

# Between movements, yarns, and shapes: embroidery in teaching practice

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## **Abstract**

This article reports the results of an empirical research that adopted embroidery as a bridge between theory, body experience, and graphic expression in a pedagogical practice developed during a teaching internship in the subject component 'Body, Afro Dance, and Education' of the Undergraduate Course in Pedagogy of the University for International Integration of the Afro-Brazilian Lusophony (UNILAB). This course subject aims to grasp the triad *humanity, culture, and knowledge* (Cortella, 1998) based on the African philosophy of *drum beating, singing, and dancing* (Ligiero, 2011). Discussing the role of art in education and the use of embroidery as a means of individual expression is part of an approach that seeks a methodology grounded in citizen's comprehensive education. The results indicate that combining theoretical knowledge, body experience with contents, and graphic expression of perceptions and sensations in adult education requires a methodology that interconnects sensitive aspects of human education to pedagogical practice. This teaching experience underscored the importance of respect for the student's unique learning movement – even at times when she/he refuses to participate. In the approach adopted, art is indispensable to access sensitive contents of the individual, the group, and historically systematized knowledge, moving towards what is proposed by Read (1986) – who sees art as a mediator in education – and Ostrower (1977) – who advocates that creativity is inherent to human beings in all spheres of life.

**Key words** art; embroidery; movement; pedagogy; teaching practice.

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## Entre movimentos, linhas e formas: o bordado na prática docente

### Resumo

Este artigo apresenta os resultados de uma pesquisa empírica que adotou o bordado como ponte que integra teoria, vivência corporal e expressão gráfica em uma prática pedagógica desenvolvida em estágio docente na componente disciplinar “Corpo, Dança Afro e Educação” do curso de Graduação em Pedagogia da Universidade da Integração Internacional da Lusofonia Afro-Brasileira (UNILAB). Tal disciplina tem por objetivo compreender a tríade *humanidade, cultura e conhecimento* (Cortella, 1998) partindo da filosofia africana do *batucar, cantar e dançar* (Ligiero, 2011). A discussão do papel da arte na educação e do uso do bordado como meio de expressão individual faz parte de uma abordagem que busca uma metodologia pautada pela formação integral do cidadão. Os resultados indicam que combinar conhecimento teórico, vivência corporal dos conteúdos e expressão gráfica das percepções e sensações na educação de adultos demandam uma metodologia que integre aspectos sensíveis da formação humana à prática pedagógica. Essa experiência docente ressaltou a importância do respeito ao movimento singular de aprendizagem do aluno – mesmo nos momentos em que se recusa a participar. Na abordagem adotada, a arte é indispensável para acessar conteúdos sensíveis do indivíduo, do grupo e dos conhecimentos historicamente sistematizados, indo ao encontro do que propõem Read (1986) – que entende a arte como mediadora na educação – e Ostrower (1977) – que defende ser a criatividade inerente ao ser humano em todas as esferas do viver.

**Palavras-chave** arte; bordado; movimento; pedagogia; prática docente.

## Entre movimientos, hilos y formas: el bordado en la práctica docente

### Resumen

Este artículo presenta los resultados de una investigación empírica que adoptó el bordado como un puente entre teoría, vivencia corporal y expresión gráfica en una práctica pedagógica desarrollada durante una pasantía docente en la componente de asignatura “Cuerpo, Danza Afro y Educación” del curso de Pregrado en Pedagogía de la Universidad de Integración Internacional de la Lusofonia Afro-Brasileña (UNILAB). El objetivo de esta asignatura es comprender la tríada *humanidad, cultura y conocimiento* (Cortella, 1998) basada en la filosofía africana de *tocar tambor, cantar y bailar* (Ligiero, 2011). La discusión del papel del arte en la educación y del uso del bordado como medio de expresión individual forma parte de un enfoque que busca una metodología pautada por la formación integral del ciudadano. Los resultados indican que combinar conocimiento teórico, vivencia corporal con los contenidos y expresión gráfica de las percepciones y sensaciones en la educación de adultos exige una metodología que interconecte aspectos sensibles de la educación humana con la práctica pedagógica. Esta experiencia docente subrayó la importancia del respeto por el movimiento singular de aprendizaje del alumno – incluso en momentos en que él se niega a participar. En el enfoque adoptado, el arte es indispensable para acceder a los contenidos sensibles del individuo, del grupo y del conocimiento sistematizado históricamente, avanzando hacia lo que proponen Read (1986) – que ve el arte como un mediador en la educación – y Ostrower (1977) – que defiende que la creatividad es inherente a los seres humanos en todas las esferas de la vida.

