

Contributions of professor for the academic engagement¹

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Abstract

The research aimed at understanding to what extent the professor helps the academic engagement in the Pedagogy Course from Federal University of Fronteira Sul, campus Erechim, Rio Grande do Sul, from the students' perspective. For such, 139 questionnaires with questions relating to the identification of professors' and lessons' profiles that attract and engage more students, were given to students from different semesters of the course. Results were divided into two categories: (I) teachers' characteristics and practices appreciated by students and (II) students' projections for their professional future. The results were analyzed by the Content Analysis from Bardin (2016). It is concluded that the contributions of professors for the academic engagement are by means of active learning proposals, meaningful experiences and a relation of confidence and reliability between professor and student. To conclude, considering the lack of Brazilian tools to evaluate the academic engagement, we present possible indicators of how instrumentalizing this evaluation.

Keywords

Higher education. Academic engagement. Learning. Professor.

As contribuições do professor universitário para o *engagement* acadêmico

Resumo

A pesquisa objetivou compreender como o professor universitário contribui para o *engagement* acadêmico no curso de Pedagogia da Universidade Federal da Fronteira Sul, campus Erechim, Rio Grande do Sul, na perspectiva de estudantes do curso. Para tal, foram entregues 139 questionários a estudantes de diferentes semestres do curso contendo perguntas relacionadas à identificação do perfil dos professores e de aulas que atraem e envolvem os estudantes. Os resultados foram divididos em duas categorias – (I) Características e práticas docentes valorizadas pelos estudantes e (II) Projeções dos estudantes para seus futuros profissionais – e analisados pela perspectiva da Análise de Conteúdo, de Bardin (2016). Conclui-se que as contribuições dos professores para o *engagement* estudantil se dão por meio de propostas de aprendizagem ativa, vivências significativas e uma relação de confiança e segurança entre professor e alunos. Por fim, considerando a ausência de instrumentos brasileiros para avaliar o *engagement*

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acadêmico, são apresentados possíveis indicadores de como instrumentalizar esta avaliação.

Palavras-chave

Educação Superior. *Engagement* acadêmico. Aprendizagem. Professor universitário.

Las contribuciones del profesor universitario para el engagement académico

Resumen

La investigación objetivó comprender como el profesor universitario contribuye para el *engagement* académico en el curso de Pedagogía de la Universidade Federal da Fronteira Sul, *campus* Erechim, Rio Grande do Sul, en la perspectiva de estudiantes del curso. Para tal, fueron repartidos 139 cuestionarios a estudiantes de diferentes semestres del curso conteniendo preguntas relacionadas a la identificación del perfil de los profesores y de clases que atraen y cautivan a los estudiantes. Los resultados fueron divididos en dos categorías – (I) Características y prácticas docentes valoradas por los estudiantes y (II) Proyecciones de los estudiantes para sus futuros profesionales – y analizados desde la perspectiva del Análisis de Contenido, de Bardin (2016). Se concluye que las contribuciones de los profesores para el *engagement* estudiantil se dan por medio de propuestas de aprendizaje activa, vivencias significativas y una relación de confianza y seguridad entre profesor y alumnos. Por fin, teniendo en cuenta la ausencia de instrumentos brasileños para evaluar el *engagement* académico, son presentados posibles indicadores de como instrumentalizar esta evaluación.

Palabras clave

Educación superior. *Engagement* académico. Aprendizaje. Profesor universitario.

1 Introduction

Engagement in Higher Education is a growing theme in current research. In this research, academic engagement is treated as a “[...] process that involves multiple aspects (affective, cognitive, and behavioral), which, when mobilized, allow the effective involvement of students with the environment and with academic activities” (VITÓRIA *et al.*, 2018, p. 263). In this sense, this study aims to understand how the professors contribute to academic engagement in the Pedagogy course at the Federal University of Fronteira Sul (UFFS), Erechim/RS campus, from the perspective of the students in the program.

