Integrating service learning projects into textile, clothing and fashion seminars in higher education

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Review**

Service learning has emerged as a transformative pedagogical strategy in higher education, fostering the integration of academic knowledge with community engagement. This paper investigates the incorporation of service learning projects into textile, clothing, and fashion curricula, examining theoretical foundations, implementation models, and documented outcomes. Drawing on empirical research and case studies, the study demonstrates that service learning enhances students' technical competencies, ethical awareness, civic responsibility, and career readiness, while simultaneously generating tangible benefits for educators and community partners. The analysis highlights discipline-specific opportunities and challenges, offering evidence-based recommendations for effective implementation. By situating service learning within the broader context of sustainability and social responsibility in fashion education, the paper underscores its potential to cultivate critically engaged, ethically minded professionals prepared to address the complex demands of the global fashion industry.

Keywords: *service learning; textile technology; clothing technology; fashion; higher education*

Pregled**

Integracija projekata servisnog učenja u seminare tekstilne i odjevne tehnologije te mode u visokom obrazovanju

Servisno učenje ili učenje kroz angažman (engl. service learning - SL) pojavilo se kao transformativna pedagoška strategija u visokom obrazovanju, potičući integraciju akademskog znanja s angažmanom u zajednici. Ovaj rad istražuje uključivanje projekata servisnog učenja u kurikulume tekstilne i odjevne tehnologije te mode, analizirajući teorijske temelje, modele implementacije i dokumentirane ishode. Na temelju empirijskih istraživanja i studija slučaja, pokazuje se da servisno učenje unapređuje tehničke kompetencije studenata, etičku osviještenost, građansku odgovornost i spremnost za karijeru, dok istovremeno generira značajne koristi za nastavnike i partnere u zajednici. Analiza naglašava disciplinarno specifične prilike i izazove, nudeći preporuke utemeljene na dokazima za učinkovitu implementaciju. Smještanjem servisnog učenja u širi kontekst održivosti i društvene odgovornosti u modnom obrazovanju, rad ističe njegov potencijal za oblikovanje kritički angažiranih, etički osviještenih stručnjaka spremnih odgovoriti na složene zahtjeve globalne modne industrije.

Ključne riječi: *servisno učenje; tekstilna tehnologija; odjevna tehnologija; moda; visoko obrazovanje*

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1. Introduction

The global fashion and textile industry faces unprecedented sustainability challenges, including escalating waste management issues driven by fast fashion production, the need for universal and adaptive product design, and the imperatives of social responsibility and ethical manufacturing. At the same time, there is growing recognition that traditional pedagogical approaches must evolve to address these complex, real-world problems. During the first two decades of the 21st century, an increasing number of institutions have sought to embed social missions as a central component of higher education, enabling them to respond more effectively to current and future challenges. Conferences and publications on this topic have proliferated across continents, accompanied by concrete initiatives in policy and programme development [1]. Higher education institutions are therefore increasingly expected to prepare graduates who possess not only technical expertise but also ethical awareness, cultural sensitivity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills as they enter the labour market.

Service learning (SL) is a pedagogical strategy that responds to these imperatives by integrating classroom instruction with community-based projects designed to meet genuine social needs. It offers a promising approach for developing both technical competencies and civic consciousness among students in textile, clothing, and fashion programmes. Since its emergence in the United States during the 1990s, research on SL has expanded globally, reflecting its growing relevance in higher education [2].

Despite growing recognition of SL across disciplines, relatively little research has systematically examined its application within textile, clothing, and fashion education. While existing studies have documented the outcomes of SL in fields such as business, engineering, and health sciences, the distinctive features of textile, clothing, and fashion education – combining creative design, technical expertise, cultural awareness, and industry-specific ethical challenges – remain insufficiently explored. This research gap is especially significant given the fashion industry's urgent sustainability and social responsibility imperatives.

This paper addresses this gap by examining the effective integration of SL into course seminars in higher education. It explores the theoretical foundations, implementation strategies, documented benefits, and practical considerations relevant to educators and administrators. The primary objective is to provide a comprehensive framework enabling fashion educators to design, implement, and evaluate SL initiatives that enhance student learning outcomes and contribute meaningfully to community needs. Secondary objectives include identifying discipline-specific challenges and opportunities, establishing evidence-based best practices, and demonstrating the potential of SL to cultivate ethically minded fashion professionals. By synthesising current research and practice, this paper presents an overview of the theoretical underpinnings, practical applications, outcomes, and implementation considerations of SL within textile, clothing, and fashion education. The aim is to offer recommendations for higher education teachers planning to integrate SL into their textile, clothing, and fashion curricula.

