Organization of Conferences in the Classroom: Faculty Innovation and University Social Commitment

La organización de jornadas en el aula académica: Innovación docente y Compromiso Social Universitario

A organização de conferências na sala de aula acadêmica: Inovação docente e Compromisso Social Universitário

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Abstract. This article presents an experience carried out at Universidad de Cadiz, which was part of the 2017/2018 call for proposals for Guaranteed Interventions for Teaching Improvements of said university where the project "The student body and the production of knowledge. Organization of conferences on childhood, citizenship, and school." was approved. The project aims to raise awareness among university students about the needs, rights, and responsibilities of childhood, through the teaching and learning processes taking place in the classroom. Additionally, in the area of University Social Responsibility, it aims to introduce students to one of the paths offered by the University to intervene in matters related to childhood: the organization of conferences on citizenship, childhood, and education for peace and non-violence. This way, the project represents a teaching innovation strategy that relates transfer of knowledge, the academic ethical dimension, and university social commitment. This article presents the organizational structure of the proposal in a Childhood Education undergraduate program classroom.

▶ **Resumen.** El presente artículo aborda una experiencia llevada a cabo en la Universidad de Cádiz, la cual se contextualiza dentro de la convocatoria 2017/2018 de Actuaciones Avaladas para la Mejora Docente de la misma universidad en donde se aprobó el proyecto *El alumnado ante la producción del conocimiento. Organización de las jornadas sobre infancias, ciudadanía y escuela*. Por medio de los procesos de enseñanza y aprendizaje del aula académica, el proyecto pretende sensibilizar al alumnado universitario en las necesidades, los derechos y las responsabilidades de la infancia. Asimismo, dentro del campo de la Responsabilidad Social Universitaria, persigue introducir al estudiantado en una de las vías que ofrece la Universidad para intervenir en materia de infancia: la organización de unas jornadas sobre ciudadanía, infancias y educación para la paz y la no violencia. De esta forma, el proyecto supone una estrategia de innovación docente que vincula la transferencia del conocimiento, la dimensión ética académica y el compromiso social universitario. Este artículo presenta la estructura organizativa de la propuesta en un aula del Grado en Educación Infantil.

Palabras clave: universidad, responsabilidad social, innovación cultural, educación infantil.

▶ **Resumo.** Este artigo aborda uma experiência realizada na Universidade de Cádiz, que é contextualizada dentro da convocação 2017/2018 de Ações com Aval para o Aperfeiçoamento Docente da mesma universidade onde foi aprovado o projeto *Os estudantes ante a produção de conhecimentos. Organização das jornadas sobre infâncias, cidadania e escola*. Através dos processos de ensino e aprendizagem da sala de aula acadêmica, o projeto visa sensibilizar os estudantes universitários para as necessidades, os direitos e as responsabilidades das crianças. Também no campo da Responsabilidade Social da Universidade, visa introduzir aos alunos em uma das vias oferecidas pela Universidade para intervir em questões da infância: a organização de conferências sobre cidadania, infância e educação para a paz e não-violência. Dessa forma, o projeto assume uma estratégia de inovação docente que vincula a transferência de conhecimento, a dimensão ética acadêmica e o compromisso social da universidade. Este artigo apresenta a estrutura organizacional da proposta em uma sala de aula do curso de graduação em Educação Infantil.

Palavras-chave: universidade, responsabilidade social, inovação cultural, educação infantil.