Therefore, the teacher-student relationship needed to be analyzed more closely. Paulo Freire (2011), patron of Brazilian Education, says that, as an educator, the dichotomy between solemnity and affection must be broken. Opening up to like the students doesn't exclude being a serious teacher, but rather shows that the relationship goes beyond that. Also, according to Freire (2011), teaching is a human-specific practice, and being a human

involves aspects that go beyond the transmission of scientific knowledge, including at the university. In many cases, it is possible to say, without exaggeration, that the teacher permanently influences the idea that the student will develop about a particular area of knowledge or object of study.

Such importance motivated this research to understand the factors that condition the learning, involvement, engagement, identification processes of students, especially at the university, with their course and their future profession. The good professors are certainly on this path.

To define a good teacher is, McEwan (2002) lists ten main characteristics of a good teacher. These ten characteristics are divided as follows: personal traits, traits referring to the intended results, and traits of intellectual life. It can be expected that, given these qualities, the teacher will be able to build and maintain a good relationship with students, bearing fruit in quality academic performance, as well as identification with the future profession.

Therefore, the research intention is to understand which characteristics and practices are valued by university students in their professors since these aspects make up the process of student engagement in Higher Education. According to Vitória *et al.* (2018), three dimensions involve the engagement process: the affective dimension, the cognitive dimension, and the behavioral dimension. All these dimensions are related to the teacher. To achieve this goal, a field research was carried out with questionnaires delivered to students of all semesters of the Pedagogy course at UFFS/Erechim with questions regarding aspects that surround their academic trajectories, more specifically regarding the professors' performance and influence in this process.

2 Methodology

The research was carried out using a qualitative approach (LÜDKE; ANDRÉ, 2017) since its focus was the intentionality present in the collected data. The first stage consisted of bibliographical research. This methodology “[...] implies an orderly set of procedures to search for solutions, attentive to the object of study, and that, therefore, cannot be random” (LIMA; MIOTO, 2007, p. 38).

After the bibliographical research, to understand how the professor contributes to academic engagement in the Pedagogy course at UFFS, Erechim campus, Rio Grande do Sul (RS), from the perspective of the students, it was necessary to know the ideas formed by the students about their professors. This survey was carried out through a questionnaire. Gil (2008, p. 121) defines a questionnaire as “[...] a set of questions that are submitted to people to obtain information about knowledge, beliefs, feelings, values, interests, expectations, aspirations, fears, present behavior or past etc.”.

Thus, 139 students from the Pedagogy course participated in the research. All five classes of the program took part. Research participants are between 18 and 69 years old, coming from public schools for the most part and various regions of Brazil, mainly from the South. Before answering the questionnaire, the research subjects received an Informed Consent Form, which declared that their answers could be used in this research, if their identities were preserved.

The next step was data analysis, supported by Content Analysis, by Bardin (2016). This methodology is divided into three stages: 1) Pre-analysis: consists of an organizational period, in which the corpus to be analyzed is defined, in this situation, the questionnaires; hypotheses about the results to be obtained; the objective it intends to reach by analyzing the answers; and the categorization of essential elements that support the final interpretation; 2) Corpus exploration: corresponds to the actual application of the terms defined in the pre-analysis; 3) Treatment of the obtained results and interpretation: after the material has already been explored, the next step is to analyze the results, being able to generate graphs, diagrams, tables, figures, according to the extracted fundamental elements and, finally, interpret the data to confirm or refute the initial hypotheses or create new analysis biases..

In addition, two descriptive categories were constructed (LÜDKE; ANDRÉ, 2017). For Bardin (2016, p. 148), “[...] classifying elements into categories requires the investigation of what each one of them has in common with others. What will allow their grouping is the common part existing between them”. Therefore, these descriptive categories alluded to the main aspects pointed out in the questionnaires, either by a higher incidence of words or phrases, by degree of significance, or by themes. The categories constructed for data analysis were: (I) Characteristics and teaching practices valued by students and (II) Projections of students for their professional future.

