

Shaping the Citizens of Tomorrow: The Challenge of Practical Teaching

Lindita Lutaj,¹ Valbona Muça²

¹Department of Pedagogy, Aleksander Moisiu University, Durrës, Albania

²Department of Social Sciences and Civic Education, Aleksander Xhuvani University Elbasan,
Albania



Формиране на гражданите на утрешния ден: Предизвикателство пред практическото преподаване

Линдита Лутай,¹ Валбона Муча²

¹Катедра по педагогика, Университет „Александър Моисиу“, Дуръс, Албания

²Катедра по социални науки и гражданско образование, Университет „Александър
Джувани“, Елбасан, Албания



Author Note

Lindita Lutaj  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9469-8862>, Valbona Muça 
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9739-4127>;

The authors have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Assoc. Prof. Dr. Lindita
Lutaj, Department of Pedagogy, Aleksander Moisiu University Durrës, Albania, Email:
linditalutaj@uamd.edu.al

Бележки за авторите

Линдита Лутай  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9469-8862>, Валбона Муча 
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9739-4127>

Авторите нямат конфликт на интереси.

Кореспонденцията относно тази статия трябва да бъде адресирана до Lindita Lutaj,
Department of Pedagogy, Aleksander Moisiu, University Durrës, Albania, Email:
linditalutaj@uamd.edu.al

Abstract

This study aims to analyze the institutional and pedagogical challenges in the practical application of theoretical knowledge for the development of civic competencies in higher education. Specifically, the research assesses students' perceptions of their mastery of theoretical knowledge and their engagement in its practical application, as well as identifying student-centered teaching strategies that prove most effective in this regard. A mixed-methods research methodology was used to conduct this study. The quantitative approach was conducted through a structured online questionnaire administered during the period October–December 2025, while the qualitative approach was supported by a literature review. The study included students from the teaching programs of the Faculty of Education at "Aleksandër Moisiu" University in Durrës, and from the Faculty of Educational Sciences at "Aleksandër Xhuvani" University in Elbasan, Albania. The study sample consists of 460 randomly selected students, of whom 47% were enrolled in Bachelor's programs and 53% at the Master's level, thus providing a broad representation of academic perceptions. The data demonstrate an exceptionally positive assessment of active teaching methods, with 98% of students emphasizing that they increase their engagement in lectures and 92% confirming increased motivation. Interactive competencies, such as communication (72.4%) and group collaboration (65.3%), emerge as the most developed. However, the study identifies a weakness in the connection between theory and practice, with 31% of students reporting difficulties in the practical application of theoretical knowledge. Furthermore, competencies such as problem-solving (38.8%) and digital skills (23%) remain problematic. Student-centered teaching is essential for the development of civic competencies, but its effectiveness is hindered by deeply theoretical curricula. Overcoming this challenge requires a thorough institutional review of study programs to integrate theoretical knowledge with direct practical engagement of students, as well as improving the quality of academic staff training in the use of contemporary teaching methods.

Keywords: student-centered teaching, theory-practice integration, civic competence, contemporary teaching methods, higher education

Резюме

В статията се анализират институционалните и педагогическите предизвикателства при практическото приложение на теоретичните знания за развитието на гражданските компетентности във висшето образование. В изследването се оценяват възприятията на

студентите за овладяване на теоретични знания и ангажираността им в практическото им приложение, както и се идентифицират стратегии за преподаване, ориентирани към студентите, които се оказват най-ефективни. Използвана е методология със смесени методи –количествени и качествени. Количественото изследване е проведено чрез структуриран онлайн въпросник през периода октомври-декември 2025 г., а качествено е подкрепено от преглед на литературата. Проучването включи 460 произволно избрани студенти, от които 47% са записани в бакалавърски програми и 53% в магистърски програми от програми към Факултета по образование към Университета „Александър Моисиу“ в Дуръс и от Факултета по образователни науки към Университета „Александър Джувани“ в Елбасан, Албания. Данните показват изключително положителна оценка на активните методи на преподаване, като 98% от студентите подчертават, че увеличават ангажираността си в лекциите, а 92% потвърждават повишена мотивация. Интерактивните компетенции, като комуникация (72,4%) и групово сътрудничество (65,3%), се очертават като най-развити. Проучването обаче установява и слабост във връзката между теория и практика, като 31% от студентите съобщават за трудности при практическото приложение на теоретичните знания. Освен това, компетенции като решаване на проблеми (38,8%) и дигитални умения (23%) остават проблематични. Обучението, ориентирано към студента, е от съществено значение за развитието на гражданските компетенции, но неговата ефективност е възпрепятствана от дълбоко теоретичните учебни програми. Преодоляването на това предизвикателство изисква задълбочен институционален преглед на учебните програми, за да се интегрират теоретичните знания с прякото практическо участие на студентите, както и подобряване на качеството на обучението на академичния състав в използването на съвременни методи на преподаване.

