

Teaching engaged with its territory: The role of Community Engagement (*Vinculación con el Medio*) in pedagogical innovation in Social Sciences

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Abstract. Faced with the demand for greater social responsibility in higher education, the COLABORAR project of the UC Social Sciences Faculty seeks to strengthen public commitment through collaboration and a two-way relationship with the territory of La Legua and its surroundings (San Joaquín). One of its main strategies is promoting innovative and co-responsible teaching with the territory, articulating opportunities for collaboration with organizations, guiding various experiential learning methodologies, and promoting a collective vision around social responsibility. In this way, the Community Engagement approach that COLABORAR promotes is an integration between the functions of the university (teaching, research, and management) with the interests of social impact. After four years of implementation, a comprehensive evaluation of its implementation and its preliminary results in teaching the faculty are being carried out. The territorial focus of teaching and the diversity of proposed methodologies have allowed the development of more than 120 products, contributing to organizations in the territory in more than 20 different topics. Support for innovation, diversity of approaches, possibilities of continuity and lasting collaboration ties are some of the strengths of COLABORAR.

Keywords: Higher education, social responsibility, educational innovation, service learning.

1 Introduction

Today, the quality of Higher Education [HE] requires acting with social responsibility (Albulescu & Albulescu, 2015; Ayala-Rodríguez et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2009; UNESCO-IESALC, 2017, 2020). The COLABORAR project of the UC Social Sciences Faculty seeks to contribute to the development of La Legua and its surroundings through a two-way and collaborative relationship. Since 2018, teachers and students have participated in more than 40 courses from the four academic units of the faculty, developing teaching and learning activities in collaboration with community, educational, and municipal organizations. An innovative, relevant, and co-responsible teaching with the territory has been promoted, offering significant learning to its students as agents of change, strengthening their public commitment and applying disciplinary knowledge for the ethical and innovative resolution of local challenges.

2 Theoretical Framework

The concept of University Social Responsibility [USR] has been used to describe the impact and public and community service activities of HE institutions. USR requires a comprehensive transformation of HEIs and articulating the relationship with the community, training, research and management (CNA, 2022; Coelho & Menezes, 2021; Hollister, 2017; UNESCO-IESALC, 2017, 2020). This shift implies developing a pedagogical, dialogical and transformational Community Engagement in which teaching plays a key role (Dournac, 2018). USR as a framework for teaching can contribute to the development of active teaching and learning processes committed to local and global challenges, which recognizes the expertise and knowledge of communities, and promotes the development of transversal skills (Hall & Tandon, 2021). Thus, it must foster teaching that integrates professionalism and an academic culture of innovation in pedagogical practices with a public commitment, through which what is taught and how it is structured is with the community in mind (Hall & Tandon, 2021; Janse van Rensburg, 2014; Morales, 2010; Myatt et al., 2018).

3 Methods

To strengthen USR as a transversal policy and improve pedagogical practices around public engagement (Vallaes et al., 2009), the following research questions were raised for the first stage of the evaluation process of COLABORAR:

- What are the characteristics of the academic activities carried out within the framework of COLABORAR?
- What challenges and opportunities do teachers and community partners identify regarding the teaching promoted by COLABORAR?

A qualitative study is proposed (Fink, 2015; Cresswell & Poth, 2018) safeguarding the triangulation and complementarity of perspectives (Daher et al., 2020), as well as allowing teachers to identify practice problems on which to develop knowledge and improvements (Felten, 2013; Morales, 2010; Myatt et al., 2018).

In this first stage, 127 products made by students in their training activities with COLLABORAR between 2019 and 2021 were systematized. The objective was to characterize the teaching-learning activities developed within the framework of the project. Two participatory evaluation instances were also carried out with teachers and community partners to delve into the challenges and opportunities for innovation that socially responsible teaching entails in collaboration with the community of the territory they inhabit (Daher et al., 2020; Giancola, 2020). A thematic analysis was carried out to organize the data and identify relevant patterns and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

4 Results

4.1 Characterization of academic activities

According to the information collected and the analysis carried out on the 127 products developed by students, the diversity of collaboration formats and methodologies used stands out. The training activities have allowed in three years (2019-2021) to develop theoretical research, community cadasters, empirical research, organizational diagnoses, project evaluations, intervention design, and the development of psychoeducational audiovisual resources. Likewise, the target group of the activities was varied: communities, work teams, children, youth, women, people with disabilities, and older adults. Linked to this, at least 20 interdisciplinary thematic axes linked to these groups were identified.

4.2 Teaching with COLABORAR

COLABORAR seeks to promote socially responsible, committed teaching that offers experiential learning. According to teachers and community partners, COLABORAR has facilitated the collaborative relationship between teaching teams and organizations in La Legua and its surroundings. The work of COLABORAR with the organizations makes it possible to identify opportunities that give continuity to the projects developed by teachers and their students (e.g., a teacher can project collaboration with one or more organizations, and the organizations can delve into the topics addressed by the course in time).

Even though COLABORAR works with courses in a Service-Learning format, it has allowed, according to the participants, to expand the repertoire of scalable methodologies with a territorial and community focus—for example, associating the analysis of public policies with inputs for governmental and non-governmental organizations, or enabling professional practices or titling workshops in the community. It has allowed for sharing and articulating experiences and building shared meanings and greater capacities among teachers.

5 Discussion

Pedagogical innovation should respond to the social role of HE. Community Engagement can play a role by facilitating, guiding, and managing opportunities in this line. COLABORAR has promoted a particular guiding imprint of territorial co-responsibility, that is, to put the territory (La Legua and its surroundings) we inhabit as the purpose of the training. Its scope has allowed addressing diverse community needs and contributing with a wide range of solutions. The methodologies are varied, but it is the stamp that has permeated a socially committed teaching culture.

6 Conclusions

Integrated management is required that promotes a socially responsible educational project, which promotes and guides teaching relevant to global and local challenges. For this, advancing the integration of research, teaching and Community Engagement is a relevant academic development strategy.

7 Limitations and Future Research

The results correspond to the first stages of evaluation. Although they contribute to understanding Community Engagement's role in teaching innovation, the following stages will allow us to identify the best practices for meaningful learning.

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