

Learning and Teaching in and with the Local Community: The Use of a Critical and Innovative Methodology in ESECS / IPLeiria

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Abstract

This work presents and reflects on a pedagogical experience conducted at the School of Education and Social Sciences of the Polytechnic Institute of Leiria, with undergraduate students in Social Education. This experience carried over the past three years (2015-2018) focuses on the use of teaching-learning methodologies. They are operationalized in active collaboration with local community entities / institutions - schools at all levels of education, support institutions for the elderly, people with disabilities, people in situations of marginalization and social exclusion, health institutions, local development institutions, cultural equipment, among others - which become privileged contexts for student training. Being the social educator a relationship agent that acts with educational intention in different contexts of social intervention, this professional training encourages the use of new teaching-learning methodologies. Thus, in the Community Animation Strategies course unit, students are challenged to work on projects where, within a group, they apply theoretical knowledge and carry out a socio-educational intervention in the chosen local community entity / institution, meeting the needs felt by the entity institution, or by the target audience belonging to it. Students are challenged to be the protagonists in building their knowledge [5]). This construction is done, in parallel, in different contexts: at classroom and at entities chosen by students, in a dialogical and collaborative relationship between practical intervention and theoretical reflection. These three years of experience allow us to verify that this methodology of learning in practical context results in benefits for the students. Based on the content analysis of the individual reflective reports carried out by each of the students – in a total of 123 students - the idea standing out is that this methodology allows students to practice and test the theoretical contents learned at the classroom bringing at the same time, real contexts challenges to the classroom of [4]. In addition, it favors the acquisition of cognitive, non-cognitive and social-emotional skills in a more solid construction of the social educator's professional profile. It's hoped that the experience described here will help to deepen reflection on teaching-learning methodologies in Higher Education within a framework of involvement with the local community.

Keywords: Higher education; Professional Profile; Social Education; Teaching-learning, methodologies.

1. Introduction

In a society that aspires to greater levels of well-being and quality of life, there are multiple indicators that show us the gradual changes and expansion limits of education [4] [5]. In response to this phenomenon, new methods are emerging in various countries, targeting different groups in unprecedented spaces and educational players are grouped around what is called Social Education [1]. Being the social educator a relationship agent, that acts with educational intent in different contexts of social intervention, this professional training encourages the use of new teaching-learning methodologies. Thus, we have new challenges that are ascribed to the higher education institutions, which are very characteristic of contemporary society [3]. If for centuries memorization has been valued, today, Higher Education is compelled by the labour market to educate professionals with a greater capacity for flexibility, autonomy and adaptability to different situations. Thus, in addition to betting on innovative, practical, flexible and diversified educational strategies gathered at their educational institution, the student is also called to participate actively in their educational process, in the development of skills that go beyond knowing/ perceiving and that are linked with the know-how and the knowledge of how to intervene.

Hence, in the 21st century, the training of professionals in higher education institutions requires active teaching-learning methodologies, which presents new challenges to students, enabling them to be an integral part in the construction of knowledge [5]. That is why today's education, that prepares the professionals of tomorrow, must involve more and more the students in their own education as well as in their curricula. Within this framework, project-based learning stands out.



We agree with Rosalina Costa (2016) when she argues that the use of this type of methodology favours learning in diverse spaces and or times, where students make use of tools that best fit their own personal characteristics, thus personalizing their work. This type of methodology provides students with the contact and knowledge of a variety of real situations, where autonomous learning and development of skills such as communication, collaboration, creativity and critical thinking are essential [6].

Considering the professional profile of the Social Educator it was decided to opt for the use of active teaching-learning methodologies, in close collaboration with community institutions of the area in which the school is integrated, making these methodologies educational benchmarks. This experience will be studied here, based on the reflection analysis of the individual reports carried out by the students, in order to understand how the main pedagogical objectives of the curricula unit are achieved.

This article is organized in five main moments. After this introduction, we will move on to the contextualization of the pedagogical experience that was carried out. Then, we will give a brief explanation of the methodology used and present the results of the experiment. Finally, we will conclude with a precise review of the main ideas presented.

2. Contextualization of the pedagogical experience

This article presents and reflects on a pedagogical experience developed at the School of Education and Social Sciences of the Polytechnic of Leiria, Portugal. This experiment was carried out with the students of the Social Education degree, within the scope of the Community Animation Strategies course (taught in the 2nd semester), which presents the following pedagogical objectives: To use Animation as a way to promote involvement and dynamism of groups and communities; To adopt and develop innovative skills with regard to animation practices as community development strategies; Structuring projects, planning and implementing intervention activities in Community Animation.