Ключови думи: ориентирано към студента обучение, интеграция: теория-практика, гражданска компетентност, съвременни методи на преподаване, висше образование

ARTICLE INFO:**Original Article****Received: 11, 02.2026****Revised: 20, 02.2026****Accepted: 28, 03.2026**

Shaping the Citizens of Tomorrow: The Challenge of Practical Teaching

Introduction

In the last decade, the role of higher education institutions has been significantly redefined. Beyond preparing skilled professionals for the labor market, universities bear the fundamental responsibility for shaping active citizens who contribute to the development of a democratic society. Democratic Citizenship Education requires that the learning process not be merely a passive transmission of knowledge, but an active, practical engagement that develops values, attitudes, and full civic competencies.

To respond to this need, the shift towards student-centered teaching has received special attention in academic policies and practices. However, despite the broad theoretical appreciation for active teaching methods and the importance of civic education, contemporary studies show that their implementation in practice faces obstacles. Many higher education institutions suffer from a weak connection between the theoretical frameworks offered in lecture halls and the students' ability to apply this knowledge in practice in real community life. The dominance of traditional lectures, theoretically overloaded curricula, and the lack of facilitating infrastructure often turn this connection into a difficult challenge for both academic staff and the students themselves.

Civic competencies cannot be developed simply through theoretical lectures within the walls of a classroom. Learning to be an active citizen requires direct engagement with reality, community problem-solving, and confronting real-life situations. Student-centered teaching provides the appropriate pedagogical framework for this, through methods such as project-based learning, interactive discussions, community service, and research-based teaching.

Through a mixed methodological approach, this paper compares existing literature with primary data collected in the field from a large sample of students. Following this, the theoretical framework and the methodology used are provided, moving next to the analysis and discussion of the findings. The paper concludes with concrete conclusions and recommendations, divided into institutional and pedagogical levels, which aim to serve as a guide for improving academic practices in shaping the citizens of the future.

However, despite recognizing this importance, there is a lack of connection between what is written in formal curricula and what is implemented in practice. The successful integration of theory with practice for the purpose of developing civic competencies faces numerous challenges.

Academic structures, the lack of specific qualifications among pedagogical staff to facilitate these processes, the lack of infrastructure connecting to the community, as well as the difficulty in assessing students' abilities to practically apply knowledge, remain some of the obstacles for universities.

Based on this issue, the purpose of this paper is to analyze the main challenges faced by teaching students at the Faculty of Education of "Aleksandër Moisiu" University in Durrës and teaching students at the Faculty of Educational Sciences of "Aleksandër Xhuvani" University in Elbasan, during the practical application of theoretical knowledge acquired in the field of democratic civic education. The paper aims to highlight not only the existing barriers but also to propose pedagogical approaches and strategies that enable the transition of knowledge from theory to practice.

In this context, the purpose of this study is to analyze, from the students' perspective, the institutional and pedagogical challenges in implementing practices for the development of civic competencies, as well as to assess the impact of active teaching methods in this direction. To achieve this goal, the study examines the following research questions:

1. What are the main institutional and pedagogical challenges in applying theoretical knowledge in practice for the development of civic competencies?
2. How do students perceive the lack of connection between theoretical knowledge and their practical civic engagement?
3. Which student-centered teaching strategies prove most effective and motivating for the practical application of theoretical knowledge?

Theoretical Framework

In the last decade, the role of universities has changed. Authors such as Allen (2024) emphasize that higher education institutions have the duty to promote democracy by integrating civic learning into the curriculum and promoting participation and ethical responsibility among students.

Democratic Civic Education and the development of competencies

Democratic civic education aims to develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that enable active and responsible participation in democratic life. The connection between the learning environment and this education has been historically proven by international empirical studies.

Initially, in the International Civic Education Study (CIVED), Torney-Purta et al. (2001) found that students who report a classroom climate as open to discussion show higher levels of civic knowledge and democratic engagement. These findings were later confirmed by the extensive ICCS study (Schulz et al., 2016), which once again highlighted the positive link between participatory classroom practices and the readiness for civic participation. To structure these needs, the Council of Europe (2018) drafted the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture, emphasizing that democratic competence is a multidimensional construct comprising 20 competencies organized into four categories: values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge.

