

Investigation article

Autonomy and participative processes in emotional education

Autonomía y procesos participativos en la educación emocional

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Abstract

Introduction: This paper presents research about emotional education, with the purpose to identify and reflect on the introduction of changes in the educational process, to analyze the perspective of students about participative and autonomous processes, as well as the tensions and difficulties experienced. **Methodology:** A collaborative self-study project was conducted by two teachers of a graduate course of *Teacher and Training* during two school years affected by pandemic. It analyses twenty-six students' portfolios and their written reflections on the educational processes and learning. **Results:** Participatory and autonomy processes undertook new formats and were boosted and developed in these exceptional circumstances. Students valued the building of a personal learning project, centered on their own goals for development and in conjunction with a class collective project. Several challenges and tensions arose, such as an immense flow of asynchronous interactions between teachers and students, very demanding for all, and inequalities in the conditions of access and use of the technologies. **Conclusions:** It is important to reinforce the emotional education research field exploring and problematizing the experiential and critical dimensions of emotional learning. That requires constant search for a creative integration of competence and critical approaches.

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Keywords: collaborative self-study; emotional education; higher education pedagogy; participation; autonomy; critical approach; competence approach; pandemic.

Resumen

Introducción: Este artículo presenta una investigación sobre educación emocional, con el propósito de identificar y reflexionar sobre la introducción de cambios en el proceso educativo, analizar la perspectiva de los estudiantes sobre los procesos participativos y autónomos, así como las tensiones y dificultades vividas. **Metodología:** Se realizó un proyecto de autoestudio colaborativo entre dos docentes de un curso de grado en Educación y Formación, durante dos años escolares afectados por la pandemia. Analiza veintiséis portafolios de estudiantes y sus reflexiones escritas sobre los procesos educativos y de aprendizaje. **Resultados:** Los procesos participativos y de autonomía tomaron nuevos formatos y se impulsaron y desarrollaron en estas circunstancias excepcionales. Los estudiantes valoraron la construcción de un proyecto de aprendizaje personal, centrado en sus propios objetivos de desarrollo y en articulación con el proyecto colectivo de clase. Surgieron varios desafíos y tensiones, como un inmenso flujo de interacciones asincrónicas entre profesores y estudiantes, muy exigentes para todos, y desigualdades en las condiciones de acceso y uso de las tecnologías. **Conclusiones:** Es importante reforzar el campo de investigación en educación emocional explorando y problematizando las dimensiones experiencial y emancipatoria del aprendizaje emocional. Eso requiere una búsqueda constante de una integración creativa de los enfoques de competencias y críticos.

Palabras clave: autoestudio colaborativo; educación emocional; pedagogía de la educación superior; participación; autonomía; enfoque crítico; enfoque de competencias; pandemia.

1. Introduction

In this paper, we problematize the changes made in the students' participatory and autonomous processes, which were put to the test over two years, in a context of emotional education. To do so, the two teachers and authors of this paper analyze and reflect on the work carried out as a collaborative self-study project. The main objectives are

- i) to identify and reflect on and about the introduction of changes in the educational process, as well as the tensions and difficulties that arise during pandemic, and
- ii) to analyze the perspective of students about participative and autonomous processes in the context of emotional education, in higher education. Thus, we have the two following main research questions: What educational changes arose during pandemic times to support autonomy and participation among students within the context of emotional education in higher education? How did teachers and students experience the continuing challenges aroused into the context of emotional education in higher education?

The pandemic crisis and the consequent lengthy periods of quarantine brought many challenges to the educational field, namely in universities. The crisis triggered by the Sars-Cov-2 pandemic, decreed on 11 March 2020 by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2020), has brought many challenges to education and school management, but has simultaneously opened up opportunities for changes in teaching and learning for the whole educational community. In Portugal, a state of emergency was declared on 19 March 2020, and online teaching was prioritized, which led to particular challenges for the students relative to the participatory, collaborative and autonomous processes that we were seeking to implement.

In these troubled times we have been challenged to rethink our beliefs and our practices. In the instability and in the search for ways forward, we have discovered contradictions and experienced tensions triggered by the changes made in these two years. In the search for a writing that allows us to understand, in Berry and Kitchen (2020) words, how “we can talk our walk in more genuine, deliberative and generative ways” (p. 123), we feel challenged, even after the writing process has begun.

