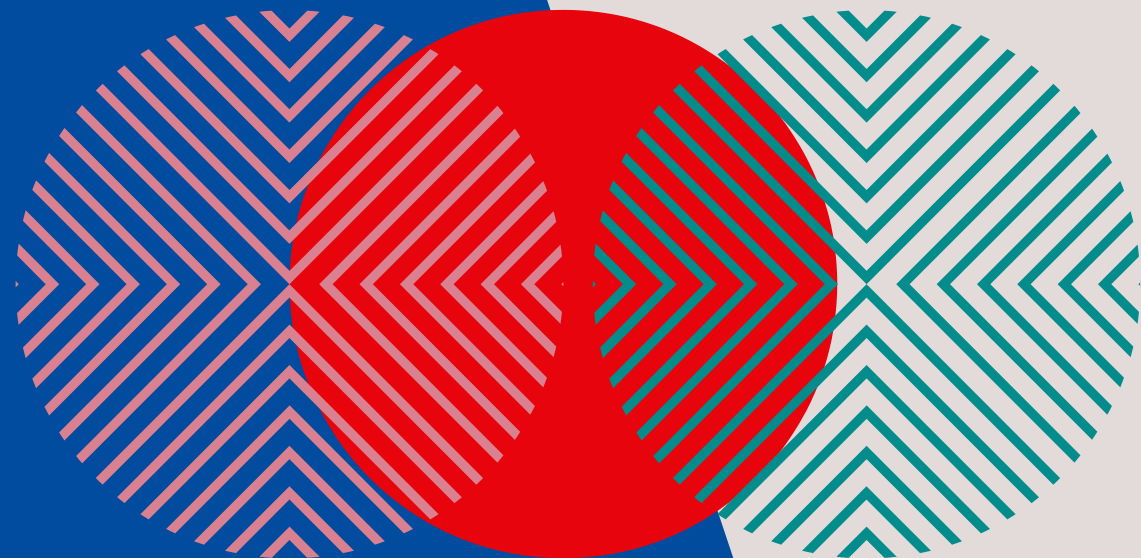


# LEARNING AND UNLEARNING AT THE UNIVERSITY

Service-learning and the civic and political empowerment  
of students, professors and universities

**Isabel Menezes, CIIE-FPCE, University of Porto**



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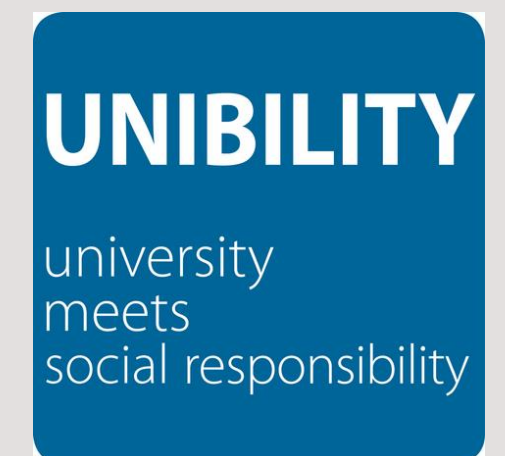
**University of Palermo, 15-16 April, 2026**

# between tradition and innovation

Education is the point at which we decide whether we **love the world** enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable.

And education, too, is where we decide whether we **love our children** enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing the common world.