This evidence ultimately suggests that the development of civic competencies is not achieved through traditional content transmission but requires active involvement and practical experience of democracy in the learning environment.

Student-Centered Teaching and Academic Engagement

Student-centered teaching relies on constructivist learning theories and the principle that students construct knowledge through active involvement. The origins of this approach can be found in John Dewey (1916), who argued that democratic education must be experienced in practice and not merely learned as theory. Later, in the context of critical education, Paulo Freire (1970) emphasized that the dialogic model of teaching fosters critical awareness and emancipation, considering the student as an active subject in the learning process and their attitudes as a fundamental approach for democratic civic education.

These philosophical foundations were subsequently validated by empirical research in higher education; Prince (2004) concluded that active methods significantly increase engagement, motivation, and conceptual understanding. A decade later, an extensive meta-analysis by Freeman et al. (2014), which included 225 studies, showed that students in classes with active teaching had higher performance and a lower probability of failure compared to those in traditional classes.

The most recent research shows that this shift toward student-centered teaching is not merely a change in methodology. Li (2023) argues in his comparative study that this approach has a direct positive effect on the development of interdisciplinary competencies, turning students into active problem-solvers. However, as emphasized in a recent policy report by the European Students' Union (ESU, 2025), this process requires a big change in academic culture where students act as co-creators of their journey, and often face resistance from rigid university structures.

The theory-practice relationship and the formation of professional competencies

A central issue in the literature is related to the balance between theoretical knowledge and practical experience. The foundations of this discussion were laid by Donald Schön (1983), who emphasized the importance of "reflective practice" in professional training, warning that a deeply theoretical university experience risks reproducing traditional approaches in students. Alongside him, David Kolb (1984) argued that effective learning occurs through the cycle of concrete experience, reflection, and active application.

Building on these foundations, subsequent studies focused on implementation. Darling-Hammond (2006) showed that training programs that integrate structured practical experience produce individuals who are better prepared to develop civic and social competencies. To formalize bridging this theory-practice gap, Dan Butin (2010) proposed the integration of Service-Learning, defining it as the integration of community work with rigorous academic reflection.

Developments in recent years have deepened the understanding of these competencies and the challenges of their implementation. Mitchell (2018) highlighted the challenge of the lack of preparation among the academic staff themselves, who often lack the methodological training to manage community projects. Furthermore, Holland (2021) argued that civic competencies are not limited merely to knowledge of institutions, but include the ability to collaborate and possess social empathy, a finding that also aligns with the Council of Europe's Framework. The practical application of these elements was supported by Taylor (2024), who showed that when students apply academic theories to help marginalized groups, they develop a deeper sense of civic responsibility. However, despite these excellent theoretical frameworks, the literature demonstrates that a deep gap still exists between the mastery of theoretical knowledge and its practical application. In their most recent studies, Ariel et al. (2025) reveal that the lack of connecting infrastructure between universities and the community remains a major barrier, often exacerbated by curricula overloaded with formal assessments that find it impossible to measure "active citizenship."

Research Methodology

Study Design

A mixed-methods research methodology was employed for this study, which interweaves the quantitative approach with the qualitative one. The qualitative approach consists of a detailed review of scientific literature and curricular frameworks addressing student-centered teaching in

the field of civic education. On the other hand, the quantitative approach was conducted through field data collection by means of a structured questionnaire. This methodological combination enables a deeper understanding of the research problem by confronting existing theory with the real perceptions of students themselves regarding the integration of theory with practice.

Population and Sample

The target population for this study consists of higher education students. The quantitative approach was carried out through a structured online questionnaire, administered during the October-December 2025 period, while the qualitative approach was supported by a literature review. The study included students from the teaching programs of the Faculty of Education at "Aleksandër Moisiu" University in Durrës, and teaching students from the Faculty of Educational Sciences at "Aleksandër Xhuvani" University in Elbasan, Albania. The random sampling technique was applied for data collection. The study involved 460 teaching students from both universities included in the research, providing a broad representation of different academic levels. The demographic and academic profile of the sample is divided by level of study, where 47% of the respondents belong to the first cycle of Bachelor studies, while 53% belong to the second cycle of Master's studies. This balanced distribution allows for a mature comparison of perceptions among students at different stages of their academic formation. Regarding gender distribution, the sample consists of 440 females and 20 males. This distribution directly reflects the specific demographic composition of the study programs included in this research.