We are inspired by the work of other colleagues who, based on these challenges, researched and reflected on the implications of their work during the pandemic crisis in universities, interrogating emotional, social and online teaching-learning dimensions (e.g. Donovan et al., 2021; González, 2020; Rabin, 2021; Maia & Dias, 2020; Smith & Kaya, 2021). Issues of human rights, such as the right to civic participation and education, of engagement, inclusion and sense of belonging, of care, equity and social justice, and of meaningful learning experiences, namely online learning, emerges as particularly important to research.

This paper sets out a theoretical framework that presents the main theoretical references regarding the educational processes under analysis and the discussion of the data presented, followed by a description of the methodology, where we present the approach, the contexts and the participants of the study. The following section is the presentation and discussion of results on the research issues, before finishing with a brief summary and final reflection.

1.1. Pedagogical approaches to emotional education

Following a line of isomorphism and coherence between formative processes and educational content, we have drawn inspiration from sociocultural theories about the emotional processes, considering the concepts of culture, climate and emotional environments (de Rivera, 2014), according to which the emotional dimensions are not only phenomena of an individual and personal order, but are also inscribed in the emotional regimes that regulate collectives, whether they be nations, institutions, organizations, groups or interpersonal relations. Therefore, in an effort to explore these topics all together as teachers and students, we have worked to create favorable emotional environments comprising an emotional culture and climate of safety, trust, solidarity and which is imbued with the ethics of caring (Gilligan, 2013); as well as a culture of collaboration, participation and autonomy. At times of crisis, which give rise to the socioemotional processes of instability, insecurity, isolation and anxiety, this becomes especially challenging.

Added to this challenge is an underlying tension, always renewed and never entirely resolved, between two different pedagogical approaches to emotional education and which are somewhat divergent from the ontological and epistemological point of view, as identified by Goralska (2020) as corresponding to two discourses - the development of competencies and the deepening of a critical emotional (co)understanding. This author argues that the former corresponds to an instrumental vision, through which “the basic mission of educational institutions is the transfer of objective knowledge and coding it in the minds of students” (p. 112). Authors like Goleman et al. (2019), Mayer et al. (2008), and Saarni (2000) theorize from this perspective, guiding us to concepts of emotional skills, emotional intelligence and emotional literacy, worked on with these students. As Casassus (2017) emphasizes, the focus is the personal and the intersubjective experience to develop consciousness, understanding and action in relation to the self, to others and to the world. SEL approach - Social and Emotional Learning approach - may be integrated in this line of action. SEL seeks to develop students’ competencies such as self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making in an integrated manner in the curriculum, through classroom activities and a positive climate, as we usually do in our classes. It aims to help

students to enhance their engagement and academic success in schools, but also to prepare them for successful personal and professional lives (Coelho et al., 2016). There are:

programs that include some direct form of student skill-building, typically via a scope and sequenced curriculum and/or through a set of activities and routines designed to be used throughout the regular day... Other approaches include interventions that (a) target adult skills, attitudes, and practices in ways that support high-quality teaching, learning, and social and emotional development, as well as those that seek to (b) transform the entire culture and climate of the learning environment via a system-wide approach. (Jones et al., 2021, p. 9)

The second approach, inspired by the critical pedagogies (Freire, 1992; Giroux, 2020; González, 2017), is guided by principles of social justice, emancipation and equality, and emphasizes the importance of sociocultural contexts, the engagement of the different participants in the educational process, the political conscience and goals of profound social and personal transformation. As such, Goralska (2020) believes that “experiencing emotions and working on emotions can be a tool of resistance to the norms and standards imposed and dominating in an (educational) institution” (p. 116).

The first approach, a dominant discourse in the field of education, with an exponential growth of scientific publications, is the object of several critics. Among the most relevant Menéndez (2018) refer the reductionism to the personal and individual responsibility, to the programmatic and predetermination of paths, and to the standardization of measurement. Others, like Zaldívar (2024), highlight also the dualistic visions between positive and negative emotions, the instrumentalization and subordination to ethical education, the psychological therapeutic aspects of some practices, the hegemony of the ideal of wellbeing.

