



NUI Galway  
OÉ Gaillimh

**UAM** Universidad Autónoma  
de Madrid

# Exploring Service Learning within Ireland from a Spanish Perspective

**Service Learning as a Community of Practice in Irish Higher Education –  
Understanding Cultural and Historical Nuances**

Dr. Charo Cerrillo (UAM) and Dr. Lorraine McIlrath (NUI Galway)

**cki** community  
knowledge  
initiative





# Overview

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## Introduction

This presentation aims to showcase qualitative research conducted by Dr. Rosario Cerrillo (UAM) and Dr. Lorraine McIlrath (NUI Galway) on service learning within an Irish context at the National University of Ireland, Galway.

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## Background

Dr. Rosario Cerrillo was hosted as a visiting professor by the Community Knowledge Initiative (CKI), at the National University of Ireland, Galway (NUI Galway) during the academic year 2018-2019.

We agreed on the design and the undertaking of collaborative research that would advance understandings of the pedagogy within Europe, and particularly within Ireland.





## Background

The rationale for the research inquiry emerges from **scholarly, legislation/policy, and practice** contexts and it has been informed by a research study that looked at nuanced enactments of the pedagogy within three diverse European contexts, namely Belgium, Croatia and England (McIlrath, 2019).





# Legislation and Policy (Formal & Informal)

## Legislation

- Universities Act 1997 - promote the cultural and social life of society', 'foster a capacity for critical thinking amongst its students', and 'contribute to the realisation of national economic and social development' (1997)

## Formal Policy

- National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (2011) - 'engaging with the wider society' is 'one of the three interconnected core roles of higher education' (Department of Education and Science, 2011, p75).
- EU Higher Education policy

## Informal Policy

- Campus Engage Charter for Civic Engagement (2014) – ten point commitment charter
- Local NUI Galway Policy (On-going)





## Scholarship

- Evolution of regional (outside US) scholarship but many gaps
- EU Higher Education Policy Context – favors benevolent rather than critical citizens – Empirical Gap;
- Questions on conception of citizenship through ‘local collective experiments’ (Simons and Masschelein, 2009)
- Diverse sets ‘conceptual vocabulary’ (Watson et al., 2011) – empirical gaps as to if these are culturally rooted;





## Scholarship continued....

- Conceptions of Civic Engagement in Europe – empirical gap (Biesta, 2009);
- Opportunity to investigate SL as an approach towards the development of civic engagement;
- Theoretical opportunity to adopt CoP's and CHAT – Empirical gap – the past is important to the present and future.





## Practice

- 2004 - CKI acts as a type of catalyst to create innovations for the University to democratise and share knowledge and to give students an opportunity to engage with community. Working locally and nationally to make change.
- 2007 – 2011 Campus Engage – NUI Galway
- National Survey (2011)
- 2011 – to date Campus Engage - Irish Universities Association
- Ongoing - development of university centres





**Main objective  
of the study**



**To explore the enactment of service learning at NUI Galway through the perspectives of those engaging in the pedagogy, in order to understand the cultural and historical contextual influences**





# Methodology

## Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

- Community of Practice (Wenger) & Furco's Institutionalisation Framework - Student, President, Academic, Community Partner, Centre for Community Engagement.
- Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT – Vyotsky/Cole) - a cross-disciplinary framework for studying how humans purposefully transform natural and social reality, including themselves, as an on-going culturally and historically situated, materially and socially mediated process





## Methodology

- Qualitative – Semi-Structured Interviews
- Review of key institutional documents
- Reflective practitioner journals
- Thematic Analysis – (Braun and Clarke, 2006)





# CONTEXT

History of oppression

Charitable tradition

Conflict in Northern Ireland

Abuses (Church and State)

Famine

Immigration

Recession

Celtic tiger

Small country – 8 public universities – Campus Engage



Lecturer:

“...the government support that came through it was actually because **there was a belief of a lack of civic values developing among a young generation** and that these courses would help to counteract a certain apathy and a drop in engagement...”