**Hannah Arendt, The crisis of education, 1954**



**UNiSL 1st Congress, University of Palermo, 15-16 April, 2026**

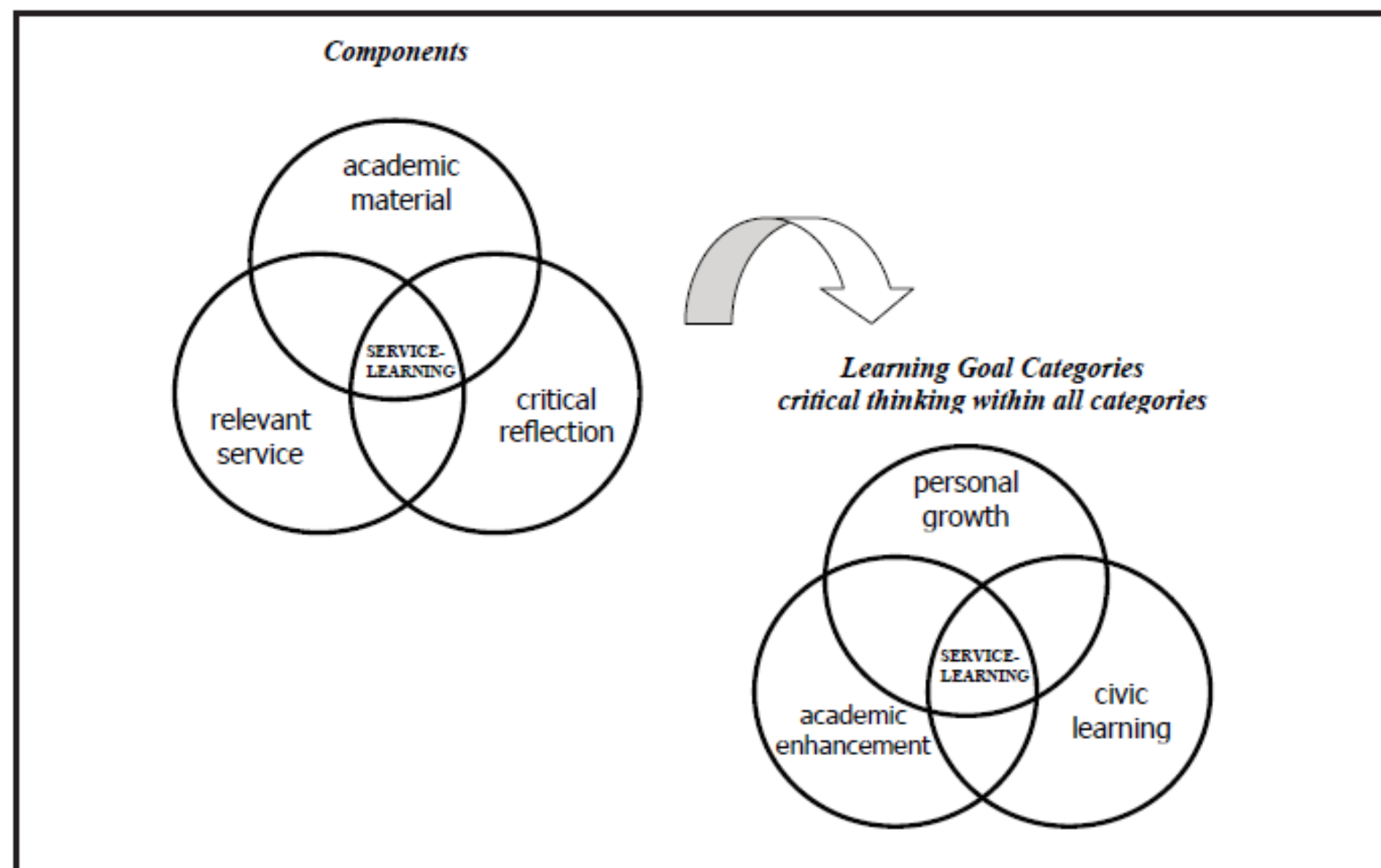
## **service-learning**



**Fiddler crabs in the mud, Rafael Martins, Believe.Earth, Brazil, 2017**



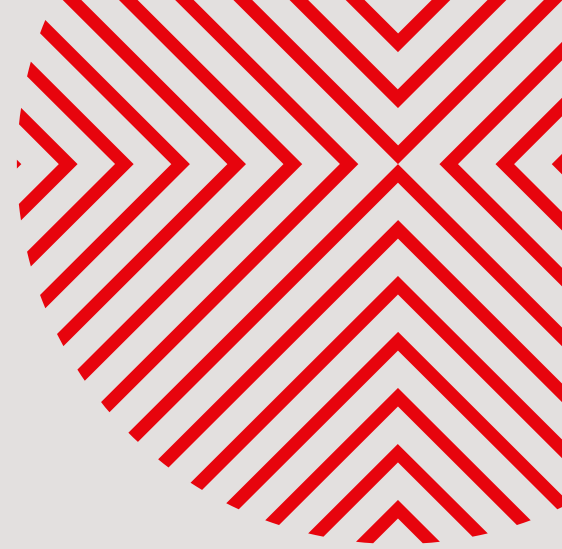
Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for the Role of Reflection in Achieving Categories of Learning Goals (service-learning example)