However, these two approaches are not necessarily exclusive, given that developing reflective skills about the self and about contexts, questioning the very social rules about what the emotional skills to be developed are and questioning how we experience emotions in contemporary Western societies, can foster resistance to the dominant discourses. It can also favor transformative learning, in the sense attributed by Mezirow (2009), in which the schemes are transformed.

These two approaches can, we believe, be conciliated by looking at them in conjunction in a holistic manner (e.g. Triliva et al., 2014). To do so can contribute to the organization of educational contexts and processes that create conditions of autonomy. Diverse pathways of learning can be created, which are geared towards the interests of the students, and which emphasize their participation in the decisions made about the curricular organization of the teaching curricular unit, as well as deepening their collaborative processes. Recognize not only the personal and interpersonal, but also the social, the cultural, the political character of emotions, amplifies and implies a more profound relation with the particularities of spaces and its inhabitants (Menéndez, 2018), in order to understand their complexities and participate with a critical consciousness. Conciliating these visions and this mindset is a permanent challenge, factor of dissatisfaction and a constant search for the not-known (Atkinson, 2015).

Peres (2020) believes that “it is also important to make Higher Education students responsible for their own learning, and their capacity to involve themselves in self-learning processes, and to create their plans, environments and personal learning networks” (p. 28). Along the same line of thinking, Baxter (2002) states that the main goal of higher education should be to help enable the students to be the authors of their own lives (self-authorship), i.e. to think autonomously, make choices and pursue their dreams. The author argues that to do so they

need to be strongly supported but warns that: “Being good company for literally thousands of students, all of whom are on different journeys, is a complex challenge” (p. 3). When faced with great crises human beings should unite and allow the common good to prevail instead of individual interests, as Echeita (2020) says “the best way to approach these difficult problems is the willingness to work together, united by a strong sense of belonging, collaboration and mutual support” (p. 11).

2. Methodology

We undertook a process of collaborative self-study (Berry & Kitchen, 2020; Donovan et al., 2021), to evolve the educational process and develop knowledge about it. We analyzed issues and dilemmas that arose, looking critically at our own practice and conceptions which were influenced by the institutional context and the class dynamics. So, this research paper is the result of a collaborative self-study approach, in the sense that most of the scholars understand it. As Mena and Russell (2017) explain, there are two forms of collaboration in self-studies and ours follows the one where a group of colleagues undertake self-study together, instead of only being external and critical friends. We are continuing analyzing our practice and re-examining our teaching to improve it, within a research project entitled *EEES – Educação Emocional e Ético Ensino Superior* [Emotional and Ethical Education in Higher Education], focused on the work carried out over the last few years, the results of which have been presented in several publications. (e.g. Sobral & Caetano, 2020; Sobral & Caetano, 2021; Sobral & Caetano, 2022; Caetano, 2023). This project is closely related and contributes to another two research projects. One is focused on the teaching work and, within it, on the pedagogical practices of Portuguese universities and polytechnics - *STORM - (Re) Configurations of Teaching-Learning and Higher Education Organizations in a Context of Change*. The other one is focused on the educator’s education and narrative research - *Formação de profissionais de educação e investigação narrativa*.

In this paper we integrated the data analysis of the students’ portfolios, identifying them with pseudonym and school year (e.g. Ana, 1st year). In the portfolios, students present evidences and reflections on the teaching and learning processes they consider relevant, structuring them around the main aspects worked on, namely: lessons diary, everyday narratives, mutual care activities, learning plans and monitoring, individual and group thematic researches, global reflections on learning and Curricular Unit.

We used thematic content analysis of these portfolios, with three main themes:

- i) participative processes of co-designing;
- ii) autonomy processes of learning;
- iii) digital technologies. The analytical units were codified and selected for this paper in order to present their views, bringing not only positive assessments, but also and above all their difficulties.

This study took into consideration several ethical principles and procedures, including anonymity and informed consent. From the beginning, students were informed about investigation purposes, procedures and their right to withdraw.

2.1. The context

The *Education and Training* course is a three-year degree graduation course and has an optional curricular unit called *Emotional Competencies (CU-EC)* within the second semester of the second curricular year, delivered for 1.5 hours a week by two teachers. The CU-EC is built with the students based on self-diagnosis and a consequent individual learning plan, enabling the joint preparation of a collective class project, and the development of proposals and organization of activities by the students themselves, in an effort to get the students involved in and to feel part of a learning community.

