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Situated and Critical Learning for Mediation and a Culture of Peace in Higher Education: An Innovative experience in the Cañada Real Galiana (Madrid, Spain)

Aprendizaje situado y crítico para la mediación y la cultura de paz en la educación superior: una experiencia innovadora en la Cañada Real Galiana (Madrid, España)


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Resumen

Introducción. Este artículo presenta una experiencia innovadora desarrollada por el Laboratorio de Resolución de Disputas de la Universidad Complutense de Madrid (DRLab), dirigida a promover el aprendizaje basado en la investigación y el aprendizaje situado en el ámbito de la mediación comunitaria y la gestión de conflictos. Los objetivos

Abstract

Introduction. This article presents an innovative experience carried out by the Dispute Resolution Laboratory at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid (DRLab), aimed at promoting research-based and situated learning in the field of community mediation and conflict management. The academic objectives were to introduce students

académicos fueron introducir a los estudiantes en un enfoque pedagógico que combina el Aprendizaje Basado en la Investigación (ABI), el Aprendizaje Situado (AS) y la práctica reflexiva a través del Diario de Ken (BoK), potenciando el pensamiento crítico y el aprendizaje autónomo. Además, la actividad pretendía iniciar al alumnado en procesos de investigación en contextos de desigualdad y evaluar sus conocimientos y reflexión. *Metodología.* Una red interdisciplinaria e internacional de docentes, estudiantes y profesionales de la Asociación Barró diseñó y ejecutó una estrategia didáctica que vincula la investigación y la práctica. El trabajo de campo se realizó en la Cañada Real Galiana, donde el alumnado exploró tanto las realidades de las familias como las prácticas de mediación desarrolladas por la asociación. Se promovió el aprendizaje experiencial a través del «Camina con nos(otros)», una actividad inspirada en el Jane's Walk, y la escritura reflexiva a través del BoK. *Resultados.* El alumnado asumió el papel de investigador durante la fase preparatoria en clase y la posterior realización de la actividad, aplicando categorías analíticas consensuadas al tiempo que enriquecían sus perspectivas a través de la experiencia directa. El modelo de mediación de la asociación se identificó como una referencia clave para la práctica profesional. Las entradas del BoK reflejaron niveles profundos de pensamiento crítico, alineados con las cinco formas de Swartz (2004): complejidad, flexibilidad, perspectivas múltiples, autorreflexión y perspicacia. *Discusión.* El estudio demuestra cómo la combinación de ABI y AS fomenta el compromiso de los estudiantes a través de la indagación, la inmersión social y la interacción con conflictos reales. Se reforzaron habilidades como la resolución de problemas, el análisis de datos y la comunicación. El BoK demostró ser una herramienta valiosa para conectar las percepciones personales con el desarrollo académico y profesional. *Conclusiones.* Esta experiencia refleja un cambio de la enseñanza universitaria tradicional al aprendizaje socialmente integrado. Redefine los papeles de docentes, profesionales y alumnado, destacando la importancia de las alianzas entre la universidad y la práctica en la construcción de competencias críticas para la mediación comunitaria y el fomento de una cultura de paz.

Palabras clave: Aprendizaje basado en la investigación (ABI); Aprendizaje situado (AS); Instituciones de educación superior; Actividad innovadora de aprendizaje; Reflexión crítica; Mediación comunitaria; Cultura de paz.

to a pedagogical approach combining Research-Based Learning (RBL), Situated Learning (SL), and reflective practice through Ken's Book (BoK), enhancing critical thinking and autonomous learning. Additionally, the activity sought to introduce students to research processes in contexts of inequality and to assess their knowledge and reflection. *Methodology.* An interdisciplinary and international network of faculty, students, and professionals from the Asociación Barró designed and implemented a teaching strategy linking research and practice. The fieldwork was conducted in the Cañada Real Galiana, where students explored both the realities of families and the mediation practices used by the association. Experiential learning was promoted through the "Walking with (us)others", a Jane's Walk-inspired activity, and reflective writing through the BoK. *Results.* Students assumed the role of researchers during the preparatory phase in class and the subsequent implementation of the activity, applying analytical categories agreed to while enriching their perspectives through direct experience. The association's mediation model was identified as a key reference point for professional practice. BoK entries reflected deep levels of critical thinking, aligned with Swartz's (2004) five forms: complexity, flexibility, multiple perspectives, self-reflection, and insightfulness. *Discussion.* The study demonstrates how combining RBL and SL fosters student engagement through inquiry, social immersion, and interaction with real conflicts. Skills such as problem-solving, data analysis, and communication were strengthened. BoK proved to be a valuable tool for connecting personal insights with academic and professional development. *Conclusions.* This experience reflects a shift from traditional university teaching to socially embedded learning. It redefines the roles of educators, practitioners, and students, highlighting the importance of university-practice alliances in building critical competencies for community mediation and fostering a culture of peace.

Keywords: Research-based learning (RBL); Situated Learning (SL); Higher Education Institutions; Innovative Learning activity; Critical reflection; Community mediation; Culture of Peace.

