

Experience Reports

Pedagogy of autonomy and teaching practice in higher education as a strategy for health promotion of university students: experience report

Pedagogia da autonomia e a prática docente no ensino superior como estratégia de promoção da saúde de universitários: relato de experiência

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Abstract

The study aims to report on the experience of promoting well-being and satisfaction in the learning process of a group of university students, based on the critical-reflective movement in the teaching and learning process, using teaching practice aligned with Freirean ideas. This is an experience report from the Basic Supervised Internship I course in Psychology at a private university located in the metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The face-to-face classes were held in the second semester of 2023, with the participation of 26 university students. The university students' feedback on the learning process was that they enjoyed the content covered, mental and emotional well-being, motivation for the classes, development of critical thinking and a sense of belonging. It was concluded that a welcoming environment, with spaces for collective discussion and respect in relationships, is favorable to promoting the well-being of university students in the academic environment.

Keywords: higher education; teaching practice; health and education.

Resumo

O estudo tem como objetivo relatar a experiência da promoção do bem-estar e satisfação no processo de aprendizagem de um grupo de universitários, a partir do movimento crítico-reflexivo no processo de ensino e aprendizagem com uso da prática docente alinhada às ideias freireanas. Este é um relato de experiência fruto da disciplina de Estágio Supervisionado Básico I no curso de Psicologia de uma Universidade particular localizada na região metropolitana do RJ-Brasil. As aulas presenciais foram ministradas no segundo semestre de 2023, com a participação de 26 universitários matriculados. O *feedback* dos universitários sobre o processo de aprendizagem na disciplina foi de aproveitamento dos conteúdos trabalhados, bem-estar mental e emocional, motivação para as aulas, desenvolvimento do pensamento crítico e sentimento de pertencimento. Concluiu-se que um ambiente acolhedor, com espaços de discussão coletivos e respeito nas relações, é favorável à promoção do bem-estar dos universitários no ambiente acadêmico.

Palavras-chave: ensino superior; prática docente; saúde e educação.

INTRODUCTION

Health Promotion is a broad action that includes social and individual factors, such as education, critical knowledge, collaboration and recognition of differences (Brasil, 2002). According to the National Mental Health Policy, the social, political, economic, cultural and environmental context influences people's mental balance and well-being in a multifactorial way (Brasil, 2001).

In this sense, since mental disorders are products of the social whole, it is necessary to increase public policies that also Favor the creation of protective networks and the implementation of actions aimed at improving people's quality of life (Brasil, 2001).

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Data availability: Data is not available. Study conducted at Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF), Niterói, RJ, Brasil.



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At the same time, when we reflect on the academic community, feelings of insecurity and fear, heightened by social isolation and remote teaching, trigger the emotional and psychological fragility of this population. Therefore, the need for actions aimed at well-being and meeting the mental health demands of these individuals is considered pertinent (Orrego Tapia, 2022).

It is known that adverse situations in the academic environment, such as excessive demands, overload of activities and stressful daily scenarios, have contributed to an increase in psychological disorders in university students, including in the field of health (Gontijo et al., 2023).

Studies point to a worsening in the psychological domain of university students in the health area, including psychology students, which reaffirms the need for a differentiated approach on the part of educators. This approach must take into account the curriculum content, institutional demands and the requirements of professional training. These aspects place university students in a situation of vulnerability, especially in the emotional and psychological field (Freitas et al., 2022).

Given this context, an educational experience that offers a space to speak, that stimulates critical-reflective thinking and promotes collective participation in the learning process can favor the autonomous production of knowledge, especially when it includes ethical commitment in the dialogical relationship between educator and university students, based on a pleasant environment that contributes to their well-being (Freire, 2021).

The critical educational practice portrayed in Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of Autonomy" (Freire, 2021) advocates the creation of facilitators for the autonomous development of knowledge production and construction. In this way, it is necessary to increase the tools for dynamic teaching that is committed to human development, different from conservative practice, but a formative, dynamic and multiple teaching action, where its actors are equally important for the actions of teaching and learning to take place.

The fundamental prerequisites for Health Promotion today involve factors such as access to education and welcoming environments. In this way, educators who offer a learning experience based on critical and human formation contribute to the well-being of university students in the academic space (Freire, 2021).

Working with active methodologies requires teachers to have skills that involve respect and harmony with university students, so that they are involved in their educational process, assuming co-participation in the construction of knowledge (Veloso; Pequeno; Negreiros, 2019).

In this context, the use of active learning methodologies contributes to the construction of an educational environment focused on the development of university students' autonomy, where the experience is based on the collaborative construction of knowledge and not solely on the transmission of content by the teacher, with the student being a repository of information.

According to Seabra et al. (2023), this reflective movement on reality contributes to critical education, with a view to the personal and social development of university students, which enables feelings of satisfaction among those involved in this process (Seabra et al., 2023).