**Palabras clave** arte; bordado; movimiento; pedagogía; práctica docente.

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# Entre mouvements, fils et formes: la broderie dans la pratique pédagogique

## Résumé

Cet article présente les résultats d'une recherche empirique ayant adopté la broderie comme un pont entre la théorie, l'expérience corporelle et l'expression graphique dans une pratique pédagogique développée au cours d'un stage d'enseignement dans la composante disciplinaire « Corps, Danse Afro et Education » du cours de Premier Cycle en Pédagogie de l'Université d'Intégration Internationale de la Lusophonie Afro-Brésilienne (UNILAB). L'objectif de ce sujet est de comprendre la triade *humanité, culture* et *savoir* (Cortella, 1998) basée sur la philosophie africaine *du tambour, du chant* et *de la danse* (Ligiero, 2011). La discussion du rôle de l'art dans l'éducation et de l'utilisation de la broderie comme moyen d'expression individuelle s'inscrit dans une approche qui cherche une méthodologie fondée sur une formation intégrale du citoyen. Les résultats indiquent que la combinaison des connaissances théoriques, de l'expérience corporelle avec les contenus et de l'expression graphique des perceptions et des sensations dans l'éducation des adultes nécessite une méthodologie qui interconnecte les aspects sensibles de l'éducation humaine à la pratique pédagogique. Cette expérience d'enseignement a souligné l'importance du respect du mouvement d'apprentissage unique de l'élève – même lorsqu'il refuse de participer. Dans l'approche adoptée, l'art est indispensable pour accéder aux contenus sensibles de l'individu, du groupe et du savoir historiquement systématisé, en direction de ce que propose Read (1986) – qui considère l'art comme un médiateur en éducation – et Ostrower (1977) – qui défend le fait que la créativité est inhérente aux êtres humains dans tous les domaines de la vie.

**Mots-clés** art; broderie; mouvement; pédagogie; pratique pédagogique.

## Introduction

In the domain of the Interdisciplinary MA Program in Humanities of the University for International Integration of the Afro-Brazilian Lusophony (Mestrado Interdisciplinar em Humanidades da Universidade da Integração Internacional da Lusofonia Afro-Brasileira – MIH/Unilab), the experience reported herein was conducted in the teaching internship regarding the subject component 'Body, Afro Dance, and Education' of the Undergraduate Course in Pedagogy of the UNILAB itself. As defined in the teaching plan of the subject, the objectives were distributed into two units (Box 1).

### Box 1 – Units and objectives of the subject component 'Body, Afro Dance, and Education'

N	Unit	Objectives
I	Humanity, culture, and knowledge: Brazils and Africas	Grasping the foundations of the triads <i>humanity, culture, and knowledge</i> and <i>drum beating, singing, and dancing</i> . Observing the body, nature, and spirituality from the perspective of awakening/reconnecting the education of senses. Rhythmic ring-around-the-rosy and children's round games, African and Afro-diasporic front and convoy.

II	Drum beating, singing, and dancing in Brazils and Africas	Knowing and experiencing various forms of culture expression in body, dance, charm, here and there. Educating by dancing: principles, interconnected human development practices. Experiencing African and Afro-diasporic dances: dance of the 'orixás' and 'iabás,' 'maracatu,' coconut, and 'farró.' Hugging dance: 'baião' and 'milonga.' Investigating and experiencing artistic community dance manifestations in the Maciço de Baturité.
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Source: Prepared by the authors.

The teaching methodology proposed by the professor in charge of the subject, in turn, consisted of expositive and participatory classes for the students to experience, discuss, think through, systematize, and present concepts and practices grounded in: a) proposed contents; b) reading and textual annotation with artistic works; c) observation and registration of the body, African dances, and education; and d) experiences with the body, art, dance, etc.