1. INTRODUCTION

We are surrounded by attention thieves, a byproduct of today's technological frenzy and hyperconnectivity. Teachers must be prepared to compete with these time bandits and explore new ways to capture students' attention. Facilitating engagement, motivation, and interest is essential for learning to occur, and for it to be meaningful for the learner (González et al., 2011). But, how can we sustain attention? Without abandoning the rigor of long-established educational goals, we sought to design innovative projects that identify pedagogical tools capable of motivating learning, capturing attention, and offering relevant solutions for the 21st century. This task requires exploring pedagogical practices informed by the learning sciences to enhance comprehension through effective teaching (Potter & Kustra, 2011) and to foster the deep, adaptive knowledge essential in the age of innovation (Sawyer, 2022).

"Instructional practice" has, traditionally, referred to prescribed training based on specific knowledge confined to the classroom. However, adopting a more experiential and participatory approach to real-life situations outside the classroom creates educational opportunities to develop the cognitive skills required for doing science. According to this model, the classroom becomes a laboratory—moving beyond scripted programming and embracing uncertainty, without predetermined boundaries for exploration. This approach fosters student achievement while also advancing goals of social transformation, service, and social responsibility.

This article analyses the experience carried out by the DRLab members during the 2022-2023 academic year as part of an innovative teaching project. An international and interdisciplinary network of teaching staff, students, and mediation professionals engaged in an educational experience linking education and research, taking the group beyond the traditional classroom and into the streets. In the process, all the participants learned and experimented collaboratively on equal footing.

1.1. Experimentation for Knowledge Acquisition: A laboratory for teaching and research into a culture of peace and mediation

For several years now, along with the possibility of citizens turning to judges to resolve their disputes, the justice system itself has been offering them the option of using other systems, or other third parties, to try to reach solutions outside the jurisdiction of public administrations. These alternative systems are known as Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) Systems, or Métodos Adecuados de Solución de Controversias (MASC) in Spain (San Cristóbal,

2013). The recent Organic Law 1/2025, of January 2, on Measures for the Efficiency of the Public Justice Service¹ introduces the need to resort to ADR as a procedural requirement before initiating a judicial process. Essentially, this means that, before suing, one must first seek to settle their dispute out of court. In the university context, Law 3/2022 of February 24 on university coexistence² also calls on universities to “promote the use of alternative means of conflict resolution that may be more effective in dealing with certain behaviors and conflicts between members of the university community”, which is to be given precedence over the disciplinary system of conflict resolution. Among alternative methods, mediation stands out in a particularly significant way, having become a key reference or starting point in certain areas, such as family (Lauroba, 2018) and educational contexts (Sánchez, 2013). It is the system that best upholds the principles of voluntariness, confidentiality, and neutrality, enabling the preservation of future relationships between the parties in conflict and encouraging responsibility in reaching solutions agreed to by all the parties involved (Golann, 2002).

For several years now, however, studies have shown that, despite regulatory and institutional support, the number of users turning to mediation services remains minimal (De Palo & Keller, 2012), and that mediation has failed in its attempt to become a genuine alternative to the judicial system. The literature has attempted to identify the reasons for this failure, highlighting among them the lack of a “culture of mediation” (Boqué, 2003; González et al., 2020). The main political and legislative challenge lies in transforming a pro-litigation culture (De Palo et al., 2014) in which the courts are seen as the default option. Changing this culture is urgent, and to achieve it, it is essential to strengthen mediation not only in primary and secondary education (Sánchez, 2013), but also at the university level, ensuring that future professionals receive specific training in ADR and, particularly, in mediation (Dorado-Barbé et al., 2015). In other words, ADR or mediation services offered to the university community will fail if no parallel process of training and awareness-raising is implemented (Silva, 2022; Blanco et al., 2020). This is the ultimate *raison d'être* of the DRLab: to promote the culture of peace and conflict management through collaborative systems.

1 Ley Orgánica 1/2025, de 2 de enero, de medidas en materia de eficiencia del Servicio Público de Justicia (BOE, nº3, de 03/01/2025). <https://www.boe.es/eli/es/lo/2025/01/02/1/con>

2 Ley 3/2022, de 24 de febrero, de convivencia universitaria (BOE, nº48, de 25/02/2022). <https://www.boe.es/eli/es/l/2022/02/24/3/con>

If there is one area within the social sciences where experimentation is justified, it is conflict management. The inherently relational nature of mediation requires a methodology capable of fostering coping, management, and adaptation skills in students, teachers, and professionals to deal with the evolving social landscape they face. While laboratories are an essential tool for scientific knowledge in the health sciences and the experimental sciences, laboratories for experimentation in the social and human sciences, such as Social Lab (at the University of Valencia) and GrupoLab (at the Complutense University of Madrid), have been established only recently. The reason for this dearth of such resources can be found in the social and human sciences, which focus on collecting, analysing, and reflecting information or “data” rather than experimentation and repeating situations or realities that have already occurred. However, the concept of the laboratory has acquired new relevance in these areas; among other reasons (Corrales-Serrano et al., 2019) because they are stimulating spaces that facilitate the presentation of problems, the searches for solutions, as well as analysis and solutions in less formal and more flexible contexts than theoretical classes. In short, laboratories contribute to practices being perceived as valuable and experimental (de los Ríos et al., 2016). Operating within the “culture of peace” framework, the laboratory uses innovation as a strategic guide, treating conflict management and mediation as experimental objects (Corchado & Blanco, 2022). It works in an international environment, promoting transdisciplinarity, internationalization, and knowledge transfer by connecting academic perspectives with professional practice, empowering affected communities (Lafuente & Corsin, 2015), and engaging undergraduate students eager to explore critical questions.

