Active Teaching-learning Methodologies in Higher Education: A Project with the Community

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Active teaching-learning methodologies are a reality at the School of Education and Social Sciences of the Polytechnic of Leiria (Portugal), namely through the articulation with institutions of the community. The qualitative research presented in this article intends to analyse the perception of the students who are attending the Professional Higher Technical Course in Sociocultural and Sports Intervention, specifically with regard to the importance of these methodologies in a project carried out with the District Hospital of Leiria. During the development of this partnership, 42 students were challenged to collaborate throughout the training process and, at the end, they were asked to write a report, which was considered the data collection instrument. These individual reports include descriptions, analyses and reflections that were processed through content analysis, using categories, adopting an exploratory approach. The results showed that the students considered that this methodology of teaching-learning allows the acquisition of know-what, know-why and knowhow competencies. Moreover, they admit that the articulation with external institutions contributes to a better acquisition and mobilisation of practical knowledge that is applicable to different situations, spaces and times in their future professional lives.

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Keywords: higher education, active teaching-learning methodologies, pedagogic innovation, community intervention, transdisciplinarity

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Introduction

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This article presents a partnership project that was developed in the academic year 2021/2022, with the students of the 1st and 2nd years of the Higher Professional Technical Course of Sociocultural and Sports Intervention of the School of Education and Social Sciences of the Polytechnic Institute of Leiria and the Santo André Hospital - District Hospital of Leiria, which are institutions located in the centre of mainland Portugal. During two semesters, the students (20 first-year students and 22 second-year students) were challenged to conceive and develop a set of sociocultural and sports intervention strategies in the Hospital. More specifically, they were required to plan and carry out sociocultural animation activities with the professionals and the patients from all the services, with the aim of enhancing new processes of humanisation and (re)building of the relationships within the Hospital unit. It is important to clarify that this partnership has as its main interlocutor the Humanization Commission of the District Hospital of Leiria, which aims to make the hospital context more supportive and courteous through the development of activities related to the promotion of well-being for users, families and professionals.

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46 47 This work was integrated in the curricular units of Fundamentals of Animation (1st year) and Management of Community Intervention Projects (2nd year). Both curricular units take place in the 1st semester of the academic year, and

therefore, during the same period of time. Their learning objectives are the theoretical acquisition of concepts related to sociocultural and sports intervention and their subsequent practical application, through the construction and implementation of actions and projects. In general terms, the purpose of the curricular unit that takes place in the 1st year is to bring the knowledge and practice of the sociocultural and sports intervention closer to the community. In the 2nd year, the aim is to deepen the knowledge acquired with regard to professional skills in the various types of institutions/organizations, contexts and equipment. This includes the use of techniques and tools that are most suitable for the planning, development and evaluation of socio-cultural and sports intervention projects.

In operational terms, the work is developed as follows: students organize themselves into groups of three/four and choose the Care Unit (within the District Hospital of Leiria) in which they intend to work, but they may also choose to work in more than one Unit. In the work presented here, the following units were chosen: Outpatient Pediatrics, Pediatrics, Palliative Care, Day Hospital, Oncology, Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Psychiatry and Mental Health. Students may also choose the recipients of their projects, that is, they can design and implement courses of action for the users of the services, for their relatives or for the professionals who work in these services. They also have the possibility to develop projects which are more comprehensive and which integrate various groups of recipients. By enabling students to choose the unit(s) and recipients of their projects, they get a motivational boost and become involved and responsible for their own learning process (Costa, 2016; Pelletier, et al., 2023; Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2022).

The process begins in a classroom context: the teacher presents, analyzes and discusses with the students the concepts that constitute the theoretical and conceptual framework upon which the course of action to be developed is based. During this phase, some professionals of the Hospital are invited to be present, in order to be able to provide real information "from the field", which complements and illustrates the concepts that are being discussed. After this initial phase, of acquiring the theoretical concepts and knowledge of the main characteristics of the Units and their respective users and professionals, even if at a distance, the students start making the diagnoses. In this second phase, students go to the Hospital and to the services they have chosen to develop their projects, seeking to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics, the perceived needs and the potential of each of these contexts. This diagnostic interpretation involves organizing the necessary data to define intervention strategies, mobilizing a range of knowledge, linking theory to practice (OEDC, 2018; Esteban-Yago et al., 2023). After completing this phase of diagnosis and understanding the reality, students begin the planning phase, establishing intervention priorities, work hypotheses and course of action strategies. This resulting in the design of sociocultural and sports activities that enhances the humanization of interpersonal relationships. Also at this phase, the project's scheduling, method of implementation and evaluation were organized. The planning phase primarily takes place in the classroom, where the teacher acts as a knowledge and learning mediator (Alam & Islam, 2022; Taye

& Alduais, 2022; Sousa et al., 2021), supporting students in mobilizing theoretical knowledge and applying the practical knowledge acquired in the Hospital.