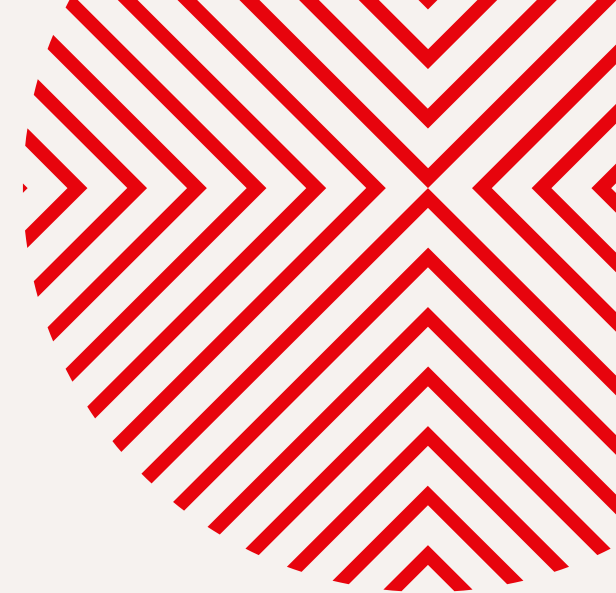


“a reflective, relational, pedagogy that **combines** community or public **service** with structured opportunities for **learning**”  
(Heffernan, 2001, p.2)

## my main message

“... when proposing SL, I always make a statement of principle: **‘This has every chance of going wrong!’**. Students and colleagues smile sympathetically. I think they realise only afterwards that it is neither humour nor poetic exaggeration: **crossing the boundaries of the classroom and situating knowledge in the places of practice is simultaneously a didactic transgression and a plunge into chaos**. It is a celebration of what life (...) has to teach us and what we have to learn from it. But **learning to learn from experience**, to use Rui Canário’s (2001) expression, **is a significant and radical challenge**.” (Menezes, 2023)





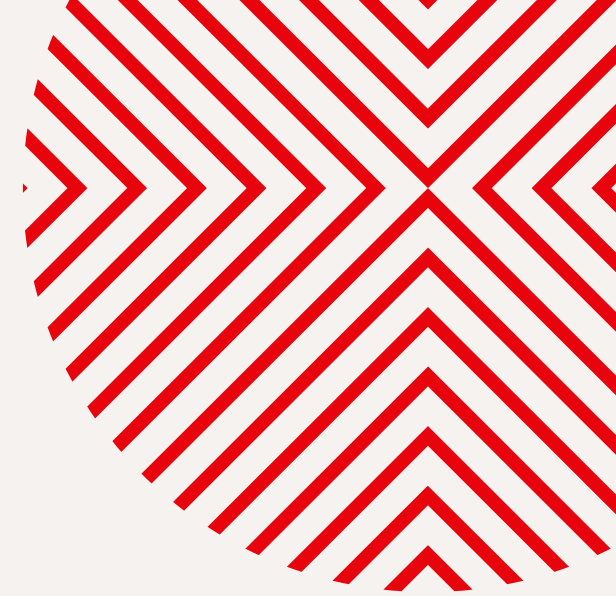
emphasis on **experiential** and **transformative** learning that research has long shown as significant:

- real life **action** → real life **challenges**
- guided **reflection**, individual and collective
- expression of **conflict**, dissent → **pluralism**
- **time** on task, continuity
- **support**, validation
- **what if?** → **imagine** alternatives

## hands-on (the mud), again and again

“the idea of **developing a project that will actually occur is encouraging**, as this allows us to step out of theory and into the practical field. (LCE1, Logbook)

“no matter how much we know the theory or imagine how things could be, **only when we are genuinely involved in a situation or context can we really learn what to do.**” (LCE2, Logbook)