1.2. Innovative Research-Based Learning Experience: Knowledge, Experimentation, and Reflection

During the 2022–2023 academic year, the “Let’s Go to the Cañada Real” activity was implemented as part of a teaching innovation project. The aim was to familiarize undergraduate students with research on mediation processes in contexts of inequality and vulnerability in the Cañada Real, and to provide insight into the work carried out by the Asociación Barró in the area. To achieve this, a pedagogical strategy was employed that combined Research-Based Learning (RBL), Situated Learning (SL), and Reflective Journaling (BoK) (Montes de Oca & Machado, 2011).

Research-Based Learning (RBL) is an educational model designed to enable learners to generate knowledge, apply skills, and adapt to the specific needs of each educational context. The inquiry process offers numerous benefits (van

der Rijst, 2017; Santana-Vega et al., 2020), as it fosters the deep internalization of concepts and promotes more meaningful and lasting learning (Healey & Jenkins, 2009). This is achieved by applying techniques from various disciplines (Plomp, 2013; Yeoman & Zamorski, 2008; Boyer et al., 2015; Healey et al., 2014; Gros et al., 2020). Small-scale research activities provide educational opportunities that go beyond the mere acquisition of information. They foster students' ability to formulate questions, design studies, collect and analyse data, and effectively communicate their findings (Kuhn, 2007). These activities also contribute to the development of critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making skills—essential competencies for both academic and professional success (Brew, 2017). By relating their learning experiences to real-life contexts or future career paths (Arifin et al., 2022), and by engaging with real-life examples (Nikolov et al., 2020), learners acquire a more practical and applied understanding of knowledge. RBL also aims to cultivate engaged and informed citizens capable of addressing and solving complex societal challenges (Healey et al., 2010). In this process, students become active participants in the construction and application of knowledge, gaining a greater sense of agency and empowerment in their learning (Bovill & Bulley, 2011).

Situated Learning (SL) enables understanding by engaging learners in public spaces and real-life scenarios, fostering meaningful practices through culturally constructed pathways (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This approach requires the belief that students can deliberately create valuable knowledge and play a central role in advancing the frontiers of learning (Lafuente & Lara, 2013). In this context, the classroom becomes a laboratory, broadening the scope of teaching beyond scripted programming and embracing uncertainty, as the boundaries of exploration are unknown. Pedagogical experience becomes more experiential and participatory when knowledge is applied in genuine, everyday situations. Our aim was to develop an academic activity that was more enjoyable, artisanal, open, informal, participatory, and emotionally engaging. We stepped outside the classroom into an expanded educational space by sharing a Jane's Walk (Jacobs, 1961) with the Asociación Barró in the Cañada Real. The relationship between learning communities and higher education institutions has a long tradition of collaboration, with each party contributing its own value. However, in our approach, boundaries are transgressed, and distinctions are dissolved. Learning becomes a shared responsibility, aimed at adapting the learning context to the world. Experience and knowledge do not reside solely in the minds of individuals, but in the community itself (Kolb & Kolb, 2013).

Finally, constructing and producing knowledge calls for reflection. Students must reflect on their learning experiences to derive meaning through interpretation (Mezirow, 1991). The reflective learning model plays a vital role in students' understanding of the theoretical underpinnings and inherent value of mediation. Additionally, it inspires the process of forming a professional identity (Askeland & Fook, 2009). This approach allows educators to understand the students' perspectives, individual experiences, and learning processes more deeply. Swartz (2004) describes five forms of critical thinking:

- Complexity: Interconnectedness between information that can be expressed in formulating questions and hypotheses to challenge claims or interpret data.
- Flexibility: Adapting to new knowledge by considering different perspectives that may emerge in the research process.
- Multiple Perspectives: Open to new ideas from different sources and perspectives.
- Self-reflection: Examining experience in terms of introspection and deliberation.
- Insightfulness: Seeing or reading into a situation beyond the superficial.

Learning is a dynamic and non-linear process in which knowledge and strategies are constantly revised and reshaped (O'Leary, 2020). Since much of this happens internally, gathering clear evidence of learning remains a challenge (Illeris, 2018). Reflective journaling is commonly used in education to assess students' progress and personal growth. The reflective journal, or "Book of Ken" (hereafter BoK), is one of the most widely used pedagogical tools in promoting and assessing critical thinking in higher education (Hubbs & Brand, 2005; 2010). In addition to valuing the role of the learner throughout the learning process, using the BoK provides a non-formal, creative, and unrestricted space (Larrison, 2020). In this way, learners perceive themselves within specific social structures as conscious agents capable of transforming the reality in which they are involved (Kondrat, 1999) and in the scenarios and contexts in which they operate (Wallengren-Lynch et al., 2023; Corchado et al., 2024).