ORGANIZATION OF CONFERENCES IN THE CLASSROOM: FACULTY INNOVATION AND UNIVERSITY SOCIAL COMMITMENT

Introduction

The 1st International Conferences on University Social Responsibility were held at the Universidad de Cádiz in February of 2014. These conferences were part of a series of academic

meetings initiated in 2008 with the 1st Ibero-American Conferences on University Social Responsibility in the city of Cadiz. Since then, the Universidad de Cádiz has maintained a permanent commitment of social responsibility that, according to its Social Responsibility and Sustainability Report of the academic year 2016-2017, "is oriented not only towards our relationship with the surrounding environment, but must also do so in a sustainable way, and must be socially fair, committed, and protective of the environment." (Universidad de Cádiz, 2017, p. 7). Among the activities undertaken by the Universidad de Cádiz in the area of University Social Responsibility (USR) and, as part of the commitment to innovation and improvement of the teaching practice, seven annual calls for proposals are open including ACTÚA (call for proposals for guaranteed interventions for teaching improvements). This call gathers the initiatives to transform and introduce innovative methodological changes that positively impact the university classroom teaching strategies. ACTÚA brings together all the submitted projects that are not in line with the INNOVA call (call for proposals for innovation and teaching improvement projects), conceived to gather the "initiatives that foster change and the methodological improvement of teaching in learning spaces, and are applied in specific subjects" (Universidad de Cádiz, 2017, p. 147). In other words, the INNOVA and ACTÚA calls were created within the USR field at the Universidad de Cádiz in a complementary manner in order to promote the activation of methodological innovation processes within the axis of academic teaching. The main difference is that the ACTÚA call has a broader scope of intervention, as the initiatives that have a place in it are not limited to the restricted scope of a specific subject, but its impact may exceed it and extend to other contexts of academic life. For this reason, projects that reach the ACTÚA call require the endorsement of the Dean, or a Director of Center or Department for submission.

Out of ACTÚA's available options of the Universidad de Cádiz for the academic year 2017/2018, the project "The Student Body and the Production of Knowledge. Organization of Conferences on Childhood, Citizenship, and School as a Teaching Strategy in the University Classroom." was submitted and approved. It was articulated around the subject "Family Involvement in the Educational Processes," part of the Childhood Education undergraduate program. The initiative aims to achieve two objectives developed simultaneously on two complementary levels and within the axis of teaching within the framework of University Social Responsibility: The awareness and the socio-educational intervention fields. First, within the teaching and learning processes, and the knowledge generated in the academic classroom, this project aims to raise awareness among students on the children's needs, rights, and responsibilities. Second, it is intended to engage students on one of the paths included in the area of USR and offered by the university to intervene in matters related to childhood: The organization of academic conferences on children, citizenship, and education. In this way, the implementation of this project is a strategy that links the transfer of academic knowledge with

the ethical dimension and the university social commitment.

Arango and Puerta (2015) provide a rich and complex first delimitation of USR that enables the delimitation of the undertone of the initiative "The Student Body and the Production of Knowledge. Organization of Conferences on Childhood, Citizenship, and School as a Teaching Strategy in the University Classroom," whose planning is presented in this article:

> … the reflection and analysis that an educational institution makes on its own mission in terms of the contributions to its immediate and distant social environment, contextualizing its issues in the light of the training provided to its students as a university, meaning the social responsibility of the university student. In these terms, USR can be understood as a practice of ethical quality that generates cognitive, educational, labor, political impacts, as well as on the quality of life, through responsible management based on the participatory dialogue with society to promote a sustainable human development (p. 37).

The above definition is a key to identify three main project guidelines within the conceptualization of University Social Responsibility:

1. It is a contextualized proposal that contributes to the social and educational development of its environment. The conferences on children, citizenship, and education represent an academic initiative rooted in the specific social, cultural, and educational context surrounding the university and, more specifically, the School of Learning Sciences, the starting point for its organization. Moreover, its purpose is to respond to the training needs and demands of its environment and the students of the Childhood Education undergraduate program. This response to the demands and needs is offered in this project from the conjugation of three characteristic academic framework components: First, the university's role as a knowledge generating institution; second, its role in the transfer and social dissemination of knowledge; and lastly, its role to work as a space of encounter, discussion, and "participatory dialogue with society" (Arango & Puerta, 2015, p. 37).