Instruments and Data Collection Procedure

For the collection of quantitative data, a structured questionnaire was designed, which was administered online during the October – December 2025 period. The questionnaire was divided into two main sections:

First section: Collected demographic and academic data of participants.

Subsequent sections: Focused on measuring students' perceptions regarding three core dimensions of the study:

The main institutional and pedagogical challenges in applying theoretical knowledge in practice for the development of civic competencies.

Students' perception of the connection between theoretical knowledge and its application through practical civic engagement.

Student-centered teaching strategies, effectiveness, and student motivation for the practical application of theoretical knowledge.

Ethical Considerations

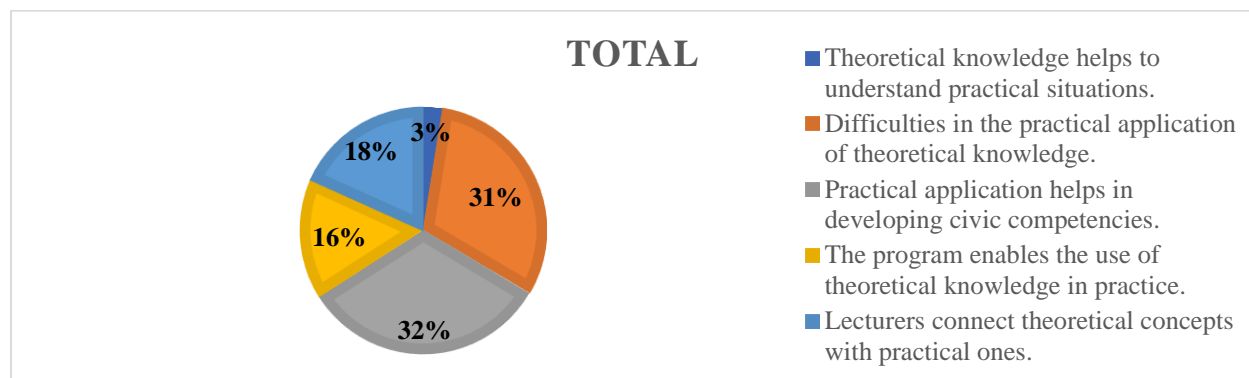
Before completing the measurement instrument, all participating students were clearly informed about the scientific purpose of the study. They were guaranteed full data security and the preservation of anonymity throughout all phases of the analysis.

Data Analysis

Regarding the issue of integrating theory with practice, the study's results highlight a diverse picture of students' experiences and perceptions. The data show that the largest group of 32% values the result of this integration, stating that practical application directly helps in the development of civic competencies. However, an almost equal portion of 31% testifies to the existing challenges of this process, reporting that they encounter difficulties in applying theoretical knowledge in practice. The rest of the responses relate to the facilitating factors that enable this connection: 18% of the respondents claim that it is the professors who manage to link theoretical concepts with practical ones, 16% believe that it is the study program itself that enables them to use knowledge in practice, while a minority of 3% simply emphasize the fact that theoretical knowledge helps them understand practical situations. (Figure1)

Figure 1

Theory-practice integration

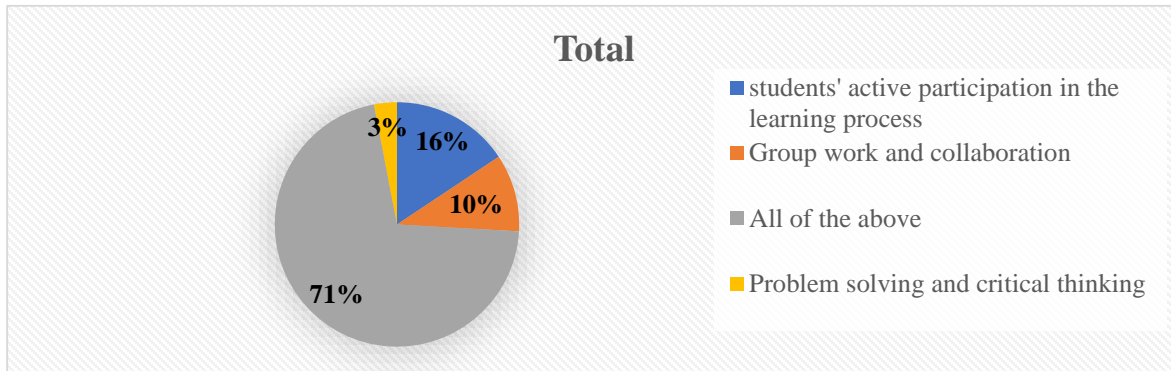


The data collected from the study show a broad understanding among participants regarding the concept of using active teaching methods. When students were asked what these methods entail, the vast majority of 71% of respondents chose the comprehensive option, identifying them as a combination of students' active involvement, group work, collaboration, problem-solving, and critical thinking. Meanwhile, regarding those who singled out only one specific element of this