Before, we already worked with principles of participation, collaboration and student autonomy, but the pandemic introduced challenges, tensions and difficulties that we had to deal with, introducing some pedagogical changes. In order to better understand the context of our work before pandemic, we cite a publication focused on two previous years:

The collective project was built based on mutual topic interests, leading to program adaptations and new proposals of activities. Some lessons were organised by small students' groups, with teachers support, and others were dynamized by teachers, considering students' interests, the curricular program, strategic principles and the opportunities that arise at the school, university, surrounding communities and the city. ... Classroom based sessions adopted a U shape layout and took place indoors, outdoors (near the lake) and outside the institution (attending cultural events). Additionally, students also participated in an annual Seminar entitled *Diversity, Education and Citizenship (DEC)* in which the teachers belong to the scientific and organising committee. Students captured their reflections and learning in a portfolio... (Sobral & Caetano, 2022, p. 4)

2.2. The participants

In the 1st school year the class (A) comprised 24 students and in the 2nd school year the class (B) comprised 21 students, the majority aged between 19 to 22 years old, mode 20 years old, and most were female, only two males in the first year and one in the second year. It was possible to work with the data, respectively, of 12 and 14 students, who signed the informed consent form, a total of 26 portfolios (see table I):

Table 1.

Characterization of students

Topics	1st year of pandemic	2nd year of pandemic
Number of students	24	21
Gender	22 female 2 male	20 female 1 male
Age	20 years old - 45 years old Mode: 20 years	19 years old - 22 years old Mode: 20 years
Informed consent	12 students	14 students

Source: Authors elaboration (2024).

3. Results

3.1. Educational processes – new adaptations

The classroom teaching as we knew it was modified during the pandemic. Upon the introduction of restrictions, in an initial phase, lessons were given asynchronously, subsequently becoming synchronous remote lessons, and later still, in the 2nd year, the classroom lessons face-to-face returned. The monitoring of the activities by teachers intensified over these two years, together with the students, the teaching body and the school board.

In the 2nd year, already more accustomed to this pandemic crisis, feeling that there would already be less anxiety due to the situation, but also due to the exhaustion of teachers, we decided to reduce the regularity of feedback to students.

To follow we present and reflect on the main challenges and changes introduced in the educational process, with repercussions on the participation and autonomy of the students, based on both the teachers and the students' reflections.

Similar to previous years, students actively took part in the entire process, from the organization of their individual work plan and research projects to drawing up a collective plan for the class, and the planning and organization of lessons in groups. The individual plan, which encourages a process of autonomy and simultaneously an active participation in the management of the student's own learning, involved processes inside and outside the classroom, in and out of the lessons, namely writing and reflecting on the everyday narratives, reflecting on the lessons, undertaking of research in scientific journals and websites, texts, videos, photographs, among others. Table 2 provides a summary of the converging and diverging points throughout the two years of the pandemic.

Table 2.

Main adaptation in the students' collective organization and autonomy

Topics	1st year of pandemic	2nd year of pandemic
Learning plans and individual research projects	Drawing up an individual plan to develop socio-emotional skills	Distinction between the individual plan for the development of socio-emotional skills and the research project on a topic of personal interest
Personal dimension of development of emotional skills	Self-diagnostic processes: use of questionnaires, reflective writing Regular monitoring of the development plan Writing of everyday narratives Development of extra-lesson and extra-class activities	
	Drawing up individual plans around socio-emotional skills, which allow groups to be formed through affinities of necessity and interests, to organize synchronous lessons	Drawing up individual learning plans around skills Only two groups were formed based on these skills. The other groups got together around topics of a social, cultural and educational nature

Construction of the collective project of subgroups and the class group	The individual plan contributes to the collective project of subgroups and the class group	
	The individual plan contributes to the collective project of subgroups and the class group	
	Participative processes for the organization of a collective plan for the class, based on the individual works	Participative processes for the organization of a collective plan for the class, based on individual research projects

Source: Authors elaboration (2024).

As can be seen in Table 2, some changes needed to be made between the first and the second year of the pandemic, to further differentiate at 2nd year the plans for the development of socioemotional skills in relation to the individual research projects, which, in our view, allowed greater expression to be given to the diversity of interests and the sociocultural dimensions to be more clearly deepened.