This study gathers and analyses students' perspectives on their learning experience. It examines how the integration of RBL, SL, and BoK fostered their critical reflection and independent thinking while deepening their understanding of mediation in contexts of inequality and vulnerability. The findings are based on students' insights shared throughout the project, including their

reflections on the realities of families in the Cañada and the mediation work carried out by the Asociación Barró.

2. OBJECTIVES

In the context of the Teaching Innovation Project carried out, this activity aimed to achieve the following objectives:

In academic work

- To introduce participants to a teaching strategy that combines RBL, SL and BoK as a means of enhancing students' critical reflection and independent thinking in interdisciplinary academic settings.
- To initiate undergraduate students into research on mediation processes in the context of inequality and vulnerability.
- To identify and assess students' knowledge and critical thinking.

In fieldwork

- To discover the reality of the families living in the Cañada Real
- To explore the mediation work carried out by the Asociación Barró

The study follows an exploratory approach, without strict hypotheses.

2. METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the study's approach, detailing the selection of participants and the research location. It then describes the data collection tools, including the Jane Walk as a situated learning strategy, and BoK for systematizing critical thinking. Finally, it explains the procedures followed and the data analysis process used to examine students' reflections.

2.1. Approach

The teaching strategy used was based on a pedagogy structured around three interconnected axes: classroom training, practical application, and reflection. These axes not only defined the pedagogical approach, but also served as the methods through which the study's data was collected, and the results were constructed.

On the first axis, students received classroom training on the community and the association to be visited, as well as on ethnographic research (Müller, 2021; Mannik et al., 2017). They were taught techniques to be used, such as

field notebooks, participant observation, interviews, and mapping. The formulation of questions was key in encouraging dialogue among students and connecting theory with practice, breaking with traditional teaching methods.

On the second axis, practical application, the pedagogical objectives aligned with the techniques used. The aim was to facilitate experiential learning through the “Jane’s Walk” activity, immersing students in the real environment, which allowed them to apply the knowledge they had acquired in the classroom.

Finally, on the third axis, reflection, the material produced by the students, documented in their BoKs, was evaluated and analysed. This process allowed students, on the one hand, to reflect critically on their learning from both an academic and personal perspective; and, on the other, it allowed teachers to assess the effectiveness of the pedagogical techniques employed.

2.2. Participants

The participants in this activity were students, teachers, and professionals from various countries. They were joined by professionals from the Asociación Barró, who contributed their experience and facilitated the meeting.

The total number of participants was 57, of which 35 were Erasmus students (E) enrolled at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid in the Social Work degree course in Mediation “A System for Conflict Management and Resolution”. Even though participation in this activity was voluntary, all the students attended, except for two, due to scheduling conflicts with other activities. The attending foreign professionals and professors participated after receiving an invitation through the laboratory, as they were part of the teaching innovation project team. The community mediators were selected by the association, and the politicians volunteered to attend after being informed about the activity to be carried out at the association’s request. See Table 1 for a detailed description.

Table 1. General information of the participants.

Country	Area	ID
Belgium	Social Work	S8 S9 S12 S13 S19 S21 S22 S24 S35
	Psychology	S1 S14
	Social Education	S11
	Law	29
Czech Republic	Social Work	S18
Denmark	Education	F5 F6
	Social Work	S2
Finland	Social Work	S16
Germany	Social Work	S3 S5 S15 S23 S34
	Social and Health Management	S0
	Psychology	S30
Greece	Social Work	S28 S32
Italy	Education	S4
	Political Sciences	S6
	Education	F8 F9
Lithuania	Social Work	S26
Netherlands	Social Work	S31 S33
	Law	S2
Poland	Social Work	S25
Sweden	Social Work	S27
Spain	Social Work	S17
	Law	EXP1
	Social Work	EXP2
	Community mediator	EXP3 EXP4 EXP5 EXP6 EXP7 EXP8 EXP9 EXP10 EXP11
	Law	F1
	Social Work	F2
	Social Work	F7
	Community of Madrid	POL1
	Madrid City Council	POL2
UK	Law	F3 F4
USA	Social Work	F7

Note. Role: S = Student; EXP = Expert; P = Professional; POL = Politician; F = Faculty.

Source: own elaboration.

2.3. Location

The Asociación Barró began its work in 1994 in Sector 6 of the Cañada Real, with the goal of intervening systematically and continuously in areas of social vulnerability. Its primary purpose is to create socio-educational spaces that foster personal and community development for people living in situations of marginalization or social exclusion. The association coordinates various activities in collaboration with different groups and institutions to improve the living conditions of these populations. The Asociación Barró plays a key role in interventions in the Cañada. In this context, it is an area that spans three municipalities: Coslada, Madrid and Rivas Vaciamadrid (Spain). It stretches for approximately 14 km and is home to over 7,000 people, including more than 2,500 minors. This area is characterized by its rich multicultural diversity, but also by significant social and economic challenges. The Cañada Real Galiana is divided into 6 sectors, each with its own characteristics, and the population faces important social inequalities.