2. Theoretical foundations and pedagogical framework

The theoretical and pedagogical foundations of SL are deeply rooted in John Dewey's philosophy of experience and education. Central to Dewey's thought is his conception of democracy as a way of life, in which all individuals must actively participate to realise democratic values. His emphasis on learning through experience and on forging meaningful connections between schools and communities provides a critical framework for SL. Although Dewey did not coin the term "service learning", he is historically associated with the pedagogy and is frequently referred to as its "father". Dewey underscored the importance of linking educational institutions with their surrounding communities, asserting that there should be multiple points of contact between the social interests of the school and those of the community [3,4].

One approach that is receiving increasing attention is experiential learning (EL). This method was first introduced by David A. Kolb in 1984 and has since become one of the most influential learning models in contemporary education. The theory of EL is based on the idea that knowledge is acquired through experience. Kolb [5] presents the experiential learning cycle, which consists of four phases: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation.

EL forms the theoretical foundation for SL, as both emphasise knowledge acquisition through active engagement and reflection in real-world contexts. Building on this tradition, SL has evolved as a structured pedagogical approach that integrates community service with academic curricula to foster disciplinary competencies and civic responsibility. SL is often associated with, or mistaken for, volunteering, charity, community service, internships, or

field education, as it incorporates elements of each. Volunteering and charity focus on service to others, motivated by compassion and without payment, while community service highlights benefits to recipients alongside student learning. Internships and field education provide practical or extracurricular experiences that enhance disciplinary understanding but are only partially integrated with formal coursework. In contrast, SL embeds service directly into academic courses, applying knowledge to real-world contexts to enrich student learning and societal impact [6,7].

The historical development of SL in education reflects broader societal changes and evolving pedagogical theories. Early SL initiatives were often associated with moral and civic engagement, while contemporary models increasingly emphasise understanding community needs, critical thinking, problem-solving, self-awareness, and communication skills as central educational goals [8]. This focus is particularly relevant in textiles, clothing, and fashion education, where innovative and sustainable practices are essential for addressing global challenges. For example, in fashion education, integrating SL projects with the co-design concept – shifting from "designing for" to "designing with" community partners – combines lived experience, cultural knowledge, and professional expertise to facilitate mutual learning and improvement. When implemented effectively, co-design involves sharing power, prioritising relationships, employing creative tools, balancing idealism with realism, and building and exchanging skills [9]. Fashion design courses inherently involve problem-solving, user research, prototyping, and iteration, all of which can be authentically applied to community-identified needs. Problem-based SL approaches further anchor projects in real community briefs, requiring students to conduct trend analysis, forecasting, and product development within specific socio-economic contexts [10,11].

3. Implementation concepts and case studies

Empirical research highlights diverse models of SL in textile, clothing and fashion education, each illustrating distinct ways of integrating community engagement with disciplinary learning. These case studies presented below provide valuable insights into the practical application of SL principles across various course formats and partnership structures (see Fig.1).

3.1. Campus-based service concept

Campus-based SL projects provide accessible entry points for integrating community engagement into textiles, clothing and fashion curricula. Myers and Eike [12] reported on a stitch shop developed as part of an advanced apparel construction class, where students offered mending and alteration services to the campus community. Pre- and post-tests assessed students' self-efficacy in apparel construction, management, and communication skills. Findings indicated increased self-efficacy in construction and management, but no significant improvement in communication skills. The project delivered afford-able repair services to campus users while enabling students to practice technical skills in a client-facing context.

