

# Interdisciplinary Ideas for Fostering Social Connectedness Through Civic Involvement of Higher Education Students In Times Of Crisis

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## Abstract

This theoretical paper proposes an educational solution based on interdisciplinary curricular development (i.e., elements of neuroeducation, applied evolutionary psychology), which refers to the insertion in the existent curricula of a learning objective that has the potential to foster the development of social connectedness of HEI students in times of crisis. This learning objective is designed to increase the awareness of the students towards the mental health and survival-related benefits of helping others in needs not only to the beneficiaries from the community, but also to themselves. Also, it is assumed that this learning objective has the potential to foster the interest of the academic staff towards considering Service-Learning educational strategy as a valuable tool in the context of accomplishing the third mission of Higher Education Institutions.

**Keywords:** service learning, higher education, interdisciplinary teaching, social connectedness

**JEL Classification:** I20, I21, I23

## Introduction

Studies on the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on the mental health and general well-being of students in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have now started to appear in the international literature (e.g. Dean Schwartz et al., 2021), indicating an increased prevalence of anxiety and stress-related dysfunctions, with the intensity being higher in those students who reported a lower level of social connection during the months of lockdown. While physical distancing and

social isolation are considered worldwide accepted measures for the prevention of the spreading of SARS-CoV-2 virus (WHO, 2020), during the first months of the pandemic, the media around the world reported that spontaneous community-oriented activities of Higher Education students have emerged in response to the needs of their communities.

A collection of cases of pandemic-related students' civic involvement in Romania which were documented in the first two month of the officially declared national lockdown in 2020, can be found in the paper by Rusu (2020), as well as in the online forum of the European Observatory of Service-Learning in Higher Education (EOSLHE, 2020). These cases of spontaneous volunteering of students in time of Covid-19 health crisis, as well as many others that were later on reported in other studies, point towards the need of identifying appropriate ways of infusing in the curricula offerings in universities of training elements of social competencies, that can better prepare the students to the reach out to their communities in times of crisis, while maintaining their own mental health and resilience through civic engagement.

It appears that the motivation of students for in-person activities, especially in the first months of the COVID pandemic, was expressed in spontaneous civic activities in their own proximate communities, some of them being based on the professional competencies acquired by the students during their tertiary studies. The needs of the community to which some of the students responded through civic activities were most often the shortage of medical protective equipment for medical staff and the lack of access to daily life supplies of elderly population. For example, in Romania, during the months March-April 2020, students that returned to their home cities as a consequence of the switch to the online teaching and closing of the campuses, started to be involved in helping their communities either individually or by joining other groups of helpers, such as non-governmental organizations, and, in a few cases, by joining their peers and teachers, especially in the cases of technical and human medicine universities (Rusu, 2020a).

As indicated by evidence-based studies on the psycho-social impacts on HEIs students involved in community-oriented programs, including those promoted and organized by their institutions, such as Service-Learning programs (i.e. a form of pedagogy that connects learning with community services), several aspects of the wellbeing and academic performances are reported to be improved, one of the most important one being the social connectedness (Cabedo et al., 2018; Shin et al., 2018) and their civic attitudes and competences (Richard et al., 2016; Garcia-

Romero, Sanchez-Busques, & Lalueza, 2018; Liu & Hsiung, 2019; Langhout & Gordon, 2019; Culum Ilic, Gregorova Brozmanova, & Rusu, 2020).

Social connectedness concept is often defined as the level at which individuals have and perceive a sufficient and diverse number of interpersonal relationships, which allow them to provide and receive information, emotional and material support, to create and develop a sense of belongingness and to foster their personal development and social functioning (Full Frame Initiative, 2013, cited in Lupas & Rusu, 2020). According to most of the definitions that can be found in the literature, social connectedness is an important aspect of physical, emotional, and mental health (Chuter, 2019; Lupas & Rusu, 2020). In line with these findings, in the current paper, social connectedness is seen as a component of students' social and mental health that should be carefully considered when designing curricular offerings and/or encouraging their involvement in the community through programs that are connected with the curricula.