2. The project is designed to be carried out from the point of view of comprehensive training of university students in training or initial training process to teach at the pre-school stage. In that sense, it starts from a critical, socially committed, and civically responsible view of the teachers (Elliot, 1990; Giroux, 1990; Schön, 1987), as well as university students. This view also situates them in the area and dynamics of University Social Responsibility. In addition, the project relies on the fact that the university has an ethical dimension because, according to Repáraz, Arbués, Naval, and Ugarte (2015), the aim is "to contribute not only to the intellectual preparation of young citizens, but also their ethical and civic training" (p. 23). López, Mollo, and de la Paz (2013) argue that it is precisely the combination of the value or ethical-political and epistemological dimensions that defines a quality higher education to the extent that:

The university should be structured to be able to train citizens committed to the development of the society and become an entity in which a quality criterion of higher education directly linked to the ability to contribute to the development of individuals and societies prevails (p. 6).

In the same vein, the dossier of the World Conference on Higher Education. The New Dynamics of Higher Education and Research for Societal Change and Development of UNESCO (2009) already stated that higher education "must not only give solid skills for the present and future world but must also contribute to the education of ethical citizens" (p. 2). In this context, it should be noted that some studies have pointed out that empathy, critical thinking, solidarity, equity, sustainable development, and, in general, prosocial actions are principles and values related to University Social Responsibility (USR) and University Student's Social Responsibility (USSR) (de la Calle & Giménez Armentia, 2011; García-Ramos, de la Calle, Valbuena & de Dios, 2016; Martí-Noguera, Martí-Vilar & Almerich, 2014; Navarro et al., 2010, 2012). In this way, the project "The Student Body and the Production of Knowledge. Organization of Conferences on Childhood, Citizenship, and School as a Teaching Strategy in the University Classroom." aims to be an occasion for the exercise of the university's social commitment (Repáraz et al., 2015).

3. It is a project that aims to create an educational and political impact on the quality of life of its environment. The organization of the conferences intends to create a space of dialogue and debate among scholars, teachers from schools rooted in the proximate context of the School of Education Sciences, university students, and other agents of the proximate social, cultural, and educational fabric.

The development of this article presents the organizational structure of the work proposal of a classroom of the first year of the Childhood Education undergraduate program in the course of the subject Family Involvement in Educational Processes.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE EXPERIENCE

Social Responsibility, Ethical Dimension, and Training on Children's Rights

The project of Guaranteed Intervention "The Student Body and the Production of Knowledge. Organization of Conferences on Childhood, Citizenship, and School as a Teaching Strategy in the University Classroom." is conceptually based on three interdependent core areas within the educational framework of the Childhood Education undergraduate program students. The first of these core areas refers to the University Social Responsibility. The second, especially linked with the previous one, refers to the understanding of higher education as an ethical community (Esteban & Martínez-Martín, 2012). The third and last core area is related to the civic or ethical dimension of the University (Cohen, 2007), and refers to the importance of including children's rights in the educational itinerary of the initial teacher training in Childhood Education.

According to Martí-Noguera, Mendes, and Campos (2015), University Social Responsibility is a relatively new concept whose expansion process is located around the last years of the 20th century and the first years of the 21st century. Moreover, it has a certain degree of complexity in its terminology demarcation, derived from the fact that social responsibility emerged as a "polymorph and plural movement without the presence of a great theoretical guide" (Vallaeys, 2008, p. 198). Even though social responsibility gives rise to multiple definitions and its delimitation is a complex task, Saravia (2012) presents a clear approach to the concept that can serve as an introduction into the understanding of USR. According to this definition, social responsibility:

> Refers to, from those who integrate the organizations, an attitude of openness to the needs of the communities with which its activity is linked. (…) Thus, it is possible to state that when social responsibility is taken up and expressed in actions manifested in concrete facts, those actions and those facts contribute to improve the average quality of life of the communities concerned (p. 23).