3 Results and discussion

Observing all these premises, 139 questionnaires were collected, which had objective and subjective questions regarding: I) the reasons why they chose a degree in Pedagogy; II) the period of the course in which they were; III) the area of activity with which they have identified themselves the most and why; IV) the characteristics that they consider important to the university professor; V) characteristics valued in classes; VI) the future perspectives in the field of Education. These questions were designed to identify the profile of professors and classes that attract and involve students in their academic trajectories.

One of the categories that guide the discussion and analysis of results refers to the characteristics and teaching practices valued by students. Conceptions of teaching characteristics and practices considered important may differ between professors and students. Brauer (2012) helps to understand some characteristics of quality teaching at the university, pointing out four topics: I) establishing and maintaining a good relationship with students; II) institute a contract between professor and students; III) use active learning methodologies; and IV) prepare an environment conducive of high attention for the student. These items relate with the results obtained in a question answered by the research subjects, in which they needed to classify some professional qualities of professors as “not very important”, “important” or “extremely important”, as shown in table 1.

Table 1 – Professional qualities valued by students

Professional qualities	Less important	Important	Extremely important
Theoretical knowledge	-	17.99%	82.01%
Professional experience	8.63%	51.80%	39.57%
Organization and planning	-	10.79%	89.21%
Innovative and non-traditional proposals	-	19.42%	80.58%
Communication ability	-	28.78%	71.22%
Good affective relationship with students	0.72%	25.90%	73.38%
Coherent evaluation proposals	-	21.58%	78.42%

Source: Authors' own (2021).

This systematization shows that most students consider all the characteristics mentioned in table 1 important or extremely important. Also, even if some characteristics rooted in technical and traditional teaching practices are valued, such as mastery of content, commitment and organization of the professor, some qualities centered on interpersonal relationships and teaching practices more focused on active student learning are highlighted as indispensable. Genú (2018, p. 60) states that “[...] appropriating the fundamental concepts of a pedagogical practice ensures much more satisfactory results than mastering teaching techniques and methodological procedures”. That is, the recognition of the social role of the teaching profession gives the teacher much more security to think and reflect on their pedagogical practices than the simple mastery of methodologies.

Teaching is an activity essentially made up of relationships: teacher/student, student/content, teacher/institution, institution/student, and it is within these relationships that the teaching and learning processes take place. Therefore, a teaching practice without a positive emotional bond established will most likely not be a significant practice, but if this connection is established, the possibilities of meaning will certainly be much greater. Tardif and Lessard (2011, p. 35) state that “[...] teaching is a work whose object isn't made up of inert matter, but of human relationships with people capable of initiative and endowed with a certain capacity to resist or participate in the action of teachers”. Taking this into account, it can be predicted that reluctance or participation is based, among other factors, on the relationship built between professors and students.

In addition to these characteristics mentioned above, the students pointed out other important aspects in the professors and the development of the practices. A term often used by university students to characterize the classes in which they most participate and get involved was "dynamic". Students pointed out that there is a need for space for dialogue during classes. Another study focused on the methodologies used by teachers corroborates this idea, stating that methodological choices “[...] contribute to the effective participation of students as protagonists of their learning, since [...] teachers have the possibility of to reframe their pedagogical practices" (BLASZKO; CLARO; UJIIE, 2021, p. 12).

In this sense, it's necessary to reflect on classes that are too expository and theoretical. Although we understand the need to have a lesson like this from time to time, when it becomes routine, students go to university possibly already discouraged. Expository classes benefit the professor in some aspects, just as the student also learns, but it's necessary to reflect on its planning and execution. "Watching classes like watching a TV program and giving classes like giving a lecture is no longer enough: we are looking for ways to – in partnership – take classes" (ANASTASIOU; ALVES, 2010, p. 78).