In view of the above, an educational experience was developed that contributed to the mental and emotional well-being of university students, based on a praxis from a critical-reflective perspective, based on a welcoming environment, promoting spaces for expression, stimulating cooperative participation in the learning process. From this perspective, the autonomous production of knowledge was favored, following the idea of the group's dialogical relationship, inspired by Freire's Pedagogy of Autonomy (Freire, 2021).

Teaching strategies based on active learning methodologies were also used. The choice of active methodologies was motivated by the specificities of the subject's teaching plan and the need to develop the skills required to link theory with the practice of psychologists.

Thus, the aim is to report on the experience of promoting well-being and satisfaction in the learning process of a group of university students, based on the critical-reflective movement

in the teaching and learning process through teaching practice aligned with Freirean ideas, at a private university located in the metropolitan region of the state of Rio de Janeiro.

Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of Autonomy: criticality, love and freedom.

As a theoretical foundation, we opted for critical educational practice inspired by Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of Autonomy" (Freire, 2021). For the author, the educator must create the means to develop autonomy in the production and construction of knowledge. In this way, Freire's assumptions offer tools for a multiple teaching practice that is committed to human development. In Pedagogy of Autonomy (Freire, 2021), the author reflects on teacher training and educational-progressive practice with a focus on the development of learner autonomy, a recurring theme in his theoretical elaborations as an educator. In the book, the author takes up the theme in an attempt to deepen and weave developments based on critical curiosity about the human being in constant movement in the world, reinforcing the responsibility of educational practice as a formative practice.

It is possible to make use of Freire's (2021) ideas in university teaching, as the author proposes the management of the training process through the application of a pedagogy that encourages subjects to a critical-reflective analysis of reality, understanding the social and ethical relevance of their actions, because according to the author, transformation only happens from the constant movement of reflection to the construction of permanent knowledge.

With emphasis on an educational practice that values equality and freedom, Freire's contributions still reverberate today through participatory and critical educational methods, with the central element being the valuing of the experience of all those involved in the teaching and learning process.

In this study, Freire's ideas guide pedagogical praxis in the encounter between theory and practice, valuing the loving nature of relationships and the impact of the actions of future psychology professionals, based on problematization and dialogue as the essence of educational action.

The educator must develop love for the students during the training process, applying more than a purely scientific and technical practice, but we must be open to the new, tolerant, fair and flexible to change (Freire, 2021).

According to Freire (2021), one of the functions of educational-progressive practice is to teach criticality, i.e. to mediate the process of building from mere curiosity to critical and nonconformist curiosity, transforming it into an unsatisfied action in search of knowledge beyond a simple experience.

This continuous movement of construction and reconstruction of knowledge allows for the use of a pedagogical approach that relates theory and practice, stimulating observation, reasoning, curiosity and analysis based on the tools necessary for questioning in order to make conscious decisions in the face of a transformative education (Silva et al., 2024).

In this context, Freirian pedagogical practice also contributes to higher education in the Psychology course, in the sense of training more qualified, critical and reflective professionals to work in the field of mental health, offering a more efficient and qualified service.

METHODOLOGY

This is a study in the form of an experience report carried out during the Basic Supervised Internship I course in Psychology at a private university located in the municipality of São Gonçalo/RJ, during the second semester of 2023, on the night shift, with 26 university students, 5 men and 21 women.

The aim was, through teaching practice aimed at critical-reflective development and the application of active learning methodologies, to create a favorable environment for promoting the well-being of university students by presenting the contents of the subject while respecting autonomy, ethical rigor and promoting dialogue among the group.

The pedagogical strategies were aligned with Freire's concept of problematizing teaching, which prioritizes motivating and participatory learning, breaking with the traditional idea of merely transmitting information. For Freire (2021, p. 14): "[...] the more critically one exercises one's capacity to learn, the more one builds and develops what I have been calling 'epistemological curiosity', without which we do not achieve full knowledge of the object".

Corroborating Freire's assumptions, according to Morán (2015, p. 4), the use of active methodologies makes it possible to transpose the teacher-centered model, placing university students as the protagonists of the teaching-learning process. Thus, it is possible to expand the way of teaching and learning, redesigning formal education where students learn through challenges, problems, activities and also with their peers in groups "The closer we learn to life, the better".

During the teaching and learning relationship, Berbel (2011) and Seabra et al. (2023) cite the potential of active methodologies to stimulate curiosity and enable the addition of new elements from contact with theorizing. In this way, university students were encouraged to approach knowledge in an interactive movement, developing autonomy, personal, academic and professional growth, combined with meaningful learning.