process, 16% of participants directly linked the concept to the active involvement of students in the learning process, 10% emphasized the importance of group work and collaboration, while a small percentage of 3% identified it strictly with problem-solving and critical thinking.(Figure2)

Figure 2

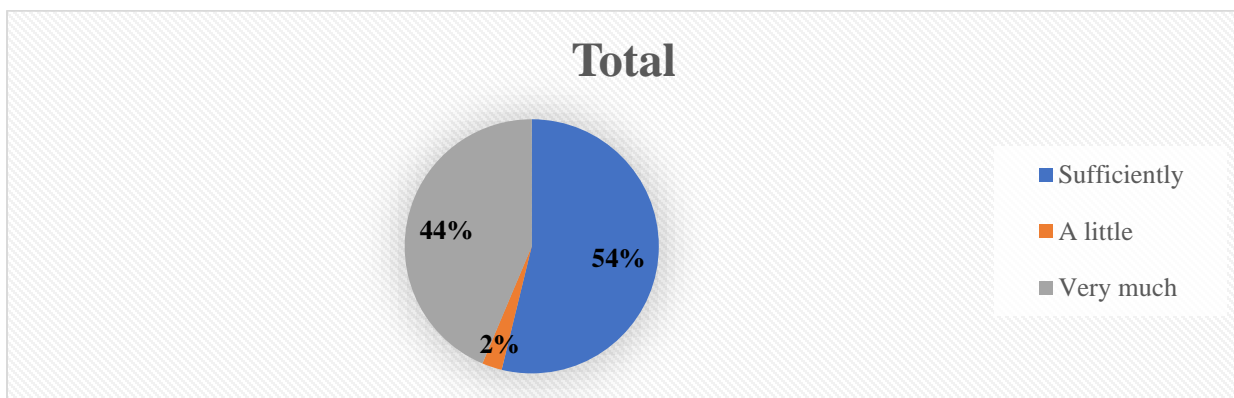
What are the active methods of teaching



Regarding the question of the extent to which active methods increase student engagement in the classroom, the study's results demonstrate a clearly positive perception. The majority of participants, specifically 54%, assess that these methods sufficiently increase engagement in the lecture hall. This assessment is strongly supported by a considerable percentage of 44%, who believe that active methods increase student involvement during the lesson a lot. On the other hand, only a negligible minority of 2% stated that these methods have little impact on increasing this engagement, thus showing that almost all respondents (98%) acknowledge the importance of using active methods for student engagement. (See Figure 3)