It is also worth discussing one of the reasons why students don't get involved in these classes. Most students of night courses, as is the Pedagogy of UFFS/Erechim, have jobs during the day, so when they arrive at the university, they already had an extensive and tiring day at work. In this sense, "[...] identifying the daily needs of the night Higher Education student and knowing their interrelationships with the environments (especially those external to the educational institution) becomes relevant, as educational training is aimed at high-quality" (TERRIBILI FILHO; RAPHAEL, 2009, p. 38). So, it isn't about dispensing students from extra-class reading or having a protectionist posture, but rather about reflecting on the reality of students, seeking, among so many studies and research, methodologies and strategies that can keep the students' attention, motivating them to participate and reflect on their own academic knowledge construction process.

Still, on teaching practices, it was pointed out that there is a need for organization and prior planning of classes and readings, dialogue between theory and practice, reception, space for socializing doubts, and use of accessible language, especially in introductory courses. Furthermore, humility, respect, and empathy were identified as important personal qualities in professors. During the Pedagogy course, UFFS/Erechim students devise ideas for a welcoming, sensitive, and attentive education with student protagonism, meaningful and contextualized practices, and many other concepts, so they hope that, in their classes at the university, they will see them embodied in their professors the teachings they build.

Experiencing classes that make it possible to reflect on praxis, which involves students and promotes moments of discussion and interaction about the profession is a factor that contributes to the formation of reflective teachers who care about the quality

of education. Thus, “[...] good beginners training is, above all, about the formation of people capable of evolving, of learning according to experience, reflecting on what they would like to do, on what really did and about the results” (PERRENOUD, 2002, p. 17).

Thus, the second category emerges that guides the discussion of results: Students' projections for their professional future. During the course, students experience multiple classes with varied methodologies and numerous resources. Based on these experiences, they reflect and decide what they consider most important and add to their practice. In this scenario, it is essential to teach about how to welcome children and how to develop meaningful work, but it is even more important to practice this at university because the real experience of ideal situations is what makes experiences more valuable and shows that it is possible to have a different education. Knowing how to teach is “[...] something that is defined by the educator's engagement with the democratic cause and is expressed by his desire to politically and technically instrumentalize his student, helping him to build himself as a social subject” (MOYSÉS, 2012, p. 14).

From this, a significant reflection emerges regarding the experiences provided to students during their undergrad Pedagogy course at UFFS/Erechim. Some students, who were mainly from the tenth and last semester of the course, indicated in their reports that they feel more secure working in certain areas as pedagogues in detriment of other areas. A study that aimed to investigate the attractiveness of the teaching profession, more specifically the Pedagogy course in a city in Rio de Janeiro, also brought this aspect into the agenda. According to Silva and Corrêa (2019, p. 66), “[...] in Brazil, the interaction of undergraduates with the school is very small, and not enough to prepare them for the daily life of a teacher”.

This is an important issue to be reflected on and discussed when talking about the quality of education. The pedagogue is qualified to work in many educational areas, such as Kindergarten, Primary School, Elementary School, Youth and Adult Education, regular High School, School Management, Hospital Pedagogy, among other fields inside and outside the school walls. In this sense, it can be assumed that trained pedagogues have a theoretical and methodological basis to exercise their role in any of these areas, but they claim that there are still gaps in this training process. Since Pedagogy is a complex and extensive science, it's possible to infer that, in four or five years, as is the average duration

of Pedagogy courses in Brazil, there isn't enough time to satisfactorily deepen all areas of in which pedagogues can work. We can relate this second hypothesis to student engagement. How the classes are taught by the professors, the opportunities for inclusion in the school and non-school environment offered, the proposals for reflection, and the construction of knowledge may make students feel more or less safe to act in a or other educational fields.

For quality education to take place, experiences and content must be meaningful. In this sense, the research subjects are concerned about this aspect and claim that they intend, in their future practices, to provide significant learning situations. The large number of reports linked to significant practices indicates that, in the students' academic trajectory, professors showed through their classes the importance “[...] of making the students understand the meaning of the content, what is the relationship between contents and their life, with their world and with the society in which they're inserted” (MOYSÉS, 2012, p. 23). This way, quality education will be provided, in which the class contents go beyond the educational institution and permeate all spheres of citizen life of the subjects.