The Jane's Walk activity was conducted in Sector 6, guided by staff of the Association and accompanied by community mediators (all of them women). During this interaction, teachers and students had the opportunity to walk through the area, speak with residents, and understand their concerns and needs. This mediation and educational support aimed to improve the quality of life for those living in the Cañada, promoting social inclusion and providing resources to facilitate their development

2.4. Data collection tools

Given the project's objectives, the Jane's Walk was chosen as a method to facilitate situated learning, while the BoK was used to systematize the students' critical thinking.

a) Jane's Walk

The technique chosen for the student's active participation in the real world was "Stroll with (us)others," carrying out a Jane's Walk (Jiménez, 2017) through Sector 6 of the Cañada, with the goal of initiating a dialogue between lab members and some families and neighbors, facilitated by the professionals from the Association, who played an essential role (Bandura & Walters, 1974; Dewey, 1995; Freire, 1970; Vygotsky, 1966). The walk showed us the reality of a socially constructed territory, created by a complex interaction of social, cultural, political, and economic processes, providing information about the experience of living in Sector 6. Additionally, it incorporated the affective

dimension into the observation, which added to the feelings and thoughts of the people with whom we interacted. We entered an unregulated learning terrain and carried out informal practices and exchanges with actors who are typically missing from the classroom: the professionals from the Asociación Barró and “a diverse community of affected people,” who were positioned as experts on their own experiences (Lafuente & Lara, 2013).

b) Book of Ken (BoK)

The English word “Ken” refers to a scope or range of perception, knowledge, or understanding of what a person can comprehend or have in their field of vision or knowledge. Students used the BoK to record the evolution of their thinking processes in a structured format. A guide was provided to help students set up and use the BoK, which they could adapt to their preferences. They were encouraged to write freely, gather relevant information, and maintain organization in their entries, reflecting on their experiences and connecting them to their personal lives, surroundings, or the city. Creativity was also encouraged, allowing students to include photos, videos, songs, poems, or drawings. Using the ethnographic material and field notebook comments, students documented their reflections and analysis in the BoK, receiving feedback from their teachers, which was understood as an evaluation for learning. The “5x6” tool by Hubbs and Brand (2010) guided the reflective process and helped students link theoretical content with their personal and professional experiences.

2.5. Procedure

The project was implemented during the 2022 - 2023 academic year in the “A System for Conflict Management and Resolution” course at the Faculty of Social Work of the Universidad Complutense de Madrid. The members of the DRLab carried it out.

The data collection activity was organized with the Asociación Barró in Sector 6 of the Cañada Real on 14 and 15 March 2023.

Ethical safeguards: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and the Ethical Code of the Universidad Complutense de Madrid.

2.6. Data analysis

The data collection, analysis, and interpretation process were carried out by the research team, incorporating the researcher triangulation approach to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings. A systematic organization

was achieved through an iterative process of field notes and a Bok, facilitating the conversion of observations and reflections on social practices and the environment into qualitative data.

Several themes emerged through the coding of texts and literature reviews conducted prior to the fieldwork: types of families, rehousing plans, and the Sector 6 mediation model. In the analysis of the students' BoK, the development of critical thinking was identified. The coding process was conducted following the traditional method without software (Fernández, 2006).

3. RESULTS

The results of the fieldwork data analysis prepared by the research team and the descriptive and reflective annotations of the students' BoK are described below.

3.1. *Evaluation of the situated learning process: experimenting for Knowledge Acquisition*

The main pedagogical objective of this experience was not merely to observe, but to actively engage and experiment. From the outset, we shared a key concern: that the activity might turn into a kind of tourist visit (Selinger, 2009), where a group of people simply "look at" a neighborhood or a social reality, as if contemplating a painting or strolling through a street in Madrid. To avoid this passive stance, it was essential to ensure that students would do more than just watch. For this reason, we created meaning in our walk while generating contextual learning with many nuances. Interpersonal relationship management, emotional connection, and trust-building were ever present in our activities, and our learning (individual, group, community, interactive, and meaningful) largely depended on these elements.

We also focused on engaging students from the very beginning through preliminary classroom research, the collaborative creation of materials, and the designing of methodological tools (pedagogical tools such as "Jane's Walk", "Participant Observation", "Life History", "Field Notebook", "Take Notes", "How to Use Your BoK", "Miniguide to Ethnography" and "How to do Mapping"). During the walk, they were encouraged to step forward and ask questions, prepared in advance in class, and engage thoughtfully and reflectively with both the environment and the people involved. This approach helped transform the experience into a process of situated, meaningful, and socially engaged learning.

Students experienced first-hand everything they had read about and learned in the classroom, applying the categories defined in class, such as origin,

education, economy, and housing, to their subsequent analysis, enriched with their own perceptions and personal experiences.

In terms of the families' origins, we encountered families of Spanish Gypsy, Romanian Gypsy, and Moroccan Gypsy descent.

