches that stimulate education for sustainable development has been a significant challenge for business schools worldwide. However, Business Schools need to carry out such a mission. In this paper, the authors argue that service learning is an alternative for Business Schools to develop future leaders and contribute to the sustainable development of society. Thus, the research aimed to answer the question: "How can business schools implement service learning as a driver for Education to Sustainable Development?" To answer this question, action research was conducted based on the project – Leadership in Small Business (LSB), in which undergraduate students in management provide online consultancy to small companies under the mentoring of professors and graduate students.

It is currently discussed how the HEI can contribute to the SDGs and how they can develop activities that develop these competencies and new leaderships. It was demonstrated as one of the study's main contributions. Furthermore, the Service learning literature says much more about the concept and application but little about the implementation process. We present a framework with the key elements of this implementation. We also point to service learning as a driver for Education for Sustainable Development. Still, on Education for Sustainable Development, the literature brings much about the importance and the paths but needs to present practical cases. From action research, it brings a practical example of the implementation process of an active learning activity focused on Education Sustainable Development.

Theoretical contribution

The main theoretical contribution is the connection between service-learning methodology and ensuring sustainable development education. This connection had yet to be made in-depth previously. It is evidenced by an empirical case of service-learning involving students from different levels of business schools in the local community.

Furthermore, it validates service learning as a methodology capable of contributing to the development of future leaders and showing how this process occurs. The study identifies the requirements, critical factors, challenges and benefits of this experience. As an additional contribution, the research highlights the application of service learning to stimulate ESD. Moreover, the study also surveys the competencies developed and discusses the role of Business Schools in sustainable development.

Managerial contribution

As practical contributions, the study seeks to assist academic managers in building activities that solve real problems while developing sustainability competencies for future managers. However, it highlights 1) the involvement of students in the activity; 2) the students' perception of competence development; 3) the amount of business served; 4) the impact of these services on social/economic development; 5) the possibility of the HEI to effectively act for the SDG. Finally, this research helps managers and educators identify the main elements needed to implement service learning in business schools.

Limitations

This paper presents limitations, such as using a single case with limited temporality and data availability. Thus, the results suggest that future studies deepen and validate the presented project results

and the development of a framework related to service learning and education for sustainable development. In addition, we recommend studies that deepen discussions on developing key competencies of future leaders for sustainability.

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Autor 1 – Coordenador do projeto, participação ativa na atividade desenvolvida na pesquisa-ação, na escrita do artigo, análise dos dados e revisão da escrita final.

Autora 2 – Análise dos dados e escrita do texto.

Autora 3 – Escrita do texto e revisão final.

DECLARAÇÃO DE CONFLITO DE INTERESSE

Os autores declaram que não há conflito de interesse com o presente artigo.

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