The challenge consisted in discussing the use of embroidery as a means of individual expression. However, how can we do it if the subject's proposal is working on body and movement? The students' willingness to follow this path was undoubtedly the great facilitator of this methodology, which involved issues of yarns and needles.

From the beginning, our purpose was developing a methodology able to make the students' graphic expression easier, by having as the practice of embroidery a means. Thus, complying with the Freire's proposal that guides us, according to which the pedagogical space is a place of mutual learning in the relationship between professor and student, without imposing a vertical knowledge or underestimating the knowledge that a learner brings along with her/him, we start with a visit to the classroom in order to learn about the established dynamics and pedagogical practices. The use of drawing as a means of expression already played a role in the methodology put into practice in the classroom, but, with a few exceptions, people sought some graphism for representation and not for expression, the use of decals and some testimonials, such as the current "I do not know how to draw."

We emphasize that resistance to drawing has been a constant in our journey as researchers - in fact, it stimulates our journey. The level of requirement to prepare an idealized drawing, quitting the drawing practice because the person feels to lack the gift needed, are just some of the aspects that hinder our expression ability. In our view, these are historically constructed false constraints whose consequence is the division between *manual arts* and *fine arts* - among the latter there is drawing, with its mythical aura aimed at dilettanti and bearers of a divine gift.

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The teaching practice was organized at a pace with three different moments, which interpenetrated, cross-sectioning the content addressed, namely: a) retrospective review of the previous class; b) theoretical discussion of a new text; and c) experience combining content and body movement. Thus, the proposal must be deployed in this dynamics, that is, we have to readapt as the classes go on.

Starting with the class' movement itself, we gradually introduced the proposal and, step by step, the students accepted invitations to a different, more detailed, movement that required new skills, such as to thread yarn through needle, and this lasted until our next meeting, when the invitation to another dance was asked.

**Figure 1** Materials used



Source: Authors' personal collection.

## On the proposed methodology

Three meetings were held. In the first, aspects related to self-consciousness, the body and individual movement were worked on; in the second, group consciousness, movement and rhythm; and, in the third, embroidery experiences were discussed, and there was exhibition of works.

The text was discussed and later experiences were carried out in order to combine theoretical knowledge to body experience, that is, linking theory to the subjective and unique inner movement, activating what Steiner (2012, p. 11, our translation) names as *movement meaning*:

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[...] it is not a question of being able to walk to and fro, but from those movements that I feel in myself when I move my limbs or when I speak; therefore, inner movements are those seen as movement sense. When I move out of myself, I also move inside myself.

Faced with the experiences, we try to fixate this movement by image, which, in turn, hardly obeys the commands of our particular imagery stereotype. Thus, we sought a unique expression capable of portraying what has been experienced in the classroom, free from the shapes and, as a consequence, from opinions about who knows how to draw or not. We emphasize that it was not sought to psychologize this process or even to interpret the drawings, but to free the students' trait and demonstrate that the drawing should be at their service instead of subjugating them to a critique marked by "I know x I do not know" or "ugly x beautiful."

So, after the experience a paper drawing was done to express feelings, movements, and sensations, providing greater freedom to modify, shave, and even discard it. Graphic expression is always a challenge when it involves adults at the most varied spaces. However, in the classroom, people were much more willing to use such a tool.

With the drawing in their hands, students should replicate it in embroidery – an activity conducted at home and shown in the classroom during the next meeting. There was not enough time to tackle complex embroidery stitches, but the goal was not making this activity an obstacle to the proposed practice, since it was the first contact with yarns and needles for many students.

Two simple stitches (basting stitch and back stitch) were chosen, demonstrating the numerous graphical possibilities offered by them, in line with the proposal of providing the student with a new pedagogical experience instead of 'blocking' her/him due to feeling unable to deal with such a practice.

Imaging representation remains a barrier in adulthood, just as it is in childhood; improving the critical sense warns increasingly more when the drawing does not correspond to reality. In general, it is at this stage that the student stops drawing, believing that she/he does not know how to do it. The wish to achieve a realistic representation, combined both to lack of graphic and motor skills to do this and to the school's pattern of keeping children in an endless exercise of coloring ready-made drawings, in addition to preparing decals and copies of pre-established images, end up leading a child to quit the drawing practice.