Director of the Centre for  
Community Engagement:

“**The recession was a nightmare** because, because in times of economic prosperity we had many community organisations and then the recession hit and **lots of those community organisations were wiped away in the space of one month**, gone loads of organisations”

President:

“I think we have just such a small we have only seven as it stands seven universities... on the island I think it **makes it easier to work together** and we have fairly well defined hinterlands certainly for undergraduate Education”



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# FINDINGS

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## Engagement

# 1

**Irish sense of community and inclination to collaborate have both historical and cultural roots**



President:

“...we were **governed by Britain** or by England for so long that I think we had to navigate from positions of the dispossessed or **people who didn't have power**. And because of that we had to find other ways to engage rather than through power relationships and I think that makes us more friendly makes us more you know I think we try and work with people as opposed to impose ourselves on people... I think **historically we are open to working together, because we had to work together in order to achieve things...**”

Lecturer:

**“...historically the country of you know charity and becoming envolved (...) I don’t think you know, we’re naturally you know more generous or more inclined to charity I think there’s some of the values that maybe you’re raised with that, **you want to become involved. I think it’s more a cultural thing...”****

Student:

“It’s very common across the whole country in secondary schools to have the **social outreach programme**”

“...the **students union** of the university **they do a lot of community events** a lot of fundraising for different charities a lot of you know like I said community events as well as **social events** in different restaurants, pubs with different **university societies**. So I think there is a lot of engagement there which is particularly good”



# 2

**Within this Irish site of inquiry Service Learning operates as a community of practice but the strength of relationships between the members varies**



Director of the Centre for Community Engagement:

“...it was very slow, it, it’s, **it connects to community of practice theory** (...) **there are no experts** and there are no novices everybody is learning from each other”

“**we had a service learning pilot group** and this was very much action orientated, people learning from each others expertise and, and really making, **making the road by walking together** (...) after three years became a hugely influential academic group of people(...) we changed the name and they became **MEITHEAL**, is a Gaelic word it’s an Irish word for community or **community gathering around a common concern**”

Lecturer:

“We use to have a **group of Service learning lecturers**, we used to meet (...) at the start for example **it was quite helpful** one of the things we were all struggling with was assessment”

“So for me civic engagement is just **working with but also beside the community** and not say reaching out or down or you know things like that so the **mutuality** of it is the engagement part for me”

President:

“We take the evidence from the community around us and we reflect that in our research. But also the research we do we bring to our communities... we don't see ourselves as distant or apart, **we are very much part of the community...**”

student:

“I think there should be a lot more civic engagement and a lot more options for students to have the opportunity to engage with the community a bit more especially through different modules. That would **benefit not only themselves but also the community** I think”

## “Community Based Learning” preferred over “Service Learning”

Lecturer:

“I think Community Based Learning is a **more accurate description of what it is**. I think the term ‘**service**’ also **had some connotations that are different** to ‘community based’ so I prefer, but Service Learning is also historical term in how it’s developed in America so you know both terms are fine but I prefer Community Based Learning”

Student:

“...this option for **Community Based Learning** for engagement with the community”



# 3

**The research participations feel that a central structure is required to successfully promote and support civic engagement and service learning**



Lecturer:

“The university started **promoting community based learning through the CKI**, the Community Knowledge Initiative”

“so you need a willingness there and then a structure that will allow it and then obviously we had **the support of the CKI to bring it into reality** and I know, that **has moved to other universities in Ireland...**”

President:

“something in the next strategy we are thinking of doing more is expanding CKI... **making it more central to the strategy**”

“A lot of **what is happening in nationally happened here, started here**, that is an important piece as well”

## Community partner

“one of the biggest challenges for community organisations is understanding who in the university, like who do you go to... they were like a **dating agency**, so they wanted to see what did we want and they identified who in the university could do that. And then they introduced us and then we met...”

“that **link person** between the community partners and the university. And **someone who can speak both languages. And understands both sides**...I remember I was sitting at one of the very first meetings and we were talking about research and 2 or 3 of the lecturers were talking and they finished and I said I don't understand one word you said...”

“sure they are the **interpreters**...”

Director of the Centre for Community Engagement:

“the **NUI Galway strategy**... it’s got some actions all colleges will examine opportunities for greater civic engagement in programmes that they offer, **guidance and support will be available from specialist staff in the CKI**”.

“...They see CKI as an **entry point**, a Gateway to the university”

“I talk about us being **cartographers** we’re in the business of **creating maps between the university and the community** and, and bringing people together along those maps”



# 4

**From an Irish perspective institutions (also universities) must be close to real world and must fight against neo-liberalism**



President:

“I think we first and foremost **serve our society**. And if we are serving our society well then we must engage and it’s working with community”

“...because physically we are very close to the town and because of that we are also **conceptually or intellectually very close to the town** as well”

## Director of the Centre for Community Engagement:

“Well, I think **students naturally are very concerned about community and society** more so than people our age and I think it’s about effectively communicating with students...”