3.2. Participative processes of co-designing the learning experience

The establishment of work groups was something that the students initially found strange, but which quickly dissipated given the importance attributed by all the group members to the topic they had in common and which brought them together, as it was something they intended to work on, as can be seen in the statements of a student:

I believe it was very important for me to work on this topic and verbalize it out loud, because I always did research about this matter but had never really talked and shared the information I had acquired and my point of view. (Bianca, 1st year)

As for the work done in a group that was defined not through friendship affinities, but through common interests, the students were extremely positive about it: "The way the teachers distributed the work groups - through topics of interest - was intelligent, interesting and enriching, insofar as I worked with colleagues who, perhaps, if it wasn't for this task, I would never have worked with" (Elena, 2nd year).

In the 2nd year, the individual skills development plans and research projects were differentiated from one another, for most of the students. In turn, we developed the social, cultural and educational dimensions more than in the previous year, because in addition to understanding the relevance of these topics for the students, we as teachers want to deepen the sociocultural and critical perspectives (Goralska, 2020). We believe that the differentiation made by students' plans and research projects may be associated with a strategy of encouraging the participation of the students: the sharing of a PowerPoint presentation on *Google Drive* with one slide per student, where each one wrote items of his/her individual plan relative to his/her development (personal and social) and research. Later, the groups would be organized by the teachers in line with the affinities, distributed through simultaneous rooms in Zoom to debate their projects in small groups. This allowed the students to delve deeper into their specific individual topics of research and branch out to broader and collective topics, working on the participatory dimension of the management of the lessons with the class and simultaneously their autonomy. With regard to this dimension, the students stated the following:

What I most enjoyed (...) were the dynamic sessions, because students were the ones who said what topics they would most like to study - this was the starting point for our work. (Leonor, 2nd year)

My topic of interest, “emotional intelligence in children”, was what gave me the most pleasure. I have five siblings, three of them aged between two and six years old. I’m an educational assistant and I find it fascinating how children deal with their emotions and their day-to-day problems. Doing this task allowed me not only to understand them better, but also to support them when they need help managing their emotions and feelings. (Greta, 2nd year)

For us, however, there is still work to be done in order to make this process of creating groups and collective themes even more participatory, so we are trying new forms of organization, creating, for example, spaces for debate in potential groups with affinities of interests, without, however, considering these groups and these themes closed, giving them the opportunity to decide and redefine themselves.

3.3. Autonomy and individual processes of learning

With regard to the autonomy processes, we believe the meditation undertaken by the students during the pandemic was a relevant development. Especially in the 2019/20 academic year, during which time we spent almost an entire semester in quarantine, the students began unexpectedly and autonomously to carry out mindfulness practices. Many used it for support in this especially difficult time when uncertainty, stress and depression were recurring emotional states. These practices began upon suggestion by the teachers, with written guidelines:

The breathing exercise that the teacher suggested was extremely liberating, as in just one minute I managed to liberate the mind and relax. I think it is essential right now to have these moments where we stay silent and switch off from the bad news. It’s an exercise that helps me relax and then I am able to start working. (Andreia, 1st year)

Subsequently, the idea continued, taking advantage of a video a student had put in her portfolio and asking her to disseminate it to encourage the sharing and active participation of the students in the construction of the UC-CE. The idea was particularly well accepted, and together with the previous one, a practice started that many appropriated systematically, bringing immediate benefits in emotional terms with increased serenity, peace and happiness.

This process was particularly fruitful as regards the impact these practices had on the life of these youngsters, as they took up these habits, with many of the students saying that they kept it up on a regular basis. Quarantine had brought them the opportunity to internalize these procedures and gain a habit that could have extremely transformative medium/long term effects for them as more aware, more self-controlled and more autonomous people:

At a psychological level, I can now concentrate better in the exercises and I feel less anxiety. When I get anxious, I adopt the strategy of putting on music that I like (...) focus fully on the breathing and forget what makes me feel bad. Although it is not instantaneous, I can feel progress. (Luísa, 2nd year)

