



Humanitarian aid project as a source of building a community of practice in the educational institution

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Abstract: This paper analyses the process of conducting the Humanitarian Aid for Ukraine initiative in an educational institution and defines the learning outcomes of the project. We used learning paradigms of communities of practice and service learning to describe and indicate essential steps of the project. The result of this practical work is an instructional guide to a humanitarian project within an educational organisation. This paper documents best practices, suggests improvements and reflects on the educational value of the activity to its participants and the hosting organisation. All the process is described by the characteristics of community of practice: domain, community, and practice, which make it easy to replicate in other educational institutions.

Introduction

The classical educational process is going through many transformations and redefinitions at present. Despite these innovations, people tend to think of an educational process as something constructed in advance by educational specialists with predetermined objectives and learner trajectories (Earle, 2002). In this paper, we would like to address the following question: how does learning take place when it is not thought of and designed in advance but rather occurs due to an external event? The current paper explains how a highly dedicated community created a learning opportunity for itself by successfully managing a fully-fledged humanitarian project in a crisis situation.

On February 24, 2022, a full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine began. A Humanitarian project, called The Humanitarian Aid for Ukraine initiative, was launched at the end of February 2022 at Learning Planet Institute (LPI) – the institute for interdisciplinary research in Paris that hosts one bachelor program, three master programs, a doctoral school and numerous researcher fellows (1). The community coordinator – the main initiator of the project – is a second-year Learning Sciences student of the EURIP Graduate School (Ecole Universitaire de Recherche Interdisciplinaire de Paris - Learning Planet Institute / Université Paris Cité (2)). The project was created in cooperation with the Association of Ukrainian Scouts in France (Plast – Scouts Ukrainiens de France) and the Embassy of Ukraine in France (Ambassade d'Ukraine en France).

As civic activities are at the core of the EURIP graduate school and Learning Planet Institute (for example, Imhotep – the association created to build efficient health communication (3), Learning Planet Youth Council – the communication platform for young activists around the world (4), and many other student and research community initiatives (5), the board of Learning Planet Institute and EURIP supported the humanitarian action for Ukraine.

It is noteworthy to mention that humanitarian aid, in the form of material donations, has proven instrumental in enabling numerous countries to surmount natural and man-made disasters (OCHA, 2022). Such donations are frequently gathered and transported by small non-governmental organizations (NGOs) adept at functioning locally (Ibidem).

This project is an example of the successful creation of a community of practice and implementation of the concept of service-learning on the institutional level. Service-learning means integrating civic initiatives and volunteering into student curriculum and education programs (Levesque-Bristol et al., 2011). Communities of practice, according to Wenger, are the following:

Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems or a passion about a topic and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis (Wenger et al, 2002, p.4).

The community of practice can give newcomers the necessary skills and make the experience of its members personalised. The community of practice is also a fertile ground to explore new concepts and

implement new strategies while mutually learning and improving. To sustain the community of practice, there should be a bond of communal competence and deep respect for particularity and experience. (Wenger, 1998).

The communities of practice are based on the following dimensions (Snyder & Wenger, 2010, p.100):

- **Domain** – defines the identity and concerns of the group. It is necessary for the group to share a passion for the domain.
- **Community** – the relationship between the members and the feeling of community should be strong. The members' expertise levels should vary. A "community coordinator", along with the core group, should take over the leadership of the community.
- **Practice** – the practice of the different groups in the community should share and develop the knowledge of practitioners. Practice contains a range of tools, frameworks, methods, stories and activities connected to learning and innovation.

Project overview

The experience explained in this practice-oriented paper can serve as a generalised blueprint for further usage in collaborative learning. In the paper, we would like to describe all the processes, from the generation of the original idea to the implementation of the active phase. For that purpose, as Snyder and Wenger suggested, we will focus on the following characteristics – the domain, community, and practice, that define the project as a community of practice.

In the case of our project, the domain is humanitarian aid, the community – volunteers concerned by the situation in Ukraine, practice – tasks, activities and learning methods used for the project.

Domain

The initial idea of opening a collection point of humanitarian aid resonated with the needs of Ukrainians and the will of Parisians to engage in humanitarian action. Indeed, the first phase of the project was the need for action that arose from the Russian invasion of Ukraine: more than 7.7 million internally displaced people and more than 15.7 million people requiring humanitarian assistance with food, hygiene, medical and other supplies (United Nations, March 2022). Within the first three days after the beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine, numerous concerned people in Paris were working on ideas of launching projects to help civilians affected by the war.

As one of the authors of the paper is also a member of the Plast – Scouts Ukrainiens de France Association – the branch of Ukrainian scouts located in Paris. This association has connections with numerous NGOs in Ukraine and collaborates closely with the Embassy of Ukraine in France. Hence it was decided to launch the project in cooperation with the Plast – Ukrainian Scouts in France and the Embassy of Ukraine in France.

Several master's students of the EURIP graduate school for interdisciplinary research proposed the project to the board of the institution at the end of February 2022.

The *main tasks* were the following:

- Opening a humanitarian aid collection point at the Learning Planet Institute: collecting, sorting, packing and sending donations (food, hygiene, baby care products, medicines and equipment for civilians) to Ukraine.
- Organising the team of volunteers from the EURIP graduate school and partnering organisations.
- Designing and maintaining the learning program for the volunteer community members.
- Sustaining active communication within the Learning Planet Institute community and French media to raise awareness about the problem and current needs in Ukraine.