But the thing that I liked the most and really helped me open my eyes the most about the poor conditions of minorities was how a phrase that we as Social Work students hear all the time, "Work with the service users, not work for them," gets implemented in real time in a real place, one that we got to see, on our visit to Cañada Real (E32).

In relation to education, they noticed that children are schooled, but many have marked curricular difficulties, and absenteeism has risen since the COVID-19 pandemic. The economy was described as precarious, as many parents have low literacy levels, and a lack of digital culture, which, among other difficulties, prevents them from accessing telematic procedures. High levels of unemployment and a prevalence of marginal occupations, particularly among individuals of Gypsy origin, have relegated many families to low socioeconomic status and a reliance on welfare.

It was very sad to see the little kids growing up in such a bad environment. But I did admire the strength, courage and love that I felt between the families (E22).

I was shocked to see how people live there. I couldn't imagine life like that, and it made me feel happy and thankful for my own opportunities and privileges. Especially seeing people helping other people, even when they have very little, really made an impression on me. The feeling of having a community makes people feel important, and that feeling is a bit gone if I look at my own country (E33)

In relation to housing, they pointed out that families live in substandard and sometimes unhealthy housing, in degraded habitats with poor infrastructure (such as sewage), and without basic facilities (such as health or education).

At first, I thought it was just a poor neighborhood, but I didn't expect to see slums like you'd find in poor countries like in Brazil, in Rio de Janeiro. I was shocked that the houses were made from materials that the people collected, that they didn't have any electricity, and by the bad health conditions (E15).

3.2. *Holistic Student Assessment Results. The BoK and Forms of critical thinking*

A holistic assessment of the BoK refers to an approach that evaluates an individual's thinking process through his or her journal. In this context, "holistic" requires analysing descriptive entries and deeper aspects of an individual's emotions, personal experiences, and development of critical thinking. This

evaluation considered the student's coherence of thought, capacity for self-criticism, depth of reflection, and their ability to relate personal experiences to academic material. Attention was paid to the student's ability to identify strengths and weaknesses, as well as their capacity to propose personal and academic improvement strategies.

Evaluation of student work identified Swartz's (2004) five forms of critical thinking, which emerged in classroom interactions, written work, and related fieldwork. A sample from the journals below demonstrates each type.

a) *Complexity*: Interconnection between information that can be expressed in formulating questions and hypotheses to question statements or interpret data.

We encountered the mediators to see directly what they were doing. The various theoretical examples also made much more sense (E5).

During the international week, we had some speakers from abroad. This was interesting because we heard different perspectives. The lecture that stuck with me the most was the one by A. B. (professor at Florida Atlantic University). I wrote many things in my digital notes about this lecture. He discussed narrative mediation and called it "a historical approach to conflict resolution". He told us that narrative ensures you move from conflict to resolution and to resolution without any backstory. (...) He also talked about how to engage people through storytelling. According to him, it is important to ask clients to say something good to each other and not to focus on the bad and negative things. However, it is also good to externalize the problems together and trace the effects of the problem together with the clients. This allows you to rethink the situation together with them. Storytelling is an excellent way to build trust. It is also a good way to deconstruct assumptions, prejudices, and beliefs (E11).

b) *Flexibility*: Adapting to new insights by considering different perspectives that may arise.

Using the BoK also made me realize what I was thinking in class. It made me rethink specific topics and enjoy writing down my thoughts. It also made me feel free because I knew I didn't have to share my notes at the end of the course. This way, I could write down all the information I wanted (E9).

For me, the highlight of the module was International Week. On the one hand, it was nice that many international professors were invited. At the same time, all the professors did the assignments with us. It was good to not just listen, but to do something actively (E22).

c) *Multiple perspectives*: Open to new ideas from different sources and perspectives.

Ultimately, I found that the families were more than happy to talk to us and show us where they lived. They aren't ashamed of where they live, and don't want to leave the area; they just want what they need to live like an average person: electricity, gas, and accessible public transportation (E1).

They had a more "friendly" approach, which I think, under these circumstances, is necessary in order to make the people living there trust the mediators. You could really see that they trusted the mediators and talked to them about their problems, which was a really nice thing to see (E2)

d) *Self-reflection*: Examining the experience in terms of introspection and deliberation.

Some students felt terrible for the families living there, not because they had basic needs that were not being met, but because they could not believe they were happy living in such an area. However, after seeing all the families in one community, I saw how happy they are to be together, and that they have known each other for many years. The neighbors in the Cañada are a real community, and can depend on each other. I found this very inspiring and motivating. It made me realize that people can find happiness and comfort in being with the people they love, under any circumstances (E1).

This experience was the highlight of the entire semester for me. Again, I was skeptical at first, as it seemed strange to go there as a privileged study group and see "this poverty-stricken place as a tourist attraction." However, my skepticism was misplaced, as we got to know the people there up close and personally, and the organization was excellent. I was inspired by the mediators, their work, and their way of interacting (E3).

e) *Insightfulness*: Seeing or reading into a situation transcending the superficial.