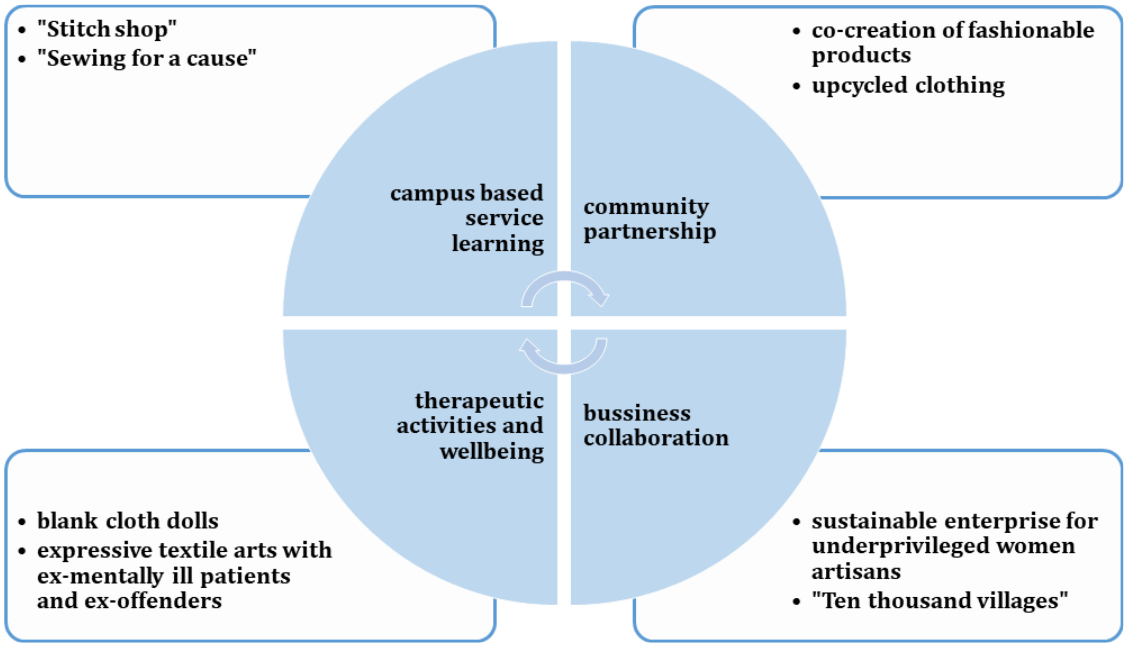


Fig.1 Service learning in textiles, clothing and fashion higher education: implementation concepts and case studies

Freeman and Kobia [13] compared a traditional service project with a full-service learning implementtation in a clothing construction course. Their "Sewing for a Cause" project initially involved students producing garments for a community partner without direct interaction. When redesigned to include direct engagement with the partner, students showed deeper involvement and reciprocal learning, highlighting the critical importance of relationship-building in SL pedagogy.

An advanced sewing course at SUNY Buffalo State University, USA [14] integrated SL by producing hospital gowns for premature infants, aligning community service with core course objectives in garment construction and quality analysis. The project fostered teamwork, reflection, and technical skill development, ultimately achieving high-quality outcomes and becoming a designated SL course.

3.2. Community partnership concept

Another educational concept that integrates SL into curricula is community cooperation, which establishes productive and mutually beneficial partnerships. Broader community collaborations enable students to address complex social needs while developing advanced professional competencies.

Hwang et al. [15] examined a collaborative service-learning (CSL) project in which fashion students partnered with refugee support organisations to co-create sustainable fashion products through workshop-based activities. Students reported increased empathy, cross-cultural understanding, and vocational insight, while refugee participants gained confidence, resources, and potential livelihood skills. This demonstration project offers guidance for educators in identifying SL initiatives that enhance student learning and foster social responsibility within apparel and textile curricula.

Chae [16] documented an innovative capstone course in which students collaborated with senior communities to design and develop upcycled clothing that met both the functional and aesthetic needs of older adults. The project strengthened students' client-centred design skills and empathy, while producing garments tailored to seniors' requirements for ease of use, comfort, and style.

3.3. Business collaboration concept

SL projects in partnership with social enterprises and fair-trade organisations provide students with authentic business contexts while supporting sustainable economic models.

West et al. [17] described a SL collaboration that engaged textile students in building a sustainable enterprise for underprivileged women artisans in India. Students gained real-world experience in production, market research, and enterprise development while contributing to capacity building and income generation for marginalised communities.

Eundeok [18] implemented problem-based SL in a product innovation course through business collaboration. A problem-based service learning (PBSL) project was conducted in partnership with Ten Thousand Villages [19], a fair-trade social enterprise, within a product innovation and management course. This integration demonstrated how SL can be systematically embedded into curricula to advance sustainability education and foster student engagement with real-world community needs. Outcomes included enhanced student empathy, critical thinking, and professional competencies, as well as benefits for the partner organisation through co-created sustainable products. The findings highlight the importance of business collaboration in SL, emphasising social enterprises as effective partners for expanding sustainability education in higher education.

3.4. Therapeutic and Wellbeing Concept

Fashion and textile skills can serve therapeutic functions when applied in SL contexts. Craft-based textile activities go beyond hobbies, acting as powerful tools for enhancing well-being and fostering social connection. Practised individually or collectively, these activities combine relaxation, creativity, and engagement, offering a pathway to improved well-being in a world characterised by stress and social disconnection [20].