This concise definition highlights two important keys as constituent elements of social responsibility. On the one hand, the responsible openness to the needs expressed in the community to which an organization is related through its activity. On the other hand, there is the improvement of the quality of life of the environment and the organization itself as a result of its responsible intervention. In regard to higher education institutions, Vallaeys (2008) provides a definition of USR in which the two keys identified by Saravia (2012) are reflected but adjusted to the university field.

> University social responsibility is a policy of continuous improvement of the university towards the effective implementation of its social mission by means of four processes: Ethical and environmental management of the institution; shaping responsible and supportive citizens; production and dissemination of socially relevant knowledge; social participation in promoting a more human and sustainable development (p. 209).

The USR refers, therefore, to the chain of strategies and policies that the university has to implement from the four basic axes that it encompasses (management, training, research, and extension or projection) in response to its social mission and in favor of a sustainable development of the environment that, in turn, positively impacts university community itself (Cohen, 2007). The "Document Developed by the Technical Committee of the University Strategy 2015: University Social Responsibility and Sustainable Development" (Ministry of Education, 2011) also advocates a definition of USR that addresses its social dimension from a sustainable perspective. In short, the purpose is that the four intrinsic functions to the university (management, training, research, and extension or projection) are "supported by the pursuit of the promotion of justice, solidarity, and social equity by building successful responses to meet the challenges involved in promoting comprehensive human development"

(Beltrán-Llavador, Íñigo-Bajo & Mata-Segreda, 2014, p. 7). It is in this sense in which Arango and Puerta (2015) referred to the USR as "practice of ethical quality" (p. 37).

From the academic axis or function of training or teaching, Vallaeys (2008) is not the only one that postulates the necessary "training of responsible and supportive citizens" (p. 209). Martí-Noguera, Moncayo, and Martí-Vilar (2014) argue that, in Latin American countries, USR has established itself in recent years as the "social demand for a higher education model that should provide society professionals with a sense of responsibility" (p. 78). Other scholars have had a similar perspective and have pointed out that the ethical training of university students is a desirable purpose of higher education (Bolívar, 2005; Martí-Noguera & Martí-Vilar, 2013; Martínez-Martín, 2006, 2008; Naval, 2008), a vision in line with the dossier of the World Conference on Higher Education. The New Dynamics of Higher Education and Research for Societal Change and Development of UNESCO (2009) that, as set forth at the beginning of this article, comprises:

> Higher education must not only give solid skills for the present and future world but must also contribute to the education of ethical citizens committed to the construction of peace, the defense of human rights, and the values of democracy (p. 2).

University is thus conceived as an institution endowed with a civic or ethical dimension from their teaching and learning processes (Buxarrais, Esteban & Mellen, 2015; Esteban & Buxarrais, 2004; Martínez-Martín, Buxarrais & Esteban, 2002; Naval, 2010; Repáraz et al., 2015) which makes it what Esteban and Martínez-Martín (2012) have denominated an ethical community.

Within the general area of education, the training of socially-responsible and supporting university students also carries with it the training of teachers that are thoughtful, intellectual, critical, and committed to their social, cultural, and educational environment (Elliot, 1990; Giroux, 1990; Schön 1987). In the case of childhood educators, this training has to be accompanied by the inclusion of children's rights in the educational itinerary of their initial university training (Ruiz-Bejarano, 2017; Urrea, Balsells, Coiduras & Alsinet, 2016), so that, in the subsequent exercise of their teaching profession, they contribute in their educational centers to the promotion of citizen participation processes in which students get involved from their commitment with their social and educational context (Coiduras et al., 2016; Ruiz-Bejarano, 2018)[1]. Also, the Decree 428/2008 of July 29 "that establishes the planning and lessons for Childhood Education in Andalusia" (Board of Education – Regional Government of Andalusia, 2008) stipulates with regard to educational intervention at this stage that its purpose must be "to contribute to the physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development of children,

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1 An example can be found in an ApS experiment performed in November, 2017 with first-year class of the Childhood Education undergraduate program of the Universidad de Cádiz in a Municipal Nursery School in the first cycle of Childhood Education. The development of the project was recorded by UNICEF and can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g5VMRkjaKx0

respecting children's rights and in accordance with their well-being" (p. 8). In this regard, children's rights are recognized within the childhood education curriculum as a necessary reality that constitutes a fundamental scenario from which schools have to contribute to the comprehensive development of children and their gradual introduction to citizen participation.