Hence, considering the nature of the contents taught in this course unit, it was decided in the academic year 2015/2016 to challenge students within a group of three / four elements to develop in a practical context the programmatic contents, and carry out a socio-community intervention, consisting of at least three sessions. This experience was carried over the past three years (2015-2018) and focused on the use of teaching-learning methodologies. They became feasible only through active collaboration with local community entities / institutions - schools at all levels of education, support institutions for the elderly, people with disabilities, people in situations of marginalization and social exclusion, health institutions, local development institutions, cultural equipment, among others – a privileged framework for student training. The role of these institutions is crucial throughout this process, since it is their responsibility to welcome the group of students, to inform them of their social and professional reality and to guide them in the design and implementation of intervention activities. The undertaking of this experience involves the development of a process consisting of five essential steps: choosing the institution that will host the project; contact with the chosen institution and knowledge thereof; construction of the intervention project; implementation of activities and, finally, evaluation of the project. This assessment is done through the elaboration of an individual report in which students are challenged to construct a conscious and critical reflection of the whole process.

This whole process is backed by the teacher of the curricular unit who, in a classroom context, works in two distinct domains: on the one hand, presents and explores, through interactive classes, the contents which are more theoretical - but are fundamental in the conduct of a professional social educator - and, on the other hand, supports the students in all phases of the development of the intervention projects as well as in the application of knowledge and in the accomplishment of various competences. In fact, the construction of knowledge takes place in a very close relationship between the teacher that supports back at school and the institution that actively participates in the development of practical knowledge.

3. Methodology

After three years of development of this pedagogical experience, we decided to assess it in order to know the portrayals of the students as to the contribution of the use of teaching-learning methodologies that were undertaken in active collaboration with the entities / institutions of the local community. An exploratory study was developed, framed in the general paradigm of qualitative research. In order to respond to the objective of the study, through the technique of content analysis, the individual reflective reports were analysed by 123 students from the three school years: 2015/2016 - 43 students; 2016/2017 - 41 students and 2017/2018 - 39 students.



4. Results and discussion: the contributions of the Higher Education and Community relationship in the training of social education professionals

In a crossover of information between scientific literature and the results of the analysis of the individual reports, we can substantiate the goal outlined, having as a structuring axis the themes that emerged transversally in the subjects' discourses, as well as the respective categories and subcategories. Table 1 shows the thematic analysis grid.

Table 1. Thematic analysis grid

Thematic	Category	Subcategory
Teaching-learning procedures	Benefit from the use of active methodologies	Autonomy
		Relationship
		Theory / practice integration
		A more conscious view of reality
		Professional integration
	Challenges / difficulties	Lack of previous experience
		Articulation with professionals
		Prejudice

In analysing the data, we highlight the Teaching Procedures theme, from which two categories emerge: benefit of the use of active methodologies and challenges / difficulties. With regard to the first category, the students highlighted the immediate benefits from the use of this type of methodology. In addition, they frequently highlighted the level of autonomy encouraged throughout this process. According to the data, students argue that this autonomy brings a sense of involvement and responsibility to the success of the project, resulting in personalized and meaningful learning experiences [2].

The capacity to develop relationships was another aspect mentioned by the students, who recognized the importance of this type of teaching-learning methodologies in the promotion of fruitful relationships, be it with their peers, with the teacher, with the professionals or the targeted groups in the institutions. In accordance with the data, we were able to perceive, the importance of having an ethical and adequate behaviour, which the students recognized as being fundamental for the professional whose main objective is to promote the involvement and dynamization of groups and communities [2] [5].

Another aspect focused by students is the importance that this type of active methodologies is linked to their professional integration. As can be seen from the data, the students recognize that this experience allowed them to experience the theoretical contents, acquiring a deeper understanding and a greater connection with the real world [6]. It is therefore not surprising that students admit that involvement in this type of process has enabled them to have a more conscious view of reality because it involved them in solving real problems. The students realized that the important thing is not to objectify social phenomena, but to know them, to understand them, to intervene in their social vitality [4].

Students recognized as an additional benefit that the use of these methodologies and genuine experience allowed them to define career goals and introduce new options for professional performance [3].

In their reports, students also reflected on the major challenges / difficulties experienced throughout this process. They begin by focusing on the lack of previous experience which left them, on occasion, without references of how to behave. The articulation with the professionals of the institutions was also mentioned as a challenge / difficulty in the extent that, sometimes, it was difficult to coordinate availabilities or to share the same trend of thought and action in regard to the student's projects. Finally, the students refer to the existence, on their part, of preconceived ideas regarding contexts and the target group, creating entropy in the design and implementation of the intervention project. However, these challenges / difficulties resulted, according to the students, in learnings that contributed to the acquisition of knowledge and skills.

Thus, and in response to the research objective, the students recognize that the use of this type of active methodology, within a framework of involvement with the local community, was fundamental to achieve the pedagogical objectives of the curricular unit, but, above all, it was important in the construction of their professional identity and even personal and social identity.

5. Final reflections

In light of the results found, we can say that the use of active teaching-learning methodologies that have been operationalized in active collaboration with local community entities / institutions are viewed by students as fruitful experiences that contribute to a more solid social education knowledge. Thus, the education of the future in the training of these professionals must necessarily use this type of methodologies because, as the data show, they allow the scientific construction in the various fields of their professional activity, since they favour the acquisition of cognitive, non-cognitive and social-emotional capacities.

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