Kihm et al. [21] developed a project in which students of family and consumer sciences – a research-based discipline focused on supporting individuals, families, and communities in achieving healthy and successful lives through education, research, and technology – constructed blank cloth dolls for donation to a children's hospital. These dolls were used by paediatric psychology staff as therapeutic tools to help children cope with challenges. The project simultaneously assessed the students' sewing competencies and provided a meaningful service to the community, with participants reporting feelings of excitement, pride, and a sense of purpose in applying their skills.

Lam and Au [22] found that participation in the arts and access to a range of arts opportunities can significantly improve health outcomes and increase well-being. By integrating expressive textile arts processes and allowing one to flow into another,

service users – including former mental health patients and ex-offenders – in this SL project gained access to their inner resources for healing, self-awareness, and creativity.

4. Discussion: evaluation of service learning – impacts and complexities

4.1. Service learning outcomes and benefits

There is potential for significant welfare benefits for students, teachers, and community partners, supporting the value proposition of SL in fashion education.

- *Student learning outcomes*: Through hands-on projects, students gain practical experience while effecting meaningful change in sustainability, community engagement, industry collaboration, and education. They also acquire professional and technical competencies, communication and interpersonal skills, cultural competence, civic and personal development, career preparation, and professional networks [2,10,11,16,18].
- *Teachers benefits and competence development*: When integrated into textile, clothing, and fashion curricula, SL projects offer substantial professional and educational advantages for higher education teachers, including enhanced student engagement and motivation, development of pedagogical innovation skills, strengthened community connections and professional networks, improved social and cultural awareness, and professional fulfilment [2,4,10].
- *Community and social benefits*: SL projects in textile, fashion, and clothing contribute to society by providing essential resources that strengthen community self-sufficiency. They foster social capital by reinforcing connections between educational institutions and local organisations, generating collaborative solutions that promote social cohesion and resource sharing. Their impact extends beyond individual project timeframes, supporting ongoing community development. Moreover, these initiatives advance cultural awareness and ethical practices, enabling communities to adopt more inclusive and socially responsible approaches to fashion and clothing while cultivating more informed and socially conscious members. The benefits for society and community include tangible products and services, capacity building, economic impact, wellbeing, and social inclusion [2,10,11,16,18].

4.2. Service learning challenges

While the implementation of SL projects in higher education curricula offers substantial benefits, successful implementation requires attention to common challenges and adherence to evidence-based best practices. Integrating SL into the curriculum can present significant challenges that hinder effective implementation in educational institutions. Projects without direct partner contact or co-design elements result in shallower engagement and learning. Unclear definitions of partner roles lead to mismatches between expectations and outcomes [23].

- *Lack of resources*: Insufficient resources and recognition systems in higher education institutions can limit their ability to develop and maintain community partnerships. Implementing SL requires access to community partners, funding for projects, and training for teachers and their assistants to facilitate these experiences. Educational institutions often face budget constraints that limit funding for projects, training, and materials needed for effective implementation. Resources may also be limited by a shortage of staff. The lack of trained staff can affect the quality of SL experiences, ultimately impacting student outcomes and the development of social responsibility [13,23,24].
- *Lack of time*: Teachers are often occupied with curricula, leaving little opportunity to incorporate SL activities that require additional planning and commitment [13,23,24].
- *Risk management*: Off-campus projects often introduce liability concerns, requiring institutions to establish appropriate insurance, safety protocols, and supervision arrangements [13,23,24].
- *Alignment with academic standards*: Educators must ensure that SL projects complement existing curriculum requirements while meeting educational goals. This balancing act is important to maintain academic rigour while providing experiential learning opportunities [13,23,24].

5. Slovenian experience: service learning projects in fashion, textiles and clothing

The TexUnite project (Erasmus+), in which the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, is a partner, promotes the key competences required to achieve sustainability goals by introducing SL into textile, clothing and fashion education through project-based seminars.

The project develops an online educational seminar for higher education, featuring digitally enhanced teaching and learning arrangements for implementing sustainability-oriented SL project seminars with external partners. The virtual exchange method is used to facilitate intercultural exchange among the six European partner universities. The project integrates digitalisation and sustainability [25].

The integration of SL into the curriculum fosters democratic values and awareness, encouraging university teachers, students, and external partners to engage in critical thinking, reflect on textile production and fashion consumption, cooperate, develop social competence, and participate in international exchange [25].