## The Community partner:

“I think the more that... as I say students can participate in service learning, I think **it brings their learning to life**. And they a greater understanding of why it is, you know that what they are learning rather than just something that’s a theory”

“I met a father there who lives right beside the university, **just across the road and he had never been inside the university** until he did that and he was in this mid-40s. Because he didn’t see the university as anything to do with him... Because he’d never been to the university, he never aspired for his children to go to university. It was completely separate to them...”

“I think for me the biggest blocker to it was what I call **the snobbery of academia**. That they didn’t see service learning as something that, you know they saw that as something that a technical college would do, not a university”

Lecturer:

“I always have to teach them **humility** and **not to see themselves as these amazing experts** who come in to spread their knowledge, that’s a very important thing they need to understand that they are learning as much as they are contributing to the community”.

President:

“I think the **humility** is an important piece...”  
“...**we don’t have all the answers**”



# 5

**Structural changes are required  
within an Irish context for the full  
recognition of service learning and  
of those who enact it**



President:

“...giving them support, so  
**supporting colleagues**  
**who wish to develop**  
**service learning...**”

“...then maybe part of  
**promotion for faculty**  
that there is an  
expectation of some  
element of engagement  
with the world more  
generally...”

## Director of the Centre for Community Engagement:

“...there’s no room for it because student teachers and graduates are required to have competences and knowledge in so many areas that are required by the Teaching Council of Ireland... **The Teaching Council of Ireland doesn’t recognize service learning so it’s not in the curriculum”**

## Director of the Centre for Community Engagement:

“...sometimes I’m  
concerned that the  
**survival of service learning**  
**is fragile because it’s not**  
**celebrated** at a high  
institutional level...”



# 6

**Irish institutions (also universities) gain legitimacy by showing social commitment. From an Irish point of view democracy is strengthened when community engagement flourishes**

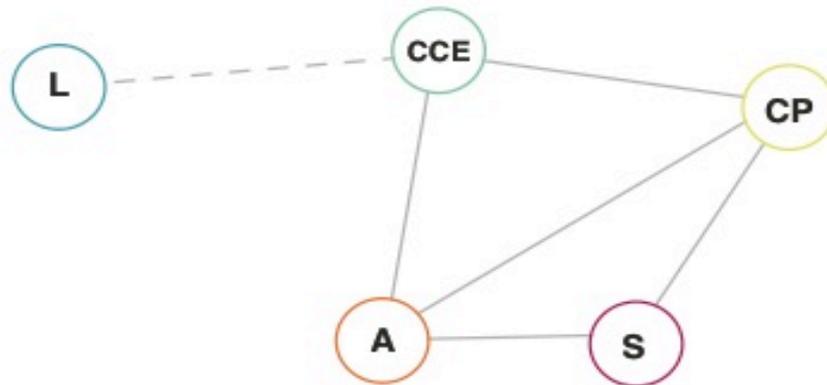


## Director of the Centre for Community Engagement:

“**NUI Galway policies...** is the **NUI Galway strategy**, this is our teaching, learning and assessment strategy that **talks about service learning** and this also sets up the, the Representatives for Civic Engagement. **There’s a whole section here on civic engagement...** **Each college will nominate an academic staff with the responsibility for civic engagement**, these responsibilities include championing to civic engagement agenda, course directors and module co-coordinators who wish to integrate aspects of service learning into their teaching will be provided with training, supporting materials and access to a practitioners network”

Lecturer:

“...Now I know from learning about service learning how in America you know that can be quite religious and it can also be quite politicised. **Here I think it's more an alignment of the vision of what you see the universities function as** being and what you are you know training students to be so that's civic notion I think is (...) and the idea of a citizen as well I think that would probably be in the **Irish context quite strong in terms of community involvement that it is a civic thing**”



### Keys for Research Participants

- A** = Academic
- CCE** = Centre for Civic Engagement
- CP** = Community Partner
- L** = Leader
- S** = Student



The inquiry finds that cultural and historical context matters when conceiving of and enacting service learning as a community of practice within Ireland and that the pedagogy is unreservedly political in nature.

This is in parallel with other studies (McIlrath, 2019) and draw points of discussion, reflection and conclusion in terms of implications for the field.





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## What could we learn from Ireland? Notes for discussion

- *Campus Engage* dedicated to supporting Irish higher education institutions to embed, scale and promote civic and community engagement.
- Civic and Community Engagement: Community Based Learning (SL) + Volunteering + Community Based Research + Impact
- Centres for Community Engagement. Funding.
- Student Union, Societies, Clubs, social events.
- Practical approach of the studies, less academic.





**Any suggestions for future research?**

**THANKS!**  
**¡GRACIAS!**