## **citizenship**



**ESSA students presenting their recommendations,  
KaunasTUniversity of Technology, Lithuania, 2017**

**SL as an equalising, democratising  
experience,  
between learners  
place-based --- universal**

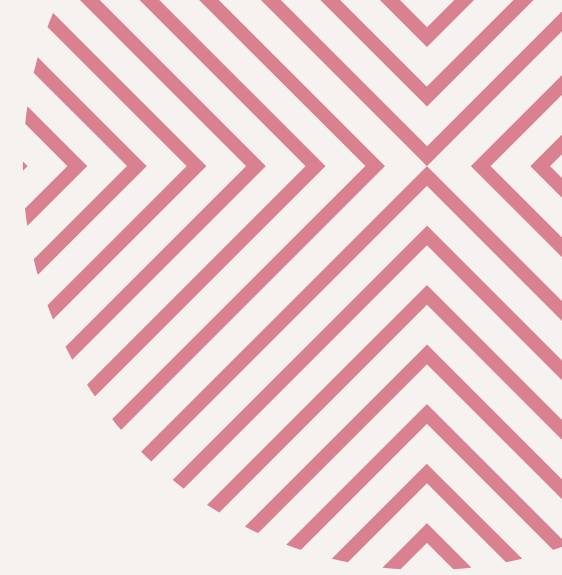
**individual and collective action-reflection ---  
individual analysis and reflection**

**concrete --- abstract**

**committed --- neutral**

**emotionally engaged --- detached/rationalised**

**embodied --- disembodied**



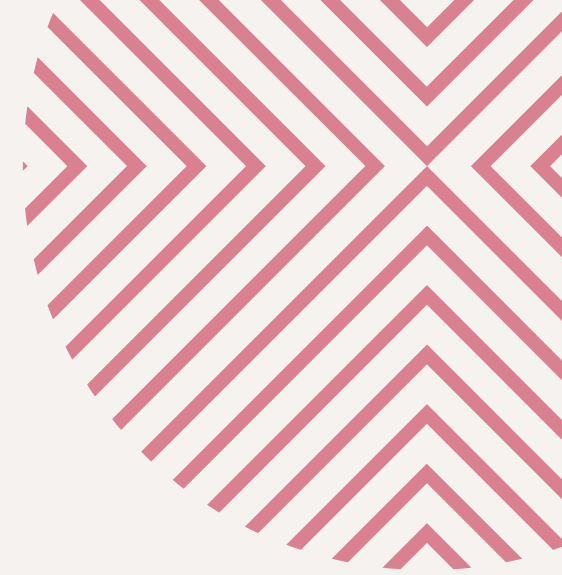
## challenging conceptions of service

–

### learning and unlearning

“At first, I confess that I was reticent, as I wondered about the **risks of leaving** my comfort zone, but I concluded that **there is no better way to learn than in a completely strange and new place.**” (LCE3, Logbook)

“... it is not about ‘**helping defenceless and helpless people**’; it is not about **placing ourselves in a superior position, as saviours**, but rather, about creating a network for **sharing resources and uplifting the community** as a whole. When I understood this, I realised **how mistaken I had previously been in my intentions**, including in the first reflection proposed for the logbook.” (I.Psi1, Logbook)



## communities with voice, vote and veto

“community work ... should not be viewed neither through the **romantic lens** that makes external agents into fairy godmothers, missionaries, 'sisters of charity', saviours or revolutionary leaders whose **magic touch of science and goodwill** will overnight transform the situation and people ...; nor with the **technicist criteria of the specialist who believes s/he has both the questions and the answers** and who goes to the community to impose a point of view, a mode of action and his/her solutions” (Maritza Montero, 1998, p. 213)



## embrancing the political

- recongising **communities have a say**, is also recognising their **epistemological status** - as producers of knowledge and sites for learning
- creating opportunities for **voicing narratives of oppression** - in their own terms, which also implies **questioning the adequacy and neutrality of existing (academic/scientific) knowledge** - sites for unlearning
- the need for a genuine **political perspective** that recognises and confronts **power and inequalities**