The partners in the TexUnite project are: University of Education Freiburg, Germany (coordinator); University of Applied Sciences Albstadt-Sigmaringen, Germany; Gheorghe Asachi Technical University of Iaşi, Romania; Trakia University Stara Zagora, Bulgaria; University of Ljubljana, Slovenia; and Ege University, Izmir, Turkey.

Four pilot seminars were successfully conducted in spring 2025. Each was implemented through tandem partnerships and integrated SL projects.

- University of education Freiburg, Germany: In collaboration with teacher training students from the bachelor seminar Fashion and Fashion Market, a comprehensive guide for the Future Fashion Walk in Freiburg was developed. Promoting sustainable fashion and shopping practices, this guide offers an alternative to fast fashion by featuring selected sustainable stores in Freiburg, along with background information on sustainable fashion. Based on interviews with shop owners, the students wrote the accompanying articles. The guide, available in English and German, will be published on the project's main website and social media platforms.
- University of Ljubljana, Slovenia: The tandem partner project Ljubljana Fashion Walk was developed and implemented with undergraduate design students. While participants found the experience highly engaging, both project leaders noted that it was demanding, as the practical workload exceeded the originally planned project hours.
- University of applied sciences Albstadt-Sigmaringen, Germany: This project was integrated into the students' industry semester, during which they collaborated with the inclusive hoodie manufacturer Wasni in Esslingen, Germany, where people with and without disabilities produce hoodies, and partnered with an influencer to promote the initiative.
- Ege university, Turkey: As the tandem partner, Ege University students produced gloves and scarves made from recycled polyester and cotton yarns to learn about sustainable materials and knitting processes. The finished products were donated to individuals at Down Kafe, a social café in Izmir that employs people with Down syndrome. Both project leaders reported that the experience was meaningful and rewarding for the students involved.

Analysis of the post-test responses from students involved in the pilot SL projects indicated that, overall, students from different universities developped a more positive attitude towards sustainable textiles and fashion after participating in the seminars. These findings suggest that the seminars effectively enhanced students' awareness of their ability to contribute to sustainability. Student feedback demonstrated strong enthusiasm for SL and included valuable suggestions for making future experiences more impactful and inclusive. Consequently, the pilot projects were considered successful, providing an excellent foundation for the upcoming semesters.

TexUnite is the first Erasmus+ initiative to embed a sustainability-oriented SL project framework into higher education curricula in textiles, clothing, and fashion. The Slovenian partner’s experience after the initial year of this three-year project has been highly positive, yielding new insights, innovative pedagogical methods, and new forms of collaboration between academic institutions and community stakeholders.

6. Recommendations and future directions

Integrating SL into fashion seminars requires careful planning, clear objectives, and genuine community partnerships. Collaborations with organisations addressing homelessness, refugee resettlement, workforce development, or textile waste must prioritise reciprocity, ensuring that community needs are truly met.

SL in fashion seminars may include designing adaptive clothing for people with disabilities, creating wardrobes for job seekers, offering upcycling workshops, conducting textile waste audits, or producing culturally appropriate garments for refugee communities. These projects should align with seminar objectives, address real community needs, and allow for student creativity and problem-solving.

Reflection sets service leaning apart from volunteer work or charity, taking place through journals, discussions, presentations, or essays.

Well-designed prompts encourage students to consider their experiences from multiple perspectives, including technical skills, industry knowledge, ethics, cultural awareness, and personal growth.

Assessment of SL should consider both the quality of community service and learning outcomes, evaluating students' technical skills, critical thinking, collaboration, cultural sensitivity, and reflection. Feedback from community partners offers essential insight into project impact.

7. Conclusion

Service learning (SL) is a powerful pedagogical innovation in textile, clothing, and fashion education, enabling the advancement of both academic learning and community well-being. As the fashion and textile industries face significant sustainability and ethical challenges, higher education institutions have an increasing responsibility to prepare graduates with technical expertise, cultural sensitivity, and a commitment to social responsibility. Integrating SL into textile, clothing, and fashion seminars supports these aims by offering students academically rigorous, professionally relevant, and socially meaningful experiences.

Evidence from various case studies demonstrates that SL fosters technical skill development, critical reflection, civic engagement, and intercultural competence, while strengthening partnerships between universities and communities. To maximise its impact, SL initiatives must be carefully designed, adequately resourced, and aligned with curricular goals, ensuring reciprocity between student learning and community benefit. Ultimately, SL can shape a new generation of textile, clothing, and fashion professionals who are not only industry-ready but also ethically conscious and committed to advancing sustainable and socially responsible practices.

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