Many students expressed their deep desire to use in their practices what they learned from their professors at the university. These reports show that the experiences and knowledge developed in the undergrad course were, or are being, significant for the students, making them plan to incorporate them as much as possible into their practices in future classes. In addition, some of the students report that, when they entered university, they began to take an interest in university teaching.

Some students even reported that they do not intend to pursue a teaching career due to their current jobs. These reports may mean that, even with a college degree, the teaching profession is less viable or financially rewarding than their current jobs in other fields. Thus, to make the decision not to follow the teaching profession, the subjects considered factors such as working conditions, devaluation of the category, salary, the lack of investment in Education in all its modalities, among other elements that surround the teaching life. However, the fact that they didn't drop out of the course over the years shows that, for some reason, pursuing studies in the area was relevant to their lives.

Considering all of this, the importance of engagement in promoting quality education is clear. Engagement is a word to which it is possible to assign several meanings. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the word engagement is related to committing to someone in the sense of a future marriage. The word also appears linked to interest in something, being engaged with something. This second option is the closest to the approach of this study.

Engagement linked to the field of education has already been studied and addressed by several authors. Over the years, the concept has been updated, as illustrated in table 2.

Table 2 – Evolution of the concept of engagement

Tyler	Time of the task	30s
Pace	Quality of effort	60s and 70s
Astin	Student involvement	1984
Pascarella	Learning outcomes	1985
Chickering and Gamson	Good Practices in Higher Education	1987
Tinto	Social and academic integration	1987 and 1993
Kuh, Schunh, Whitt and associates and Kuh <i>et al.</i> (2005)	Students' engagement	1991 and 2005

Source: Kuh (2009 *apud* RIGO; VITÓRIA; MOREIRA, 2018, p. 12).

However, engagement started to be studied in the Brazilian context recently. Despite this, its concept can already be understood from foreign studies. Engagement, therefore, appears “[...] as a variable that is concerned with investigating for what reasons, by what means and under what circumstances an individual can develop and maintain a guideline, a focus, a direction concerning a person, a group, an activity or a project” (BRAULT-LABBÉ; DUBÉ, 2009 *apud* COSTA; VITÓRIA, 2017, p. 2261). In this sense, observing engagement in the university context, it is possible to understand its importance and the contributions of evaluating it as an indicator of quality in the academic environment.

Although Brazilian instrument to measure the aspects surrounding engagement does not exist yet, it doesn't mean that they aren't important, or even essential for learning, and it's already possible, with the available literature, to test some quality indicators to be considered in an assessment of engagement in Higher

Education Institutions (HEIs) in Brazil. In table 3, we present five axes that can guide the assessment of engagement in institutions, as well as elements that are related to each one of them.

Table 3 – Possible indicators to consider for student and institutional engagement

Pedagogical proposals	It concerns the actions of professors in the classroom, about their teaching plans, schedule coherent with the students' level, innovation in the planning and use of technologies, collaborative work, stimulating and non-traditional activities, evaluations coherent with the learning processes.
Quality of social relationships	It concerns the open dialogue between professor and student, sensibility in solving emerging problems, the bond well established in the relation professor/student, student/student, institution/professor, and institution/student.
Opportunities beyond the classroom	It concerns the possibilities for engaging in non-mandatory internships, study groups, research projects, social actions, immersion in different environments, exchanges, conferences, academic weeks, among others.
Conditions for staying	It concerns the offer of economic, social, and emotional conditions so students can stay at the university.
Environment and structure	It concerns the institutional spaces offered to students to promote welcoming, comfortable, different options for study and leisure in the academic environment.

Source: Authors' own (2021).