While professional competencies and procedural knowledge that the HEI students are equipped with can be of great help in time of crises (e.g. offering medical assistance, building medical supplies), only few HEIs in Romania have preparatory programs or curricular offerings to address the motivation and the knowledge of students for helping others and themselves in times of crises through civic engagement (if possible in relation with the curricular content), as well as the awareness of the protective values of these types of actions at levels of the mental health and social functioning of the students involved in them. It is generally acknowledged that one of the activities associated with social connectedness and mental health, especially in young individuals, is volunteering, which is often encouraged and valued by Higher Education Institutions in the context of the third mission of the Universities. Diverse views on the third mission of the HEIs exist depending on the institutional and national cultures, from the entrepreneurial view based on transfer of knowledge and strategic partnerships to programs offering the students the possibilities to learn through real life experiences by voluntarily getting involved in the community (e.g. Mahrl & Pausits, 2011). In all these views, it appears that the services provided by the universities for the society are at the center of this view and are added to the first two missions, education and research, as a third object in the direction of initiating an exchange outside the scientific system and to find answers to social issues (Mahrl & Pausits, 2011 cited in Brozmanova Gregorova et al., 2020).

This paper aims to propose an educational solution based on interdisciplinary curricular development (i.e., elements of neuroeducation, applied and evolutionary psychology), which refers to the insertion in the existent curricula of a learning objective that has the potential to foster the development of social connectedness of HEI students in times of crisis, by making them aware of the mental health and survival-related benefits of helping others in needs not only to the beneficiaries from the community, but also to themselves.

## Methods

This paper is a theoretical one based on the qualitative analysis of the literature in the area of students' civic involvement in general and during the Covid-19 pandemic, including here the papers previously elaborated by the author, either individually or in collaboration with other experts in the field. The literature is presented from the perspective of the proposal of an interdisciplinary learning objective aiming to increase the awareness of students in Higher Education Institutions towards the mechanisms and benefits of their civic involvement not only at level of beneficiaries of their services, but also at level of their social and mental health.

In terms of curriculum design, educational sciences often address the challenges posed by the interactions between different disciplines (Woods, 2007; Stock & Burton, 2011). The process of designing an interdisciplinary curriculum involves competencies of teachers from different disciplines and / or with different trainings in the direction of sharing educational visions, ideology and practices, including here the collaboration with stakeholders from the community (e.g. Woods, 2007). Stock and Burton (2011) provide some definitions of integrative approaches to interactions between disciplines (multi-, inter- and transdisciplinarity), which can be used in building interdisciplinary curricula by including learning objectives and/or activities targeting the civic involvement of students in the community in various forms, such as volunteering and Service-Learning. Multidisciplinarity is considered the least integrative form of educational and research methods that involve the interaction between several disciplines. In the multidisciplinary approach, each team member contributes to a topic from the perspective of his discipline, aiming to share knowledge and compare results, without overcoming the barriers of specific disciplines and without generating new knowledge (Stock & Burton, 2011, cited in Rusu, 2020b). Interdisciplinarity assumes that specialists from several disciplines approach the

same topic, usually one with significant relevance for real life, crossing the specific boundaries of each discipline and being able to generate new knowledge. The major difference between multidisciplinary and interdisciplinarity is considered to be the level of cooperation and integration. Transdisciplinarity is considered the most advanced form of integrated approach, involving not only multiple disciplines and interdisciplinary collaboration between them, but also cooperation with representatives outside the academic community, who can provide critical analysis of generated solutions and signal specific needs (community members, non-governmental associations etc., Stock & Burton, 2011, cited in Rusu, 2020b).

## Results

### **Interdisciplinary Learning Objective: Neurobiological and evolutionary mechanisms and benefits of helping others in needs**

As mentioned above, this study proposes a learning objective that could be documented and included in the future in an interdisciplinary curriculum refers to understanding the neurobiological mechanisms and quality-of-life benefits of helping others in need. Thus, students may become familiar with studies on adaptive significance and explanatory biological models of human prosocial behavior, which includes forms of their civic involvement (e.g. Rusu, *in press*; Rossi, 2001). In the literature, prosocial behavior is defined as “a broad category of actions performed for the benefit of others” (Penner et al., 2005). According to this definition, volunteering and Service-Learning fall into the category of prosocial behavior in the human species. Volunteering does not imply any material benefit or expectation of payment in any way from the beneficiaries (Wilson & Musick, 1999; Rusu & Davis, 2018; Rusu, 2019; Rusu, 2020b; Rusu, *in press*) and usually manifests itself in two forms: formal or systematic volunteering, which is done through associations and organizations, and informal or unsystematic volunteering, which is usually done spontaneously, either individually or in groups, often based on crisis situations. Regardless of the category, both types of volunteering are aimed at people that are often unfamiliar and without kinship connections with the students involved and are often defined as successful actions in ensuring the social functioning of the human species. In addition, more and more studies document that volunteering can bring significant benefits to volunteers in terms of perceived well-being, with these benefits behind a number of neuro-

physiological changes (Calvo et al., 2012; Bekkers, Konrath, & Smith, 2016; cited in Rusu, *in press*).