On the day before returning to classroom lessons I was even more anxious than usual. I felt the need to do the exercises to see if I could relax and sleep. When I finished, I felt

much lighter and more relaxed and I slept peacefully. That was when I truly realized how much I needed the exercises and the benefits they brought to me. (Paula, 2nd year)

Also, with regard to autonomy, it is important to highlight the relevance attached to the students' drawing up an individual plan and keeping track of it, and the production of an individual portfolio:

An action plan is a detailed plan about certain essential parameters to achieve my goal. Through it I guarantee that I fulfill the objectives of my personal project. By monitoring and reflecting on the action plan, I can see how I am evolving, the objectives achieved and what I have yet to do. Furthermore, I consider it important to make changes if necessary. (Ana, 1st year)

For me, what allowed me to learn most was compiling this portfolio, despite the fact it was a lot of work and complex. I managed to reflect on significant moments of my life and the way I improved several aspects; reflecting on some lessons; gaining skills as regards emotions, toxic relationships, anxiety and self-esteem, and mainly understanding what I had to do to achieve certain objectives that would bring about a positive change in my life. (Luísa, 2nd year)

As we can see, significant learning is attributed to these processes of autonomy, namely in terms of self-regulation. These are learnings through which students come out strengthened, through the awareness and assumption of their transforming power.

3.4. Digital technologies to support the participative and autonomous processes

As well as the aforementioned use of moodle to make the lesson programmes visible and to allow the teachers provide feedback on the students' individual portfolios, it is emphasized that there was a much more systematic use of moodle and other online resources during these two years of pandemic, as outlined in Table 3.

Table 3.

Use of digital technologies to support the educational processes

Topics	1st year of pandemic	2nd year of pandemic
Use of moodle for asynchronous processes and autonomous learning	Organization of sections for each asynchronous lesson, introducing the content, suggestions of activities, study support resources (e.g. texts, videos, posters)	Organization of sections to prepare the synchronous lessons, setting autonomous activities to be done between lessons (e.g. suggestions for analysis of narratives) Placement of autonomous self-assessment tools (e.g. Veiga Branco questionnaire, scales of well-being and discomfort)
Use of zoom in synchronous lessons	Work in a common room to develop the collective processes Use of simultaneous rooms to share the questionnaire results, plans, narratives and debate	
	---	Registry in google drive files Debates on emotional regimes and the pandemic
Use of various online resources	Sharing of videos (in synchronous lessons and in moodle for asynchronous lessons), by both teachers and students	

Sharing of varied content:

. Google drive (e.g. PowerPoints with research and summary of debates).

. Padlets (e.g. to record the emotional control area to be worked on and the subsequent undertaking of the collective project).

. Mentimeter (strategies to develop skills).

Source: Authors elaboration (2024).

As shown in Table 3, the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) increased and diversified throughout these two years. As well as refresher training on the use of the e-learning moodle platform, colleagues of other curricular units also shared the pedagogical work. This in addition to the learning with the students, who brought a range of resources as tools in their work presentations, and who participated within debates and sharing their own narratives and learning processes.

It is also worth mentioning that the use of digital technologies is increasing year on year and is in line with our research perspective, which gives rise to critical reflection and changes made to our working methods every year. But the pandemic effectively brought the need to enhance our digital skills and prepare ourselves for the challenges of online education.

The frequency of the feedback through ICT was extremely tiring, especially in the first year, as we wanted to support the students at a time when they were especially fragile, fearful and disorientated. Also, the fact we were not with them in person every week made us try to make up for the absence by working closely with them using virtual means. The students were sensitive to the arduous nature of this task, and they themselves sometimes felt exhausted with so much asked of them from the different Curricular Modules. Some comments on this issue are written below:

It demands a lot more from each one of us, insofar as we need (more than ever), as students, to manage our time and activities, which helps us grow as individuals and future professionals. (Vanessa, 1st year)

Our lessons were interrupted by a completely atypical situation, and for some time I felt completely lost (...). I felt lost and alone. (Lurdes, 1st year)

In the subsequent year, already more naturalized with this pandemic crisis, feeling that there would be less anxiety, but also due to teachers' exhaustion, we decided to slow down a little the regularity of feedback to students.