However, about a research carried out in thirty-six Spanish universities, the report "Presence of Children's Rights in the Degrees in Teaching and Social Education in the Spanish University," contained in Urrea et al. (2016) points out that, in the particular case of the Childhood Education undergraduate program, only in 1.31% of the examined subjects' teaching guides, children's rights are explicitly shown among their competencies, objectives, or syllabus. Regarding the Universidad de Cádiz, human rights appear within the Dissertation of the Childhood Education undergraduate program (verified in the school year 2016-2017) as part of the general objectives of the Childhood Education undergraduate program's Curriculum, but that is not the case with children's rights. This is a situation on which it would be necessary to intervene sooner or later.

From this conceptual framework, materialized through University Social Responsibility, the ethical dimension of higher education and the recognition of children's rights, the project "The Student Body and the Production of Knowledge. Organization of Conferences on Childhood, Citizenship, and School as a Teaching Strategy in the University Classroom." has been submitted within the call for proposals for Guaranteed Interventions for Teaching Improvements of the academic year 2017/2018.

Purpose of the Project in the Subject: Educational City, Citizen Participation, and Children's School

Planning the project includes the organization of conferences in the field of the subject "Family Involvement in the Educational Processes,"2 taught in the second semester of the first year of the Childhood Education undergraduate program. The conferences will take place in May 30, 2018 and will work along the line set out in the Global Action Week for Education (hereinafter GAWE). The GAWE is an initiative organized within the framework of the Global Campaign for Education since 2001 involving one hundred and twenty-four countries that, through various social, political, and educational initiatives, claim the right to a quality and equal education for all children3. In this regard, the main topic of the conferences is provided by SAME's annual theme, whose choice for 2018 is: "Education, the road towards peace. Leave your mark!" The title of the meeting was established by university students during a class session: "University conferences

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2 "Family Involvement in the Educational Processes" is a subject of six ECTS credits of basic training.

3 Complete information on the Global Action for Education Campaign and the Global Action Week for Education can be found at http://www.cme-espana.org/same/ and http://www.campaignforeducation.org/es/

on children's rights. The culture of encounter: Educating for peace and non-violence."

Within the subject "Family Involvement in the Educational Processes," the project is developed as a teaching strategy of the first (Family and Children's School. General Considerations), and fifth (Educational City. Citizen Participation, Community, and Children's School) topics.

Project Objectives

The organization of the teaching innovation and improvement proposal aims to achieve two objectives closely connected to each other. First, the project aims to raise awareness among university students by learning and analyzing the children's needs, rights, and responsibilities at the national, regional, and local level. Second, it is intended to engage university students on one of the paths offered by the university to intervene from the academic context on childhood: the organization of university conferences.

Organization of the Class and the Classroom Activities

Sixty students are enrolled in class C of the first subject of the Childhood Education undergraduate program. The students are distributed into two subgroups for the development of the subject's practical lessons. In the case of the subject "Family Involvement in the Educational Processes," Subgroup I made their practices on Wednesdays, while Subgroup II has Thursdays of each week assigned. For that reason, the decision to hold the conferences on the same days in which group C has the teaching of this subject assigned was adopted.

For the planning of the classroom activities, five working groups were created in each of the class's subgroups. The maximum number of students allowed in each group was seven people. The proposed activities correspond to the two objectives that articulate the project.