Walking through the Cañada Real had a significant impact on me. First, I found it beautiful to see how the mediators in the area had such good relationships with the community. I did not know mediation could also be between a community and a government, so learning about this and seeing the mediators' connection was lovely. We saw and heard how the mediators are doing a lot for the community, and that the community appreciates them. The conflicts they are fighting for differ from what we learned in class. I had not realized before that mediation could intervene in other conflicts than, for example, criminal, family, and labor issues. These conflicts highlighted the problems associated with a lack of electricity or water, and I cannot imagine living with these kinds of conflicts. However, it was beautiful to see how the people living in Sector 6 take nothing for granted, and are happy with the smallest things (E14).

Their work and positive energy greatly encouraged me in my goal and desire to become a social worker. It showed me, again, the importance of attitude and passion in this line of work (E3).

It can be stated that the activity, and especially the reflective use of the Book of Knowledge, enabled students to effectively put critical thinking into practice, meaningfully connecting theory, personal experience, and social reality. This experience not only strengthened their analytical and reflective skills, but also laid the groundwork for a more engaged understanding of the context in which they intervene.

Building on these learning outcomes, the following discussion situates the results within current pedagogical frameworks, highlighting their relevance for training in community mediation and social work.

4. DISCUSSION

This study confirms previous findings regarding the positive impact of experiential approaches and Research-Based Learning (RBL) on the development of students' critical and research skills. Prior research (Berding, 1997) highlights that immersive learning, promoted through activities such as Jane's Walk (Jiménez, 2017) and ethnographic techniques (Mannik, 2017), fosters active participation and direct engagement with real contexts, enhancing students' autonomy, data analysis abilities, and communication skills (Kuhn, 2007; Healey & Jenkins, 2009). Additionally, it nurtures intellectual autonomy by enabling students to formulate questions and design relevant research processes in real-life community mediation contexts (Healey et al., 2014), as well as develop their communication skills through formal and collaborative presentations of findings (Brew, 2017).

Overall, this pedagogical model equips students with the essential competencies to address complex issues and carry out effective research in community mediation. The main concern was ensuring that the students did not perceive the fieldwork as a type of dark tourism, or "poorism" (Selinger, 2009), but rather an opportunity to apply research techniques and learn from the residents and professionals working in an especially difficult context. The key to the success of this activity was teamwork for the careful preparation in the classroom, before the activity. The writing and assessment of the BoK provided evidence of students' evolving thought processes by connecting their inner world with real-world experiences through self-awareness and self-knowledge (Stevens & Cooper, 2009). This self-awareness was fostered through the interaction between personal and social structures (Ferreira & Ferreira, 2019), allowing students to recognize their thinking patterns and reflect on their

understanding as researchers. In the BoK, analytical processes were structured around real fieldwork, also revealing how students developed competencies for dialogue and evaluation. As noted in other studies (Ortlipp, 2008), the use of the BoK influenced the learning process by making students' shortcomings visible.

Jane's Walk also proved to be an activity that facilitated social learning (Wenger et al., 2002), helping to transform a community into a learning system (Wenger, 2010). This interaction was not achieved through participation alone, but through essential "active and deliberate facilitation" by professionals from the Asociación Barró.

While the methodology used is not original in itself, its application in the context of the Cañada Real offers valuable contributions both locally and internationally within the field of higher education. This study adds value by applying these methodologies in such a unique context, which, although harboring a marginalized community, can become a robust learning environment (Lave & Wenger, 1991), situated within a fragile socio-cultural reality (Sen, 2007). It is a heterogeneous community of surprisingly resilient and sustainable families who face complex problems while striving to eradicate exclusion as a form of coexistence (Bauman, 2015). The people affected expressed these realities in a meaningful way (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Currently, this community is fighting to reclaim the urban identity granted to them by the territory, even though the system tends to deny it. Within this setting, we engaged with their social and individual experiences, shaped by diverse cultural identities and marked gender inequalities (Luna & Ramazzini, 2020; Martín & Gamella, 2005), as well as by strong family cohesion (Giménez, 2019).

Another important contribution of this study is that it was carried out in an international and interdisciplinary environment, bringing together diverse perspectives that enrich understanding of community mediation and its pedagogical implications. The methodology employed here, grounded in well-established pedagogical frameworks such as Research-Based Learning (RBL), Situated Learning (SL), and reflective practices, has proven highly effective in previous research. Hevia and Fueyo (2018) explored the potential of peer learning in virtual environments, highlighting its value in developing professional competencies such as reflective thinking and digital skills. Silva (2017) demonstrated how community participation, particularly through social advertising at events like Jane's Walk, can promote sustainability and strengthen social relationships, emphasizing the importance of integrating universities and communities for social cohesion. Nóbrega (2022), in turn,

addressed the role of fear in the urban experience, suggesting that collective strategies to confront fear could reshape how we approach safety and urban life. These studies underscore the importance of participatory approaches that bridge theory and practice.

This study applies these insights specifically to a community mediation context, with a focus on mediation and social work students. Given their training, social work students are particularly well-positioned to benefit from such methodologies, as they must understand the communities they serve, develop active listening skills, and assess social dynamics.