The next phase, the implementation and execution of the activities, follows the previously discussed and validated schedule with the Hospital and the units where the projects take place. Each group of students must develop at least three structured sessions of activities, each lasting a minimum of two hours. Thus, projects with different activities, involving different recipients, issues, needs and different age groups are developed, but all with the same premise: to foster humanization processes. Finally, there is the evaluation phase. Althoughthe evaluation is carried out throughout the entire project, this phase has a special focus at this point, when students analyse and evaluate the entire process that has been developed and the results they have obtained, culminating in an individual evaluation report.

This was the basis to create an exploratory study, which sought to understand the students' perceptions regarding the use of these types of participatory teachinglearning methodologies.

Regarding the structure of the work, and after reflecting on the importance of using active teaching-learning methodologies in the first part, the methodology used, the research question and the objectives will also be contextualised in the next part, In the third section, the results are presented and discussed to reach the conclusions expressed in the last part of the article.

Literature Review

Innovative Teaching-learning Methods Involving the Community

Today's society is characterised by the progressive modification and expansion of the boundaries of education and educational systems (Esteban-Yago et al., 2023; Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2022; Morin, 2010). In the midst of the 21st century, teaching, particularly at the higher education level, requires another type of approach, which is more focused on understanding and acting in the complexity of modern times (Almeida et al., 2022; Taye & Alduais, 2022), since "contemporaneity is not compatible with teaching in which we work with abstract and decontextualized activities and in which mechanical, repetitive skills are developed, easily executed by machines" (Xavier, 2015, p. 33). Strictly speaking, nowadays, the challenge goes beyond that: the aim is to have holistic-based teaching, in terms of experiences and knowledge, which integrates the contents and the curriculum in an interdisciplinary way (Jensen et al., 2019; Alam & Islam, 2022).

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In this sense, the path to follow is that of using active teaching-learning methodologies, in an approach that proposes new challenges to students, enabling them to take on the role of subjects in the construction of knowledge (Kukulska-Hulme *et al.*, 2022; Morin, 2010). Therefore, the structuring axis is the preparation of technicians and professionals, but at the same time, the training of citizens with the ability to interact with themselves, with others and with the world around them (Esteban-Yago *et al.*, 2023; Gomez, 2010; Manikandakumar & Sridevi, 2023).

From this perspective, educational institutions work in a three-dimensional logic, that is, they are concerned with the development of methodologies that have repercussions on individual civic attitude, interpersonal relationships and students' professional competencies (Kukulska-Hulme *et al.*, 2022; Sousa *et al.*, 2021).

In light of the above, the vast possibilities that can emerge from the connection between the educational institution and society are evident, with explicit effects that one has on the other. In this close relationship with society, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are able to develop students' competencies in terms of learning to know and learning to learn, enabling the acquisition of technical skills and specific competencies in the professional area in which they are training, by integrating new knowledge, new research modalities, and establishing a connection between theory and practice (Manikandakumar & Sridevi, 2023; Santos et al., 2016). In this relationship, students are challenged to practice and test ideas, where the theoretical component emerges as a way to understand and improve the practice (Alves & Teo, 2020; Esteban-Yago et al., 2023; Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2022). However, the competencies in terms of learning to be and learning to live together are not neglected, in a logic of training democratic, participatory and humanistic citizens (Taye & Alduais, 2022; Frank, 2023), especialmente in a time of increasing social and cultural diversity: "students are expected to be able to act autonomously, so as to build their own criteria for feeling and acting, strengthening their individuality with freedom and responsibility" (Xavier, 2015, p. 31).

In this sense, the active teaching-learning methodologies developed in collaboration with institutions in the community surrounding the HEIs emerge as useful tools for training professionals (OECD, 2018). While there is a wide array of pedagogical innovation strategies (Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2022), this study essentially resorted to dual learning scenarios. This strategy advocates the creation of learning scenarios based on the link with the labour market. Thus, through the creation of hybrid learning scenarios, the classroom aligns itself with the labour market, adopting and implementing problem- solving pedagogies, cases, real situations, which requires the development of critical thinking and the collaboration among various individuals, in different domains of knowledge.