Bernard Blot (1982), discussing the drawing practice for children, divides the experiences into 3 groups, according to the age group, namely: a) up to 6 years; b) from 6 to 9 years; and c) from 9 years on. In the age group up to 6 years, the child starts from the point and goes on seeking to master the other shapes, in complete figurative abstraction, thinking through her/his inner world. In the second age group, from 6 to 9 years, the child

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makes the movement from the object, trying to reproduce it, instead of starting from her/his inner world. The last period is regarded the most critical – it is in it that many of us stop drawing.

Rapidly, though gradually, the child moves from intellectual realism to visual realism. She/he discovers the space and acquires, particularly, the notion of depth. Unfortunately, she/he tackles technical constraints. She/he notices the void of a faithful reproduction of reality; but such an awareness (and it would be interesting to know why) starts inhibiting it. [...] The fact is that from that moment, and increasingly more (until the end of adolescence in fact, if she/he is still drawing and painting then), the child copies. But she/he is also aware of the imperfection of her/his copies, which, moreover, cannot balance her/his feeling of helplessness. She/he gets discouraged, starts to make decals. She/he gets more and more disappointed; feels ashamed and quits it: it is the so-called “I do not know how to draw” (Blot, 1982, pp. 127-128, our translation).

Quitting the drawing practice, combined to a widespread pedagogical practice that prioritizes education for labor, ends up reinforcing the idea that drawing and arts, in general, are aimed at artists and not at ordinary people. But this idea makes us feel ‘smaller’ in face of such a key knowledge for our comprehensive education, in addition to maintaining the discourse that the arts are reserved to the chosen ones, the so-called ‘talented people,’ to dilettanti. When we grasp the significant social role of art in educating for citizenship, we notice the relevance of favoring critical thinking and putting into question the place reserved for the arts, especially in professor’s education.

In other words, in today’s words, aesthetic laws are inherent to the biological processes of life itself; and these laws lead life along the path of well-being and effectiveness; and it is our professional duty, as educators, to discover these laws in nature or in the experience and make them the principle of our teaching. Balance and symmetry, proportion and rhythm, are primary factors in the experience: in fact, they are the only elements through which the experience can be organized into patterns that remain, and it is their very nature that imply harmony, economy, and efficiency. What is felt as right works correctly, and the result, when measured by the individual’s consciousness, is a high sense of aesthetic pleasure (Read, 1986, p. 29, our translation).

Thus, considering the great gap between contact with art in pre-school education until adulthood, we see that the initial challenge consists in seeking to overcome the first

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barrier of “I do not know how to draw,” by introducing other expression possibilities and not only the figurative one<sup>1</sup>, as well as combining drawing to other experiences that facilitate a particular graphic expression; to do this, we resorted to the embroidery practice.

Widely used as an adornment in garments and in pieces of decoration, embroidery is a means of expression in this methodology, going beyond a decorative and utilitarian view, showing itself capable to combine concentration, rhythm, and movement, as well as to maintain the experience lived in the classroom in a continuum in time, something which favors what Ostrower (1977) names as *psychic tension* in individual creative processes.

In any creation field, the individual would have to be able to sustain a tension state, spiritual and emotional concentration, self-awareness, a long production effort, for weeks, months, years, for as long as a work could last. [...] The greatest importance, therefore, must be assigned to the quality of the individual's inner commitment and her/his renewing capacity, that is, to her/his ability to concentrate and, when resuming work, managing to resume the initial creation state, *achieving and sustaining attention at this deep awareness level*. That is what matters. This means rediscovering the dynamic tension of intentionality, the driving force of doing. The individual need not “seeking inspiration.” She/he relies on her/his ability to intuit in the concentration depths where she/he does this work (Ostrower, 1977, pp. 73-74, emphasis by the author, our translation).

In this case, embroidery takes a role capable of guaranteeing the development and maintenance of individual creative processes, thus not seeking to use it in order to develop domesticated personalities, as it has been the case throughout history regarding women's education, since that which the Jesuits offered to the female Indians (Alegre, 1988).