Even though engagement has its visible "final results" in the quality of higher education, it involves much more than just learning students. For academic engagement to be promoted and maintained at a high and constant level, several factors are combined, among them, good methodological learning processes, which mobilize the interest and involvement of students; educational actions and educational policies promoted at the institutional level that enable physical, emotional, social and financial conditions for the permanence and good performance of the students, therefore, if such conditions aren't available, the students won't have cognitive conditions to employ all their capacity to study. In addition, moments of academic mobilization must happen, so that the participation of university students is promoted, which makes students feel like they belong and are committed to the institution.

Thus, academic engagement emerges as a variable of relevance to be investigated in higher education contexts not only because it lies on cognitive and methodological aspects, involving the student and teaching body and teaching and learning processes, but because it brings an investigative outlook about educational institutions by focusing on their institutional organization as well as their management. (VITÓRIA *et al.*, 2018, p. 264).

So, including engagement in aspects that are considered in the evaluation of the quality of higher education will involve, or should, efforts, studies, and institutional movements that promote it. In this way, professors, students, and the managing team would benefit, because an environment in which engagement levels are high is a suitable and pleasant space to be, whether studying or working.

5 Final considerations

For a long time, it was believed that student learning depended exclusively on their will and dedication to study. However, fortunately, with more in-depth studies, it's currently possible to say that many factors contribute positively or negatively to the process of building knowledge.

This study sought to understand how the professors contribute to the academic engagement in the Pedagogy course at UFFS, Campus Erechim/RS, from the perspective of course students. Through the results obtained and analyzed, two descriptive categories emerged: (i) characteristics and teaching practices valued by students and (ii) students' projections for their future professions.

On the first category, characteristics and teaching practices valued by students, the results point to the importance of the relationship built between professors and students during the course. In this good relationship, elements such as professors' flexibility understanding the different students' backgrounds student and variables that can hinder their study schedule.

It was also pointed out that the professors need to have good didactics, that is, the use of good methodologies in the development of their classes. This is intrinsically linked to engagement since students have indicated that they are involved, are dedicated, and engaged in the disciplines in which there are discussions, interactive work, the opportunity for participation, and mobilization of the prior knowledge of the students.

There are also issues related to professors' theoretical knowledge as well as their organization and planning. The students considered it important that professors display expertise on the subjects treated in their classes, as well as show organized and coherent planning for what the course entails.

It was also reported that university professors contribute to the identification of students with certain areas of pedagogy. Professors who show enthusiasm, knowledge, and excitement, have practical experience in the area and point strategies and methodologies to be developed with children are regarded as great professionals, involving students with the course, as well as the interest of the students closer to their areas.

In this sense, it can be inferred that professors have valuable contributions to students engagement. These contributions are through proposals and experiences provided at the University, provided that they are significant and non-traditional. The reflection of these contributions is noticeable in the reports of students who entered the pedagogy course without much interest in the area of education and ended up getting involved and are satisfied with their choice.

Professors were also cited in the future perspectives of the students, the second category of analysis. Most of them - with those who do not mean to follow in the area of education, or haven't preference yet - point out that they want to practice in the future the examples and knowledge built with some professors. Certainly, these experiences and learning were significant and perhaps involved aspects beyond cognitive, such as affective relationships with the professors.

With this, it can be noted that aspects pointed out as important in professors' approach so that students are involved, interested, and participate in classes are necessary elements for integral training, covering cognitive, social, and emotional aspects. So, the university students pointed out that it is so important that the professors know what they are teaching, but it is also important that they know who are the people learning. Students consider that professors who understand their lives beyond university, seeing them as living subjects, such as problems, distractions, interests, and wishes, provide lessons, proposals, experiences, and more significant learning, engaging and thus promote the students' engagement.

In this direction, this study's suggestion of indicators that can assess the academic engagement can contribute to point concrete elements of what is possible to consider on engagement in evaluations, thus helping in the instrumentalization of this change in higher education institutions. Finally, the quality indicators proposed here are related to five axes, being them: I) pedagogical proposals; II) quality of social relations; III) extra classroom opportunities; (IV) conditions of permanence, and V) environment and structure.

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