## SL project: secondary school project on the 50 years of the democratic revolution

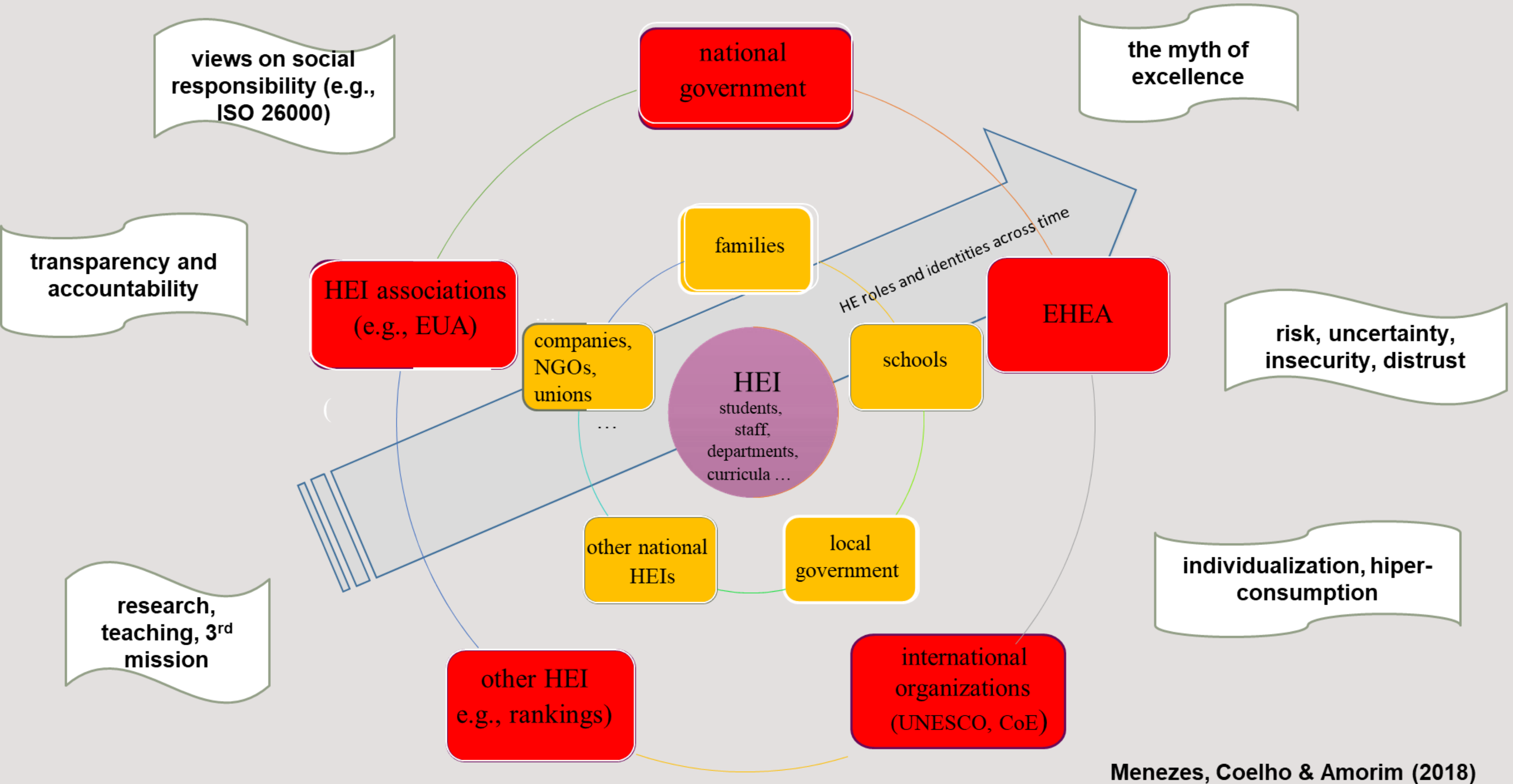
“You know, I did what you said. I talked to my family, to my grandparents. **And it did not go well.** I asked them what it was like **when Salazar was around** - and they said it was great!!! They said it was better than today, it was safer. **And I said (still looking shocked): ‘Are you dumb?! How can you say that?!’**” (young girl, ESAH)



# university social responsibility



**Language workshop for migrants, University of Porto,  
Portugal, 2025**



Menezes, Coelho & Amorim (2018)

## What is USR?



- central to the education of “**public-minded alumni**” (Chase, 1923, p. 520), committed to the life of the *res publica*
- a way for **inclusion and diversity** in terms of both disciplines and students
- a way to “**knowledge production that is open to epistemic diversity** (...), open to **critical cosmopolitan pluriversalism** – a task that involves the radical refounding of our ways of thinking and a transcendence of our disciplinary divisions” (Mbembe, 2016, pp. 36-7)



## connecting and expanding learning

"... to acquire these skills, **I may need to step outside my "world", my own realities, and take a closer look at what is happening around me.** It is true that throughout this degree I have been working on this aspect, yet I believe it never hurts to explore it further. It is only through experience, work and real life that **we can truly understand everything we have been studying** (LCE, 3)"

"I appreciate the idea that **teaching and learning also occur outside the Faculty**; I feel like I learned a lot from the students and the institution itself." (LCE, 4)



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# What is the university for?