The students were in favor of using the digital technologies, as supports to the participation and debates during lessons, as exemplified by the following excerpt:

Although these lessons were through the computer, I think the teachers managed to make them very dynamic and interesting by sharing videos, PowerPoints, ideas with each student and class; simultaneous rooms where we exchanged items of information

and small tasks, among other activities. Exercises such as meditation helped to calm us down and alleviate the tension of the semester somewhat. (Catherine, 2nd year)

We ask, on the one hand, if the use was not excessive, and consequently dispersed the learning owing to these multiple applications.

On the other hand, we came to realize the use of these technologies entailed various difficulties, namely the differentiation and inequality among the students as regards internet access, and also improper functioning of cameras and microphones because of the places where the students connected to the zoom lessons (private, overcrowded and noisy spaces). In the 2nd year, when the quarantine was less restrictive, we tried to provide alternatives in rooms equipped for the purpose when the need arose, but the students did not take up this possibility and always said the difficulties were temporary. What is certain is that these constraints caused alterations in the educational process. For example, we stopped setting mindfulness activities during lessons when we realized the students had difficulties in concentrating given the adverse conditions.

On this matter some students said:

As for the meditation in the lesson, it did not work out very well. At that time my brothers were always at home, so it was very difficult to concentrate on my breathing. However, I began doing it and I found an application that has helped me with the breathing exercises. (Greta, 2nd year)

With the emotions we were feeling, we were invited to close our eyes and concentrate on our heart, putting our hands on our chest to help us concentrate, then focusing on our breathing to calm ourselves down. At times I managed to concentrate, but then I heard the shouting of my brother, who was playing video games in the room next door. (Maria, 2nd year)

The difficulties, on the other hand, may have favored an autonomous process of research and practice by the students, as recorded in the previous statement, where there is also use of ICT.

When lockdown finished and classroom lessons resumed, the students were generally in favor of the face-to-face lessons:

Today we resumed classroom lessons. We were all looking forward to this day – students and teachers – as we were anxious to leave home and mix in the academic community again. When I found out about the new government rules and consequently the return to the university, I was a little anxious and had high expectations for the day. (Paula, 2nd year).

Lockdown ended in the middle of March/April that year (2021), returning to the university last month, in May, because of the different phases of the lifting of restrictions. I was fed up with having online lessons and having to stay at home. I was very happy to get back to my “normal” routine. (Vickie, 2nd year).

All of this worked well for me. The university decided that we would spend one week at home, working autonomously, and one week with classroom lessons... This change ended up being a good turnaround in my life. (Greta, 2nd year).

In common we see this desire to participate in academic life, but also, for some, the development of a certain taste for the autonomy that these times have provided.

4. Discussion

Emotional education is a process that can encourage social and educational participation, aiding the development of transversal skills – both academic and personal – mobilized in contexts where the students take part. This integration of critical and competence approaches brought particular challenges during pandemic and through different phases of total and partial lockdown we experienced. A critical perspective is particularly associated with participation processes, emphasizing the understanding, debate, problematization and action. It intends to question societal problems, our deepest convictions and instituted practices (of teachers and students (Goralska, 2020; Menéndez, 2018)). At the same time, students identify personal and interpersonal problems as anxiety, difficulties of empathy and of communication that need to be addressed, which gives opportunities to work in the development of these social and emotional competencies (Casassus, 2017; Goleman et al., 2019). These concerns with intra and interrelationships may be related to the profile of the students, where young women predominate. Each year, most students at this curricular unit are young women, a condition to work with, more than a limitation to overcome, and we are conscious that other compositions may bring new implications for teaching and students' strategies and pedagogical answers.

Imbued with these views, we attempt to overcome obstacles to participation, collaboration and autonomy of the students, constantly adapting to the changing situations. Working during the pandemic alerted and provided a deeper understanding of critical social issues, as issues associated with inclusion and dominant ways of living and expressing emotions among young people in contemporary societies, themes that have expanded after the pandemic to other issues, such as the war in Ukraine, Human Rights and social inequalities, gender identities and exclusion, environmental problems, among others. Other issues may emerge in the future.