Along with the drawing, the use of embroidery in pedagogical practice, in addition to its ancestral references, constitutes a means of germinating knowledge and specific language for individual expression in classroom experiences – regardless of the gender at stake.

## **Between movements, yarns, and shapes**

After a class for observation, we defined that two texts would be discussed. As a group, the internee and the full professor would be responsible for conducting the experiences, being up to the internee the individual drawing and embroidery practices, highlighting the fact that all students' activities should also be carried out by the trainee and the professor.

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<sup>1</sup> The figurative expression comes from the concept of figurative art, in which realism reigns, that is, faithfully portraying what a person sees.

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In this way, we occupied the living space shared with the students the learning promoted, in a circular relation of learning exchange.

In the first meeting, the text “Brincando com as sensações do corpo” [Playing with body sensations] (Jalles & Araújo, 2011) was discussed, resulting from a pedagogical work conducted with a group of 21 children, aged 2 or 3 years, from the Childhood Education Center (Núcleo de Educação da Infância – NEI) of the Application School of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte (Colégio de Aplicação da Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte – CAp/UFRN). This study has systematized the actions expressed by the body, since this is the first language of a child.

All actions were based on experiences aimed at their goals, which were: a) knowing one’s own body; b) exploring some physical, motor, and perceptive abilities of the body; c) establishing body care procedures; and d) building affection bonds. The pedagogical practice introduced began with round conversations, in which questions concerning the first ideas about the body were discussed, followed by three experiences whose purpose was increasing the perception of one’s own body, the perception of one’s own body and the colleagues’ body, and understanding self-body care, completing the process with a musical ‘sarau’ to celebrate.

In order to establish a parallel between the experiences conducted with children in the text mentioned, we held a meditation event in which each student could get in touch with the sensations of her/his own body and the constant internal movement, even when we are physically standing still. Then, they were asked to represent graphically, by using only the basic graphical elements *line* and *point*, without resorting to shapes.

Students had some difficulty to concentrate on meditation; on the other hand, there was a surprising ability to share experiences, even graphically. It was noteworthy that, even before the same sensations, the graphic expressions were unique, singular. Repeated drawings were rare.

**Figure 2** Outcomes of the 1st experience



Source: Authors' personal collection.

In the second meeting there was a retrospective review of the previous class and texts from the work *As cirandas de ontem e de hoje* [Ring-around-the-rosies of yesterday and today] (Haes, 2012) were discussed. Chapter V, “Os protótipos das formas de cirandas e seus efeitos na vida futura” [The prototypes of ring-around-the-rosies and their effects on future life], discusses what the author names as the *form and movement triad* of these playful activities consisting of *children’s round games*, *face-to-face games*, and *convoy games*. The children’s round games evoke the circle’s ability to maintain a protective, quiet, nature; face-to-face games, or ‘back-and-forth’ games emphasize the pulsation and breathing rhythm present in all movements of the Earth, as well as the human social relation; in turn, the convoy movement develops logical thinking. Along with the ring-around-the-rosy movements, music becomes more important as it illuminates the broad content of images of this activity, revealing the image content itself (Haes, 2012).

Chapter IX, “Ritmo e religião” [Rhythm and religion], in turn, also discusses rhythm in playful activities and their effects when in early contact on the child and on cults:

What would the world be without this divine rhythm? Rhythmic is the heartbeat of the universe, the unfolding and events of the universe as a whole. Rhythmically takes place the walk of the sun, the moon, the planets following their celestial trajectories; rhythmically, the seasons of the year follow one another. The rhythm pulsates in the blood and in the human soul, it undulates in everything that is alive, in all that is art and also in the flow and ebb of the tides. It is in this way that the

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truly great nature of rhythm is revealed to us in everything that unfolds physically and spiritually and also in that which can lead to the highest and also the most hidden things: the Christ who, in a blissful way, lives in beneficent rhythms (Haes, 2012, p. 168, our translation).

Having the discussion of the texts by Haes (2012) as a basis, ring-around-the-rosy experiences recalling our childhood were performed, and the students were invited to share the feelings and sensations evoked. This was a special moment of interculturality, since several students were of African origin.