Some experimental studies indicate that volunteers report a higher level of self-esteem and life satisfaction from participating in community-oriented activities compared to control groups (Bekkers, Konrath, & Smith, 2016; Konrath, 2014; Rusu, *in press*). Although there is not yet a unitary framework to integrate the hypothesized neurophysiological mechanisms to underpin the benefits reported on volunteers involved in other types of activities to help others, one of the elements that constantly appear in the explanatory frameworks of these is dopamine, a neurotransmitter that is often associated with the reward circuit and positive effects. Thus, dopamine-producing neural regions are most active when a person makes charitable donations (Moll et al., 2006, cited in Rusu, *in press*). Also, dopamine is one of the most commonly suggested candidates for the potential explanation of the phenomenon often referred as “*volunteer’s high*” or “*helper’s high*” (Luks, 1988, cited in Rusu, *in press*), commonly described as a sensation of pleasure and subjective happiness associated with the participation in community-oriented activities, such as volunteering and charity events.

Another candidate pointed by several authors for explaining the physiological mechanisms of the prosocial behavior is the oxytocin, a neuropeptide which is involved in positive social interactions in humans and other animal species. Although there are studies indicated that, compared to the placebo condition, the nasal administrated oxytocin was associated with an increase of motivation to donate in charity contexts, especially in men (Barazza et al., 2011, cited in Rusu, *in press*), there are not yet studies to directly connect the release of oxytocin with the expression of the community-oriented behavior, such as volunteering or Service-Learning.

When designing such an interdisciplinary neuro-education and psychology-based learning objective aiming to foster the mental health of students through their civic engagement, it is important to mention that, in terms of evolutionary human history, it appears that formal activities to help others in need, such as formal volunteering and Service-Learning, are relatively recent developments (for example, formal volunteering programs date back to the mid-1800s, Harris et al., 2016, cited in Rusu, *in press*). Due to the intense development of the media communication, most people are constantly exposed to information about the suffering and threats to the survival of other beings, including those who are not in their physical proximity, so

one can assume that the empathic response is in a continuous state of being activated, and, consequently, the motivation for prosocial acts. One of the solutions of the diffusion to the members of our species of this motivation to help people in need (often thousands of miles away from us) is the appearance of the opportunity to help through online donations, or to redirect the empathic response to other people through involvement in volunteer and Service-Learning programs.

## Discussion and conclusions

Besides the expected impact on the preparedness of students to become socially engaged in times of crises, the interdisciplinary learning objective proposed in this theoretical paper has the potential to foster the interest of the academic staff and of the institutions towards considering Service-Learning pedagogy as a valuable tool in the context of the third mission of the Higher Education Institutions.

In line with the literature in the field of Service-Learning, it is recommended that, in order to facilitate the transition of spontaneous and/or organized volunteering activities towards Service-Learning, besides finding ways of connection the service part with the curricular content, the usage of reflective techniques might help the teachers and students, as well as the community partners involved in these programs and/or activities, to become aware of their meaningful engagement and to develop social empathy and compassion in times of crisis (Culum-Ilic, Brozmanova Gregorova, & Rusu, 2020; Rusu, 2020a, 2020b). Another recommendation in relation to the community-engagement stories of the students that are reported at local, national and international levels, is to include these cases in the online activities (e.g. classes, webinars) as examples of good practices that maintain the civic engagement of academic community, particularly of the students, even in those situations with limited possibilities of in-person participation. As indicated in Rusu (2020a), in terms of fostering of the social empathy and social connectedness in students, it is recommended to develop guided reflections regarding these transformational stories through the following dimensions of the empathy model elaborated by Decety & Moriguchi (2007 *apud* Wang, Carroll, & Delaine, 2018): affective sharing, self-awareness, perspective-taking and mental flexibility, emotion regulation. As pointed out by several studies in the area of civic engagement in Higher Education, reflective practices that are

based on compassion and empathy building are essential components of the mechanism of change in the context of educating in our students to become not only compassionate leaderships, but also to promote responsible attitudes and behaviors towards people, animals and environment.

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