Addressing the changes, tensions and difficulties identified, we highlight a greater structuring and visibility of the programming to support the students and anchor the processes of greater autonomy and participation in their learning. The participatory, collaborative and autonomy processes took on new formats, and were to some extent encouraged and developed by these exceptional circumstances, but they, too, continue to be a reason for concern and a desire to go deeper. The use of several resources were increased, as a support to collaboration, participation and autonomy, to structuration and transparency, with care ethical concerns with students well-being, equality and inclusion, in line with what was mentioned by several authors in their researches (e.g. Baxter Magolda, 2002; Echeita, 2020; Peres, 2020; Rabin, 2021; Smith & Kaya 2021; Urrego-Betancourt, 2022). Research shows a lot of evidence about an increase in the use of new technologies in these critical times, which also happened in the two years covered by our study (e.g. Castellanos-Alvarenga, 2024).

New digital technologies were explored, in variety and frequency, both in collective and collaborative work scenarios, in synchronous lessons, in individual feedback situations between teachers and students, and in asynchronous processes. But new problems arose, such as inequalities in the conditions of access and use of these technologies (e.g. Donovan, 2021; Daumiller, 2023), as well as an immense flow of asynchronous interactions between teachers and students, which proved extremely demanding on all parties involved, and a need of self-regulation (e.g. Urrego-Betancourt, 2022; Castellanos-Alvarenga, 2024). Interdisciplinarity and collaboration between classes of different years of the same graduation course took place, but did not go into the same depth as before or after the pandemic, insofar as before we usually

built bridges with other institutional projects (e.g. Sobral & Caetano, 2020; 2021; 2022), such as events inside universities and schools organized by the teaching teams (e.g. topical seminars, educational workshops) and even with other non-university events of an educational, cultural and artistic nature (e.g. participation in external activities). Of course, we could access lots of asynchronous online events (as was done, for example, through the presentation of live streams and other videos), but we felt it was necessary to reinstall these in-person relations and as soon as possible make these forums and initiatives available again. The pandemic had a huge impact on slowing down this kind of initiatives, which we believe was extremely negative, a situation reviewed after pandemic as more events were organized and new relationships were deepened between curricular units at different levels of education (Caetano, 2023).

Some changes would have taken place regardless of the difficult conditions thrown up by the pandemic, and probably would have been introduced in other circumstances, given our growing awareness of the contradictions and lack of cohesion between our ideas and what actually happens; tensions that require constant redirecting and which keeps us searching for a creative integration among the conflicting pedagogical perspectives.

5. Conclusion

For two years of pandemic, in turbulent and uncertain times, we had to rethink our practices, seeking a balance between what we had done up to then, what we considered essential to maintain, and what we needed to change to adapt to the circumstances. It was a time of new experiences, with a strong emotional component, causing personal, interpersonal and institutional changes, some of which continue, although with constant transmutations resulting from the dynamism and great mutability typical of contemporary relationships and societies. During the process we, as teachers, tried to train ourselves, both as a pedagogical peer, and in collaboration with other colleagues, to overcome the difficulties and enhance our pedagogical skills, especially in the technological field.

Collaborative processes are not easy, at a time when we face the pressures of multiple challenges on top of our option to make the educational processes dependent on unpredictable interactive dynamics, which prevents detailed prior planning and requires constant review of the work in conjunction. In this paper we intended not only to witness educational processes and adaptations that took place in the context of higher education, from the point of view of its participants, but also to give visibility to this area of emotional education and highlight the importance of developing and integrating processes of participation, collaboration and autonomy in these same contexts.

Without wishing to generalize, however, it is important to reinforce this perspective of the research of the experiential and critical dimensions in the emotional learning of future education professionals, to be integrated in a structured and formal way in higher education curricula. This means to facilitate the development of soft competences, associated with the personal education of students, but also with their professional future, as they will go to work in the field of education, where they may even develop emotional education projects. The critical position towards the dominant discourse can give tools to make choices and explore the possibilities of convergence between the two approaches.

What this line of research brings to the scientific world is the possibility of a complex approach to education, where the emotional is a subject on its own. Our research brings some possibilities to work with an integrated approach, where several dimensions can be developed, but also brings the need to maintain vigilance to the challenges and tensions, in

order to keep the balance. The embodied emotional experience is not only a personal, private or interpersonal issue. It may bring awareness and commitment to the social, cultural, ethical and political questions of our times and contexts. This can occur when we have the intentionality to go deeper in a critical vision of the constraints and we take power from it, get more autonomy and participate in its transformation.

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