Some ring-around-the-rosies were chose to be performed in the classroom, with special attention to feeling and identifying the movement and rhythm of each of us and the other in the group. Two circles were made, one contained in the other, which rotated clockwise and counterclockwise. In the sequence, there was a sharing of sensations, resorting to drawing as a facilitator. Our attention was drawn to the fact that students have expressed to feel the energy generated by the group in a circular movement, as a response to what the author says about the circle's protective nature, as well as the paternal tranquility involved in hugging (Haes, 2012).

Before the experiences, this time, the invitation was to use an embroidery frame, whose circular shape reflected the experience, this time with insertion of the element color. At this stage, graphical elements that could theoretically help representing movement and rhythm were introduced, based on Gestalt Theory, according to which we have a natural movement of continuity and enclosure of the shapes observed.

The Gestalt, after systematic studies, introduces a new theory about the phenomenon of perception. According to this theory, what happens in the brain is not identical to what happens in the retina. Cerebral excitement does not occur in isolated sites, but by extension. There is, in the perception of shape, no further process of association of the various sensations. The very first sensation of shape is already global and unified (Gomes, 2004, p. 19, our translation).

We took our embroideries to be finished home, in order to present them in our last meeting, when we evaluated the proposal and talked about the experience with this pedagogical practice, sharing impressions, difficulties, and possible effects on the students' individual pedagogical practices, and also prepared the embroidery frame exhibition.

**Figure 3** Outcomes of the 2nd experience



Source: Authors' personal collection.

The experience lived in the classroom have indicated that when we quit a stubborn pursuit of graphic realism, drawing becomes more fluid, dynamic, and unique.

## Conclusions

In our last meeting, we asked students to answer an open-ended questionnaire about the challenges of the proposal, how they assessed the outcomes, the possibility of inserting the proposal in their pedagogical practice, and how they assessed the didactics. Here are the testimonies of some students who helped us to analyze what was done in the classroom:

*[...] according to the methodology used, we can do many things for classroom, coordination, organization, performance ... (Student A)*

*[...] accessible and innovative didactics. A knowledge expanding experience. (Student B)*

*I believe that this methodology is very important for the learning process, and it is used in various forms, subjects, as a pedagogical tool. (Student C)*

*[...] it was a proposal that we can take to classrooms in order to improve children's skills and believe in their potential to tackle the challenges. (Student D)*

*It was excellent. Besides being the first time we had contact with embroidery in the classroom addressing a subject, it also helped us to grasp the experiences and interpret our body's movement. We mixed theory and practice through art. (Student E)*

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Thus, we assess the outcomes in a positive way and notice the importance of bringing new teaching practices, especially in a subject of the Undergraduate Course in Pedagogy, that is, in the education of professors who can expand knowledge in a large education network.

The experience outcomes, when combining theoretical knowledge, body experience of contents, and graphic expression of feelings and sensations in adult education, demonstrated the growing need to seek methodologies capable of interconnecting the sensitive aspects of human education to pedagogical practice.

Throughout the teaching internship experience, we managed to conduct a part of the practice aimed at the research project at the MA level, consolidating knowledge and, at the same time, realizing that activities do not always occur as planned, but this does not make them less rich. The outcomes were satisfactory and we often had to ward off the shadow of frustration stemming from some rigidity and the need to control the class and the process as a whole, something which became almost impossible in the classroom dynamics.

Lesson plans were prepared, and they consisted in establishing the proposal that would be taken to the class through the text chosen for discussion, the means used, the challenge posed, and the experience, however, in fact, we had to look for flexibility and adaptation to new realities. Aspects not considered came out and unexpected outcomes provided new learning opportunities. In the end of the teaching experience, we become more aware of the need to observe the student's unique learning movement, even at times when she/he refuses to participate.

Witnessing, accomplishing, and experiencing a pedagogical work proposal that seeks not only to convey content, but to educate professors more conscious of themselves, enabled a great learning, considering our predominantly academic education. Developing a methodology that combines the search for a graphic expression of experience and the sense of classroom experiences through embroidery has shown to be a nice surprise.

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