Teaching path

Weekly face-to-face classes were given, lasting three 50-minute sessions each, following the subject's teaching plan and the institutional course plan. Strategies such as: lectures; slides; case analysis; scientific articles; seminars; visits to the Applied Psychology Service (SPA); books; digital material in the virtual environment before classes; videos; teamwork groups; problematization and resolution of real problems were used to make the content more dynamic and easier to understand.

Based on the Practical Guide for Introduction to Active Learning Methodologies (Luchesi, 2022), the following teaching strategies were used:

- I. Peer and team-based learning: the class was divided into smaller groups so that university students could exchange information and learn to work as a team, fostering some debate or practical activity. This strategy was used with the aim of developing interaction skills, exchanges of experience and logical thinking skills.
- II. Inverted classroom: Access to the theoretical material was offered before the face-to-face classes, via the Virtual Learning Environment, according to the course syllabus, in the "Virtual Classroom" (VLE), so that the class could study the concepts before the face-to-face activities.

It is understood that Active Methodologies are based on ways of developing the learning process, using real or simulated experiences, with a view to successfully solving challenges arising from the essential activities of social practice in different contexts (Berbel, 2011). Figure 1 highlights some of the fundamentals of Active Learning Methodologies.

During the Basic Internship I course in Psychology, the articulation between theoretical concepts and professional practice was encouraged, with a focus on stimulating the autonomy of university students' learning. The content followed the institution's teaching plan, including interventions based on psychology theory, practical simulations involving the skills and competencies expected of a professional psychologist and the code of ethics. The aim of the classes was to help university students become the protagonists of their learning, including their human development.

In this context, the application of critical-reflective practice in favor of the autonomous development of knowledge highlights that the teaching task was directed towards a training practice based on ethics and empathy.

In other words, the planning of the classes followed a guideline based on the educational practice of "respect for the dignity and autonomy of the student", with the meetings being guided by a loving coexistence that was open to curiosity (Freire, 2021, p. 8).

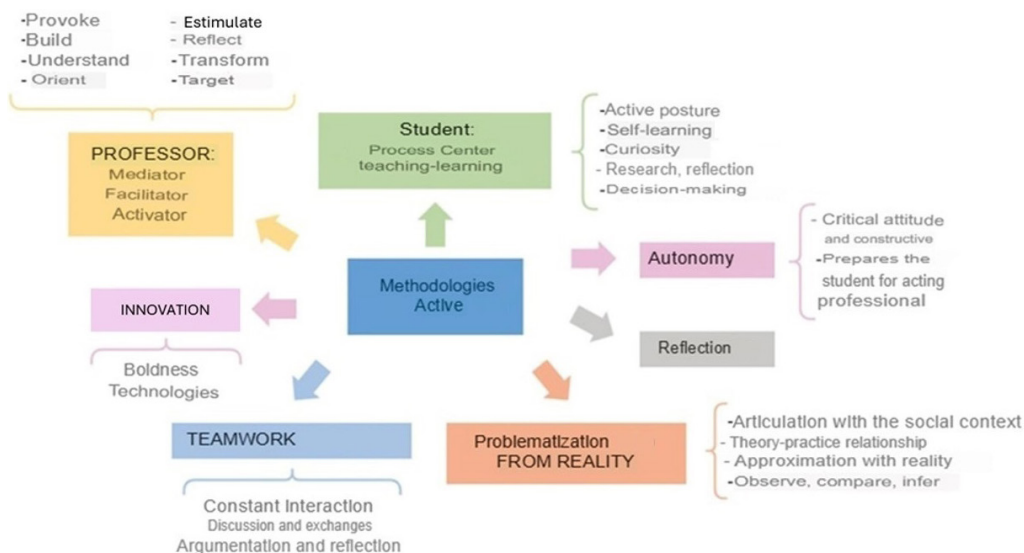


Figure 1. Principles of active learning methodologies. Adapted by the authors (2025).

Source: Luchesi (2022).

For Freire, “training is much more than purely training the student in the performance of skills”, which highlights the ethical responsibility of teaching and “expressively connotes the nature of educational practice as a training practice” (Freire, 2021, p. 14).

The educational experience was analyzed by evaluating the skills developed during the course from the university students’ point of view, considering their experience in the teaching and learning process. It was mediated by the problematizing and ethical teaching methodology carried out during the semester, taking into account the barriers characteristic of the academic space and the complexity of the content.

Teaching and learning go hand in hand

The first meetings were held in conversation circles, with the aim of introducing both the teacher and the students and their expectations of the course and the challenges of professional practice.

Over the course of the semester, discussions were held about the field of work and the competencies and skills needed to train psychologists, in parallel with the group’s critical and reflective questioning of the content discussed in the discussion groups. At the end of the term, a group dynamic was held to provide feedback on the learning process in the subject, as well as the delivery of the final grade required by the institution as an assessment tool for the course.