The first author of the current paper was responsible for the project deployment and coordination.

Community

During the first three days, the community coordinator was in charge of the reception of donations, stock management, logistics, and communication with donors, local activists, and the media. 3-5 volunteers on site were responsible for sorting and packing donations. Due to the significant growth in the number of donations and people willing to help over the first days, the decision to enlarge the project scale was made. That is why we developed the learning system to create and sustain the community of volunteers. The learning system included the following elements:

- Communication channels for volunteers dedicated to asking questions, offering improvements and giving feedback.
- Workflow guidelines that depend on the task (welcome point, sorting, packing, community management, logistics, etc.).
- Community-building events (regular common lunches, feedback sessions, outdoor activities and discussions for volunteers).

The community of volunteers grew from 3-5 people to more than 100 volunteers in the peak phase of the project (the first two months), and 50 community members stayed active from the beginning of the project until the end of the active phase (4 months in total). The community included: students and researchers from EURIP graduate school, Learning Planet Institute staff members, and people related to partnering organizations.

It is worth mentioning that during the first days of community building, as volunteers were learning how to run the humanitarian aid project and giving multiple pieces of feedback, the team implemented changes to upgrade the practice to enhance the equity, well-being and efficacy of volunteers. That makes the project an example of a co-constructed learning community in which diverse perspectives were included.

Practice

Therefore, among all changes implemented within the first week of the project, one of the most significant was the implementation of management positions for experienced volunteers, which included:

- *Project coordinator*: workflow and logistics management, communication with partners and media, reporting, event organising, and cooperation with recipient organisations in Ukraine.
- *Communication manager*: social media management (content creation, communication with the online community of donors, partners, and volunteers), scheduling visits of media representatives.
- *Responsible for volunteers*: managing shifts schedule, planning the shifts, distributing the work between volunteers, resolving issues of the volunteers, and providing learning materials.
- *Stock manager*: administering the stock spreadsheets, registering each categorised box of donations to the system, creating delivery notes with detailed lists of items sent and delivery vehicle and driver details, preparing custom clearance documents for drivers, and managing the work of senior volunteers.
- *Senior volunteers*: responsible for several categories of donations: food, hygiene, baby care, equipment products and medicines (requirement: medical diploma holder). Those volunteers managed the work of junior volunteers regarding the reception, sorting and packing processes.

Community members were assigned management positions depending on their expertise and availability throughout the week. The volunteers met regularly at the collection point, and they were trained by senior community members that had already gained experience by being involved in the project workflow since its early stages. During the regular feedback sessions and informal gatherings, community members repeatedly reported an increased sense of belonging that improved their well-being.

Learning outcomes

Based on all the processes explained above, various competencies were acquired as part of the project. Thanks to the regular feedback sessions with volunteers, we derived the following learning outcomes:

- *In entrepreneurship*: conceptualising and creating a project idea, calculating necessary resources, and establishing the project lifecycle.
- *In project management*: building processes in the team, establishing roles and responsibilities, organising the logistics system, creating shifts and schedules, and writing reports.
- *In communications*: creating visibility in social media, creating content, communicating with activists, media representatives, and public speaking.
- *In event management*: organising formal and informal events for volunteers and stakeholders, organising a final gala for the community of volunteers and project stakeholders.
- *In education management*: designing a learning and mentoring system for new volunteers.
- *In self-development*: gaining the capacity to work in conditions of crisis and psychological instability, understanding the value of self-support and giving a hand to others.
- *In professional development*: providing volunteers with recommendation letters to facilitate their employment-seeking, validating the project as a master internship for the project coordinator.

Conclusion

During the active phase of the project, organisers succeeded in building a community of practice of more than 100 volunteers and establishing partnerships with more than 40 organisations in France (local governments, schools, education communities, logistics companies, various enterprises, NGOs, etc.) and more than 15 NGOs in Ukraine. Within the four months of the project, the team successfully sent more than 75 tons of humanitarian aid, which translated to 45 different vehicles and 6754 boxes packed by volunteers coming from numerous countries of the world (Ukraine, France, USA, Poland, Italy, China, India, Sri Lanka, Peru, Russia, and others).

The project also allowed the students to regularly interact with researchers and employees of Learning Planet Institute as well as with volunteers and activists from outside of the institute. Learning outcomes of the project impacted several domains, such as entrepreneurship, project management, communications, event management, education management, self-development, and professional development.

Improvements

According to the related literature, it would be beneficial to implement such projects as integral parts of the bachelor's and master's programs curriculums (Owusu-Agyeman & Fourie-Malherbe, 2021; Boland, 2014; Kingston et al., 2014). However, for the organisers of the initiative mentioned above, it was essential to keep the project open to the participation of the employee and research community of the institution and ensure inclusivity for the volunteers not affiliated with the institution.

To conclude, the example of this project deployment and coordination would be helpful for the other institutions willing to engage in civic activities and implement communities of practice and service-learning.

Endnotes

- (1) <https://www.learningplanetinstitute.org/en/about> [access: 15.10.2022]
- (2) <https://eurip.u-paris.fr/> [access: 15.10.2022]
- (3) <https://imhotep-sante.org/home/> [access: 15.10.2022]
- (4) <https://www.learning-planet.org/2022/08/16/youth-council-2022-2023/> [access: 15.10.2022]
- (5) <https://livingcampus.learningplanetinstitute.org/en/vie-etudiante> [access: 15.10.2022]

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