Active pedagogies enable students to engage in a more meaningful way, giving space for them to intervene, reflect and take a stand on the contents that are being worked on, assuming a central role in the teaching-learning process (Almeida et al., 2022; Taye & Alduais, 2022). This pedagogical strategy favours a more personalized learning, so students are more motivated and committed.

The use of the dual learning scenarios strategy allows for the active and dynamic application of knowledge where, together with the labour market entities, the student develops critical analysis, the ability to question and collaborative work. This strategy of pedagogical innovation is especially important in the courses that train the future professionals who will work in the area of sociocultural intervention, as they enable students to immerse in real contexts and engage in personalized work that makes use of tools that best suit their own characteristics (Costa, 2016; Manikandakumar & Sridevi, 2023). In fact, in courses where the job opportunities are very extensive in relation to the areas,

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contexts and target audiences of intervention, being able to develop, throughout the course, activities and courses of action in various domains allows for a more informed choice in terms of professional practice and specialization.

In the work developed with external institutions, students are invited to draw upon different knowledge, both scientific and humanistic, using various methodologies and tools, with different audiences and in different fields of action. Given that they are offered opportunities to learn and experiment with different strategies in various areas, students are encouraged to develop new ideas and solutions, in an imaginative and innovative way, as a result of the interaction with others or personal reflection, and apply them to different contexts and learning areas, in a logic of non-abstract conception and experimentation (Pelletier, et al., 2023; Kukulska-Hulme *et al.*, 2022).

In the accomplishment of this purpose, the teaching-learning methodologies that are operationalised in the work developed with community institutions provide for learning and the acquisition of various competencies, where students express and use multiple skills in the development of essential tools for their future profession (Manikandakumar & Sridevi, 2023). Therefore, it is essential to systematically and intentionally promote activities, in and outside the classroom, that allow students to make choices, confront different points of view, solve problems and make decisions, applying the contents covered in the Curricular Units (Sousa *et al.*, 2021).

This paradigm, in contrast to the approaches of previous centuries, values the association between experience and knowledge, where knowledge is built through action and the reflection on action, in a logic in which "school learning must be related to living in society, because the most meaningful and lasting learning is the one that acquires meaning in its relationship with the world" (Xavier, 2015, p. 34). From this point of view, education is not separate from community life, but is rather a part of it, requiring collaborative work with civil society (Taye & Alduais, 2022). Thus, the promotion of solutions of complementarity and the creation of synergies with community institutions for social intervention are valued, enhancing real experiences of participation, as well as application and mobilisation of knowledge.

Therefore, it is a matter of encouraging "learning through practice", which is an aspect of paramount importance in an area that requires the acquisition of practical competencies and the concrete experience of social and political life, as is the case with social intervention (Kukulska-Hulme *et al.*, 2022; Sousa *et al.*, 2021). Thus, the training of professionals should start from the assumption that it is a global process, which cannot be limited to formal teaching in the classroom, but should rather prioritise collaborations with external groups or organisations, creating the right partnerships and providing the best opportunities for students to deepen scientific and technical competencies (Manikandakumar & Sridevi, 2023).

Methodology

 The methodology of a research study must be appropriate to the object of study and the objectives to be achieved. The researcher should choose the most suitable approach and tools, ensuring their feasibility and validity (Guerra, 2006). The main issue addressed in this study is the understanding of the students' social perceptions (Clark & Creswell, 2015) regarding the use of active teaching-learning methodologies, in a logic of pedagogical innovation associated with community intervention.

Given the above, a qualitative paradigm was chosen, since the aim is to gain a deeper understanding of an innovative pedagogical experience. It was considered appropriate to adopt an exploratory typology, as it can serve as the foundation for future research of a similar nature.

The research presented here was based on the community intervention projects developed by the students in the 1st and 2nd years of the Higher Technical Course in Sociocultural and Sports Intervention of the School of Education and Social Sciences of the Polytechnic of Leiria (Portugal), in the various services of the District Hospital of Leiria. These projects were integrated in several curricular units of the course and their objective was to work on specific contents of conception, implementation and evaluation of strategies and activities in sociocultural and sports intervention, within the community. By applying these projects in a real context, the idea was to give a motivational impulse to students, involving them and making them responsible for their own learning process.

Therefore, and in light of the above, the objective was to understand the students' perceptions regarding the use of this type of methodology, as reflected in the following research question: what are the contributions of active teaching-learning methodologies in the training process, according to the students? In order to address this question, the following research objectives were set out: a) To identify the competencies that the use of this methodology allows students to develop; b) To understand the importance given by the students to the collaboration with the community within their training process.