“to train students to their multiple, future careers”

**Napoleonic model**

“to create and maintain a broad, advanced knowledge base and to stimulate research and innovation”

**Humboltian model**

“to enable students’ personal development”

**Newmanian model**

“to prepare students for life as active citizens in a democratic society”

**Deweyian model**

**A vision of 4 archetypes of HE (Zgaga, 2009) illustrated with quotes from the London**

**Communiqué**

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“As my future job heavily relies on the work towards the community, especially due to my interest in Public Health, **addressing inequalities, ethical problems and reconsidering the usage or efficiency of resources** is an essential pillar of my upcoming profession” (SAR41 - Male, Medicine, UPorto).

“For me it made me think (...) about how I react in certain circumstances, like, for example, **I tend to be very impulsive and kind of telling people what to do instead of maybe being more collaborative and negotiate...** rather than telling people what to do...” (FGD5 - Female, Geo Sciences, UEdinburgh)

**professional**

**knowledge**

**personal**

**civic**

“... I had only a basic understanding of USR, but training and auditing activities substantially increased my awareness of USR. Now **I have the ability to describe and discuss why USR is an important area for any university**” (FGD6 - Female, Chemical Engineering, KTU)

“University has a **territory where it is physically bounded and located, but the institution is not alone**. That territory is shared with other people, from different backgrounds, different experiences and different conceptions of what reality is as a whole. **University has therefore the obligation to get back to that people that surround that institution, recognizing them and making them part of the definition of policies**” (SAR26- Male, Psychology, UPorto).

- experience in not a well-organised teacher, and yet **we are all learners**
- learning beyond university walls implies **listening and recognising local epistemologies**
- what if? imagining **universities as pluriversal beacons of learning and unlearning**

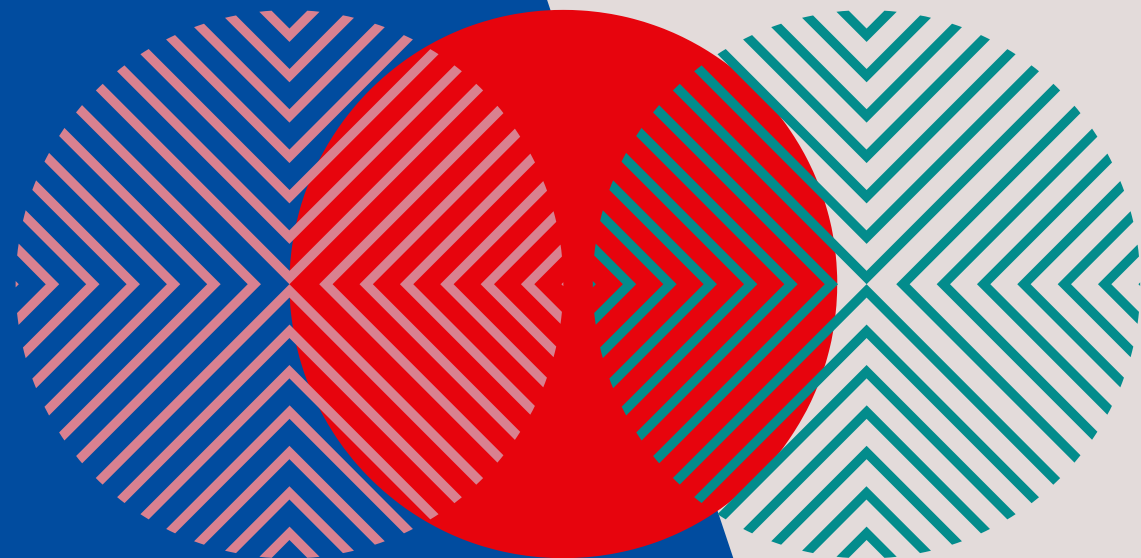
**... and sometimes**

“I told my mom I had to go to an ESSA seminar, and she said:  
**‘Oh, ESSA ... has it not ended already?’** ... and I said **‘No,  
no .. to be honest, I think it will never end!’** (female  
student, 25, Medicine)

## THANK YOU

and also my **colleagues** at the University of Porto, without whom this work could never be:

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