The development of the first of the objectives, related to the student awareness on children's rights, will take place mainly within the university classroom. Class activities aimed at the acquisition and consolidation of content related to children are envisaged within this space: The concept of childhood in history or the current situation of children at national, regional, and provincial levels from the social, cultural, economic, and educational fields, among others. In addition, this objective is supported by a prior project carried out during the first semester from a learning and service approach (ApS), and in which students had to design and undertake a group of educational workshops on environmental education and children's rights at a local children's school with UNICEF's support (Ruiz-Bejarano, 2018). The project implementation was the first contact between students and the development of initiatives from the children's rights approach.

In view of the above, the activities planned to consolidate this first project objective are as follows:

- Reading reports that delve into the current situation of children at the national, regional, and provincial levels. UNICEF provides materials and resources to work on children in the university classroom.
- Organizing classroom activities that delve into children's rights.
- Creating debate situations in the classroom regarding children-related media news.

For its part, the second objective proposed in the project is related to engaging the student body on the social and educational intervention from the university area. Achieving this objective involves the organization of the conferences simultaneously with the development of the subject throughout the semester, mainly during a part of its practice lessons. The distribution of the class in cooperative groups or working committees with specific objectives focused on specific tasks that require the organization of an academic event is foreseen. The activities are subject to modifications according to the needs identified by the class, but it is possible to point out the most relevant:

- Planning and timing of the conferences.
- Search and selection of the participants in the conferences: Social workers, NGO staff, teachers in Children and Primary Education centers, academic teachers and professionals, etc.
- Communication with the conferences participants.
- Publicity of the conferences on social networks and the * web site.
- Creation of billboards, logos, and conference scheduling.
- Search for collaborators with the organization of the event.
- Development of a final report or a minutes book.

The assessment of the project objectives runs parallel to the assessment of the subject itself. In that sense, the estimation of whether the objective was achieved will be made with the same tools and assessment methods as the subject: The observing sessions in the classroom, the valuation and assessment of class activities, and the realization of a final evaluation. In addition, the completion of a questionnaire by students to assess the outcome of the conferences is contemplated.

CONCLUSIONS

The organization of academic conferences as university classroom teaching strategy has been explained throughout this article. Its justification has been made from three complementary conceptual axes. First, the project has been contextualized within the scope of University Social Responsibility (USR), primarily defined as a "practice of ethical quality" (Arango & Puerta, 2015,

p. 37). Specifically, the initiative has been incorporated to one of the four inherently academic functions, teaching or training, related to the formation of socially committed and supportive citizens (Vallaeys, 2008). Second, in that regard, the project also connects with the ethical dimension of higher education that some studies have identified (Martínez-Martín et al., 2002; Naval, 2010; Reparáz et al., 2015). Third, it has been argued, in the case of initial teacher training, that the university's ethical dimension should not only lead to the ethical and civic training of university students, but should also be oriented towards the training of teachers that are critical, thoughtful, and committed to their educational environment. In that vein, the need to incorporate children's rights to the educational curriculum itinerary of the Childhood Education undergraduate program.

The organization of the "University Conferences on Children's Rights. The culture of encounter: Educating for peace and non-violence," has been set as a strategy that enables the transfer of knowledge generated in the academic classroom in order to provide a space for dialogue with the social, educational, and political agents of the environment that has a cultural and socio-educational impact in the community and the university context. In addition, planning conferences on children's rights as part of the academic practices of the Childhood Education undergraduate program has a direct and positive impact in the university students' training, both raising awareness in the field of children's rights, as in the social and educational intervention. In this regard, the project reflects the principle according to which "the exercise of civic participation requires providing occasions in which to exercise it in all areas, including such regarding the university" (Reparáz et al., 2015, p. 51).

Finally, the complex organization process of academic conferences motivates the execution of a series of cognitive, social, and communicative skills by university students who have to use strategies regarding conflict resolution, cooperative work, shared leadership, location of information and text analysis sources, time and resources management, communication with professionals in public institutions, etc. In this way, the project of organizing university conferences by students also becomes a tool for self-empowerment.

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