The participants in this study were 42 students, consisted of 20 female and 22 male students, aged between 18 and 23. All students participated in the intervention projects which were developed at the partner institution - the Hospital, and in the end, they completed individual reflective reports, which served as the data collection tool for this research.

The reports had a pre-defined structure and contents, which were developed around topics related to the process developed throughout the semester, directing the students' reflections according to the objectives identified above. In these reports, the participants described, analysed, and reflected upon the entire experienced process. The topics contained in the reports served as the basis for further analysis, leading to themes and categories. So, the data were processed and analysed through content analysis, using categories and subcategories (Bardin, 2013; Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023), which are presented in the table below, in order of frequency.

Table 1. Thematic Analysis Table

Theme	Category	Subcategory
Acquired competencies	Learning to do	Apply theoretical concepts
		Create appropriate intervention
		strategies
		Operate in the training area
		Deal with the unexpected
	Learning to be	Autonomy
		Self-esteem
	Learning to live	Work with peers
	together	Relate to the target audience
Collaboration with the community	Immersion in a real context	Non-abstract content conception
		Collaborative work
		Multi-referential learning spaces
		Differentiated models
		Mutual gains

Source: own authorship

Based on the data systematised in the table above, in the next phase we will address the set objectives by incorporating the recorded units of the subjects' speeches, which will be presented in a coded form (with an "S." for student and a number) in order to maintain the anonymity of the participants.

Results and Discussion

By combining the scientific literature with the results of the content analysis of the participants' individual reflective reports, we are able to address the first objective of the research: to identify the competencies that the use of the methodology enables students to develop.

Based on the results obtained, according to the students' opinions, this teaching-learning methodology enables the acquisition of competencies in terms of learning to do, learning to be and learning to live together. In terms of learning to do, the participants in this study first highlight the possibility of applying theoretical concepts covered in various curricular units of the course's study plan (Esteban-Yago *et al.*, 2023; Santos *et al.*, 2016). In fact, according to the subjects, this type of methodology offers a stronger connection to the real world as it allows them to practice (Almeida et al., 2022; Alves & Teo, 2020; Kukulska-Hulme *et al.*, 2022) and, therefore, acquire deeper knowledge: "I found it very interesting to be able to do activities in the field that I had only known theoretically and thus learn much more" (Student - S.- 10).

Another aspect highlighted by the participants was the possibility of being able to create intervention strategies appropriate to the situations and audiences. The students learned to apply their competencies in a variety of situations (Costa, 2016; Manikandakumar & Sridevi, 2023), meeting the needs and potentialities that they perceived to be truly important and significant: "conceiving and implementing intervention strategies is a very complex process because we have to

consider many variables. Many of these would not have even crossed our minds if we had not gone out into the field" (S. 20).

The students also valued the fact that this type of methodology provides them with the opportunity to experience the profession they are training for (Alves & Teo, 2020; Kukulska-Hulme *et al.*, 2022). In essence, these methodologies enable students to be in contact with tasks similar to those they will have to perform in their future profession, allowing them to experience what the reality will be like after their training years: "carrying out this project allowed me to experience what I will be doing as a professional and that was very good" (S. 21).

Finally, in the learning to do category, students mentioned the ability to deal with the unexpected. According to the participants, this type of methodology helps develop improvisational skills (Costa, 2016; Esteban-Yago *et al.*, 2023; Sousa *et al.*, 2021), which means being able to observe and analyse the social reality, adjusting actions based on that analysis and adapting them to practice as much as possible: "I believe that the most significant learning outcome is the ability to improvise, meaning being in the context where something does not go as planned and having to quickly adapt activities or strategies" (S.19).

Regarding the category of learning to be, the participants first highlight the autonomy that methodologies of this nature provide (Gomez, 2010; Manikandakumar & Sridevi, 2023; Xavier, 2015). In fact, throughout the process, the students' ability to take on an active role in the construction, implementation and evaluation of the entire process was emphasised: "I realized that the process was moving at our own pace, that is, the more we participated and got involved, the more issues were resolved" (S. 7).

Another subcategory that stands out is personal appreciation. In fact, the study subjects mentioned that, throughout the process, they felt increasingly valued and that their insecurities decreased as they progressed with the implementation of the activities and received feedback from professionals of the institution and teachers (Costa, 2016; Kukulska-Hulme *et al.*, 2022; Morin, 2010). This recognition led to an increase in self-esteem and well-being, both within themselves and towards others: "engaging in these activities made me set aside my insecurities and learn to value myself more. After all, I can do it too" (S. 19).