This study highlights the importance of pedagogical approaches that prepare future mediators, especially social workers, to engage with real-world challenges, foster deeper community involvement, and strengthen the connection between higher education and community development. By doing so, it offers new perspectives on how educational practices can better align with the needs of marginalized communities, ultimately contributing to the advancement of social work education in both local and international contexts.

The transformation of community mediation relies on social learning (Bandura & Walters, 1974). Social learning systems and community-based approaches (Lafuente, 2022) play a crucial role in fostering a culture of peace. Although social learning is not a new concept, recognizing its significance remains essential (Woodhill, 2010) to drive behavioral change and actions that accelerate conflict resolution and integration processes.

4.1. Limitations

Although RBL, the BoK, and Jane's Walk are presented as successful experiences in this study, it is important to note some limitations that need to be considered. Organizing the visit to Cañada Real involved a considerable amount of work and financial resources. Coordinating the activities, managing the visits, and ensuring the participation of all the parties involved requires a significant investment of time and money. This presents a challenge when it comes to replicating this type of initiative on a larger scale without the proper support.

The Asociación Barró facilitated access to an adequate level of fieldwork. In retrospect, fieldwork opportunities should have been expanded to meet the varied needs of the project. However, this was quite challenging due to the project's structure, particularly the coordination of an international group of students, professionals, and professors gathered for a limited period. Designing the structure of RBL-based learning activities requires the most complex and demanding learning design.

The working methodology of the DRLab assigns mediation professionals a leading role in achieving its purposes. The tasks of professional mediators themselves make it difficult for them to access and participate in collaborative projects with higher education institutions, and increase when they reside in other countries since the scarcity of resources makes meetings more difficult.

Innovation in higher education introduces an additional element that needs to be taken into account. Teachers need not only to improve their teaching skills, but also to be willing to take on new tasks or roles in order to acquire experience in innovation contexts (van Dijk et al., 2020).

To overcome these limitations, which undermine the sustainability and effectiveness of outcomes-based learning initiatives, it is essential to have a system of institutional support integrated into the policies and strategic plans of the academic institution. Supporting the development of interdisciplinary teams and collaborative networks between the university and the professional sector facilitates exchanges of resources, experiences and best practices, and promotes the fostering of a much-needed culture of collaboration, allowing for the creation of shared spaces and projects in which teachers, professionals, students and stakeholders can find ways to work together.

5. CONCLUSIONS

First, the alliance created between the university and professional practice stands out, which is one of the main objectives of the DRLab. The collaboration between students, faculty, and the Asociación Barró resulted in the creation of a learning community (Blackmore, 2010) where evidence can be gathered to improve the teaching of mediation and the culture of peace. We want to highlight the essential role played by the Asociación Barró in providing students with an extraordinary pedagogical experience. The institution placed all its knowledge at the participants' disposal, sharing the working space and dedicating valuable time to answer questions and address the difficulties of these future professionals. Furthermore, the participation by political representatives in the walk, facilitated by the institution, was notable. They also engaged in dialogue with the students, sharing their own challenges and concerns. This collaboration had a clear and measurable impact on all the participants (Wessels, 2020). This type of experience should be offered regularly and institutionalized, rather than as occasional visits organized solely by particularly engaged or sensitized faculty. While organizing these initiatives poses challenges, their value in terms of learning and professional development is indisputable (Yermekbayeva, 2024). It is essential that universities take to the streets, particularly in certain programs, such as Social Work, to allow students

to face social and professional realities directly and to apply competencies and tools that are difficult to practice in a classroom.

Secondly, the methodology employed allowed students to become actively and deeply involved in their learning process (Healey et al., 2014). The Jane's Walk allowed students not only to perceive the reality of community mediation, and the work carried out by Barro, but also to observe aspects such as solidarity among families, a strong community identity, and resilience in the face of poverty. These lessons, which would be impossible to grasp in a traditional classroom setting, were seen by the students as transformative (Jiménez, 2017; Mannik, 2017), as evidenced in the BoK (Ortlipp, 2008), promoting the development of reflective and critical competencies for analysing social conflict.

Lastly, the execution of the activity in the Cañada Real was crucial, a setting that was transformed into a meaningful learning space, not one associated with poverty. Here, theoretical knowledge was intertwined with emotions, frustrations, and a sense of community, providing a learning environment that prepares students to face social challenges, with a focus on social justice and a culture of peace (Bandura & Walters, 1974; Wessels, 2020). As highlighted by several previous studies, interaction with real and marginalized environments provides valuable opportunities for developing competencies in complex contexts (Bauman, 2015; Lave & Wenger, 1991). This approach has reinforced the students' professional identities; as one student expressed, they were reminded of why they decided to study Social Work:

Thank you for reminding me why I chose to study for this Bachelor's degree [...] my feelings about being a social worker have been confirmed. Ensuring justice for people who don't have enough power or influence to create a better future makes me really happy (E33).

This comment encapsulates the essence of the experience: a powerful reminder of the real-world impact students can have through their work as future professionals, and how practical learning reinforces their commitment to their careers.

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