In the group dynamics, each student wrote on paper, without identifying themselves, how they felt about participating in the subject in the light of the teaching strategy used and about learning the content in a meaningful way, and placed it in a balloon. Afterwards, the class stood in a circle and, to the sound of music, passed the balloon to the classmate next to them until the music stopped. Then everyone popped the balloon in their hands and shared the message with the group.

At the last meeting, at the end of the semester, a recreational activity was held in the form of a collective snack, reaffirming the horizontality and loving relationships between the group.

The option of offering spaces for discussion on the content being worked on was presented as a proposal to link theory and practice, giving students the chance to recognize themselves as subjects with knowledge and a place to speak in the group, fostering collaborative bonds and spaces for exchanges between peers in order to build knowledge.

According to Freire (2021, p. 19), “There is no teaching without teaching, the two explain each other and their subjects, despite their differences, are not reduced to being each other’s objects. Those who teach learn by teaching and those who learn teach by learning”. This

movement values the student in the learning process, and the educational action is one that respects the student's curiosity and language, awakening true dialogicity in the educational relationship.

The teaching strategies during the semester promoted an ethical and collaborative space, based on an inclusive and respectful educational practice, where meetings and the use of active learning methodologies valued different types of knowledge, providing a favorable environment for the educational process.

Freire's ideas produce reflections on teaching and learning in the institutional space. According to Freire (2021, p. 16), "The right-thinking teacher makes it clear to university students that one of the beauties of our way of being in the world and with the world, as historical beings, is the ability, by intervening in the world, to know the world".

In this way, the critical-reflective educational action applied in the Basic Supervised Internship I discipline made it possible to value the group in the learning process, in recognizing and respecting different types of knowledge, in the importance of the space for discussion and collective exchanges, promoting conditions of mental and emotional well-being in the university space.

Well-being and learning satisfaction at university

Unfortunately, the academic environment can pose risks to the mental health of university students, whether due to excessive demands, unfavorable learning environments or task overload. According to Bock, Furtado e Teixeira (2022), educational institutions that encourage competition reproduce a form of dehumanization in relationships, leading to the objectification of others and ourselves.

Consequently, Freire (2021) discusses the importance of supportive relationships as a historical duty of citizens, bringing the assumptions of the Pedagogy of Autonomy as a possibility capable of promoting the "universal ethics of the human being".

In this sense, loving and critical-reflective pedagogical practices applied in higher education can contribute to safe, stimulating and pleasant conditions for the full development of learning. It is important that the human formation of university students considers that "health promotion goes beyond health care", but that they promote healthier environments (Brasil, 2002, p. 22).

Freire's ideas draw attention to the constant vigilance of educators against all forms of dehumanization (Freire, 2021). In line with these reflections, Bock, Furtado e Teixeira (2022) reaffirm that a citizen's stance requires us to understand mental health beyond psychology, but rather to understand it from a political perspective that is of interest to everyone involved in life. Thus:

Talking about health means thinking about promoting mental health by understanding man as a totality, that is, as a biological, psychological and sociological being and, at the same time, in all the conditions of life that aim to provide him with physical, mental and social well-being (Bock; Furtado; Teixeira, 2022, p. 472).

Therefore, strategies to minimize the impact on mental health include, among other things, avoiding unfavorable conditions in the social environment. In this study, such actions should consider the university space, as mentally healthy students will be able to develop self-control in the face of stressful situations, will be able to face challenges, establish ethical relationships and develop as a whole human being.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

It can be said that the objective was achieved, since it was possible to report on a positive experience in the teaching-learning process of psychology undergraduates through critical-reflective teaching practice at a university.

It was possible to see that, at the start of the meetings, the university students were insecure about the group exchanges and felt awkward about taking part in the educational experience,

as they had expectations that were in line with traditional pedagogy characterized by the mere transmission of information by the teacher.

When they encountered the strategies of active learning methodologies, the university students showed remarkable interest in the content covered in class and, through cooperative activities, experienced situations focused on analyzing and solving real problems in the daily life of the profession.

Love, respect and ethics were skills identified in the relationships between peers and between teachers, culminating in meaningful and formative learning.

In this way, the educational experience was adapted to the group's needs, differences and similarities, offering the possibility of creating environments conducive to stimulating active participation in the individual and social learning process.

The ideas in Pedagogy of Autonomy were relevant to the indispensable process of transformative teaching practice in higher education, as they awakened the creativity, curiosity and well-being of the university students during their formative experience on the Psychology course.

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Authors contribution

VRL: Written of the text, Conception, Study design, Writing of the article, Standardization of the text, Organization of the references. GSCV: Written of the text, Final approval of the article, Overall responsibility, Standardization of the text, Organization of the references. EAC: Written of the text, Final approval of the article, Overall responsibility, Standardization of the text, Organization of the references.

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