The last category within the theme of acquired competencies relates to learning to live together. In this category, participants highlighted the development of the ability to work with peers (Gomez, 2010; Manikandakumar & Sridevi, 2023; Sousa *et al.*, 2021). Since the students' projects have to be done in groups, it promotes collaborative work and the management of shared knowledge, competencies and emotions: "working with other members of the group was a highly enriching challenge, where each one gave their best and we tried to overcome each other's shortcomings" (S.17).

The development of competencies related to interpersonal relationships, namely with the beneficiaries of the projects, was an area that was highly valued by students. According to the results obtained, participants recognized the importance of these types of methodologies in fostering productive relationships with the target audience of the institutions (Gomez, 2010; Kukulska-Hulme *et al.*, 2022), overcoming insecurities and fears, and strengthening communication and

empathy skills: "when I started doing the activities, I was very insecure, but I developed the ability to communicate with people" (S.11).

Regarding the second objective – understanding the importance attributed by students to community collaboration within the scope of their educational process – the data reveals that the participants valued the opportunity for immersion in a real context.

According to the participants, carrying out projects in external institutions allows for a non-abstract understanding of the content, which means a different and more fruitful approach to how educational content is addressed (Alves & Teo, 2020; Manikandakumar & Sridevi, 2023; Xavier, 2015). This is because the content is tested and analysed with reference to experiences in a real context: "Like this, we learn the various subjects in a way that makes more sense to us because we apply the theory and then reflect on the practice" (S. 12).

Another aspect highlighted by the data is collaborative work. According to the students, working in teams, both with their peers and with professionals from the hospital, allowed them to acquire essential knowledge and competencies (Costa, 2016; Kukulska-Hulme *et al.*, 2022), especially in the field of social intervention: "I learned a lot from my colleagues and the hospital professionals. There was always a lot of sharing and joint learning" (S.16).

The data also reveals that another benefit that the students attribute to the collaboration with the community is the existence of diverse multi-referential learning spaces, materialising in the opportunity to develop competencies and knowledge in different situations, spaces, and times (Gomez, 2010; Xavier, 2015): "It was great to work on educational content in different places and with various people" (S.2).

Within this category, the subjects also admit that immersion in a real context allows for the use of differentiated pedagogical models in various curricular units, resulting in a more robust and consolidated acquisition and mobilization of content (Alves & Teo, 2020; Manikandakumar & Sridevi, 2023; Morin, 2010): "With this partnership with the hospital, the teacher was able to work on the content in conjunction with practice, and for us, it was very enriching" (S.17).

Lastly, the students emphasize the importance of their work in the institution. In essence, the participants perceived the existence of mutual benefits for both themselves and the institution that hosted their projects, as the focus was placed on creating common developmental processes (Santos *et al.*, 2016), where the application of theoretical and scientific knowledge contributed to social innovation and to the empowerment of the institution. This promoted the enrichment of students, technicians and professionals, and the hospital's patients: "I realized that the professionals were not familiar with the activities we did. We have already left a kind of kit there so that in the future, they can develop this type of activities autonomously" (S.11).

Conclusions

 To think about education nowadays implies taking into account the diverse contexts in which it is developed and consolidated. This concern becomes even more relevant when focusing on Higher Education and the training of professionals capable of mobilizing specific competencies in the scope of social relations and applying knowledge of intervention in different community action contexts. Starting from a pedagogical approach based on active teaching-learning methodologies, the students were challenged to implement projects of sociocultural and sports intervention at the District Hospital of Leiria. This work of pedagogical innovation, which took place in two main spaces – the classroom and the hospital – was based on a relationship of mutual enrichment and a logic of applying theoretical components outside the classroom and analysing practical aspects in an academic context (Alves & Teo, 2020; Costa, 2016; Gomez, 2010; Kukulska-Hulme *et al.*, 2022).

Therefore, and considering the results obtained, we can state that the use of this type of methodology was perceived by the students as an enriching experience of consolidation of the educational contents and development of a wide range of competencies, both in terms of academic and professional training, and at the level of personal and social development (Esteban-Yago *et al.*, 2023; Manikandakumar & Sridevi, 2023; Sousa *et al.*, 2021). Along the same line, students considered that the methodologies that promote immersion in real contexts are very important because they allow for more robust and fruitful training, while also addressing the needs of partner institutions through the development of new techniques and different community intervention activities (Costa, 2016; Kukulska-Hulme *et al.*, 2022). This social relevance of educational projects, in the search for pedagogical innovation solutions, contributes to a better education and academic training that is more in line with the new profiles of citizens and professionals (Xavier, 2015).

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