Figure 3

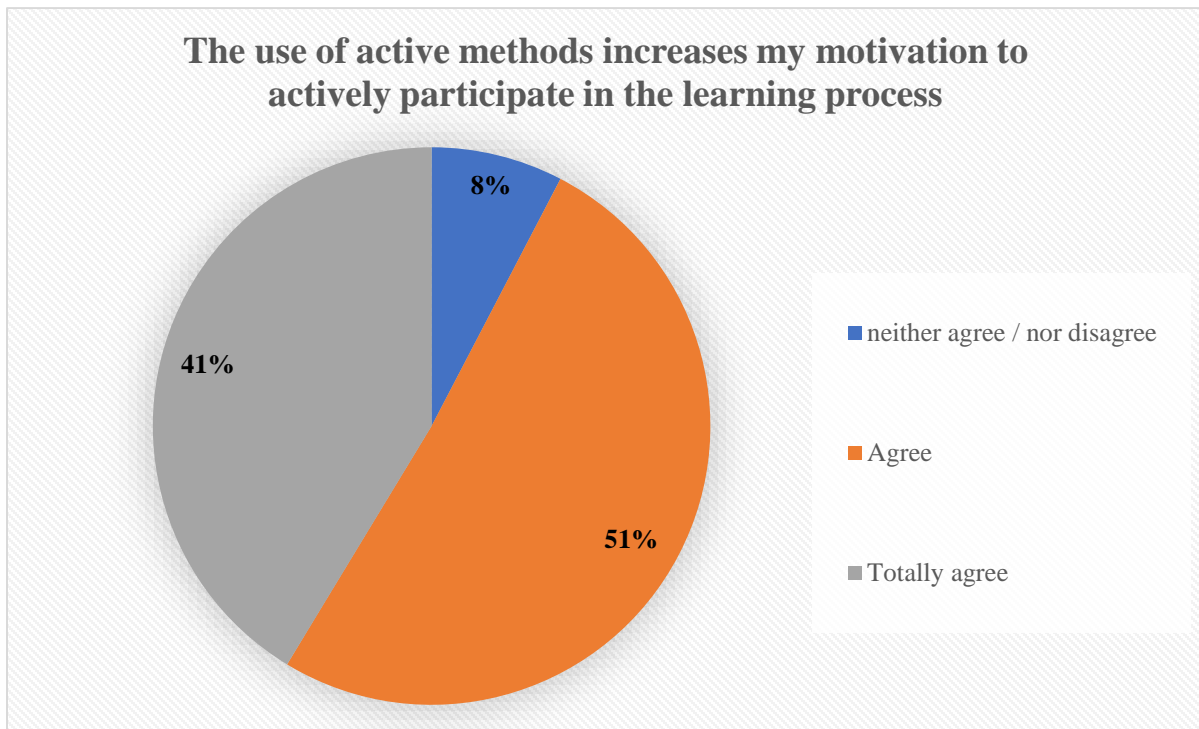
Students' classroom engagement



Regarding the impact of active methods on increasing students' motivation to participate in class, the data reflect a strong positive consensus. The absolute majority of respondents value the effectiveness of these methods, with 51% stating they agree and 41% stating they completely agree that they stimulate student motivation. Only a small percentage of 8% maintains a neutral stance, stating they neither agree nor disagree on this issue. As is seen in Figure 4 this result, with a total of 92% positive support, clearly shows that active methods play an essential and widely accepted role in stimulating students' interest and desire to be involved in the lesson.

Figure 4

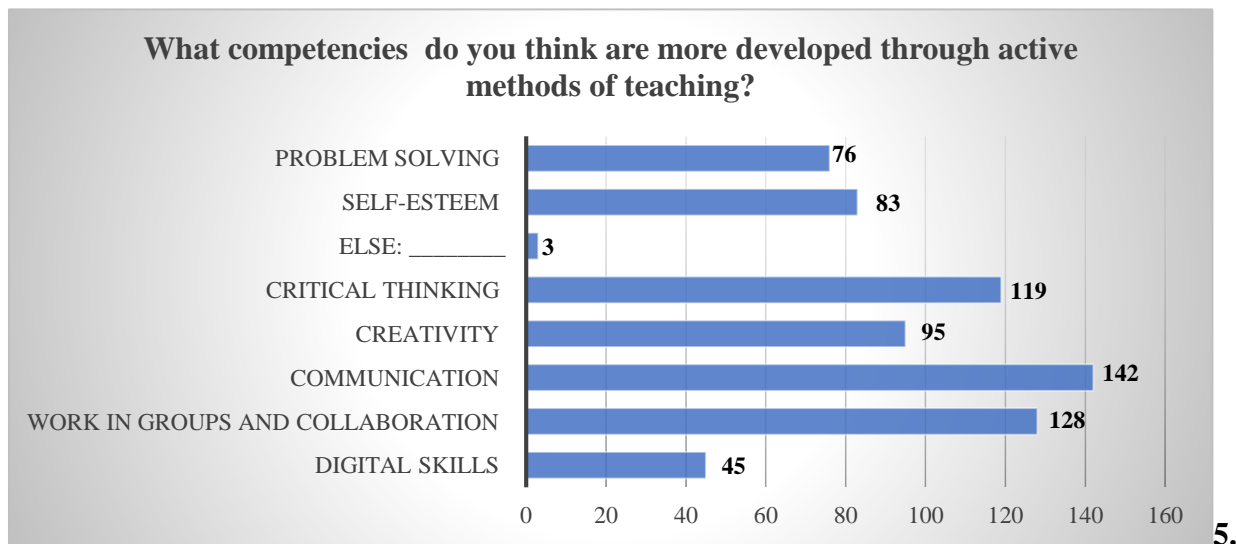
Using active methods and motivation to learn



The competence most developed is communication, selected by 142 students (72.4%), followed by group collaboration, with 128 responses (65.3%). A considerable proportion of students also highlighted the development of critical thinking (60.7%) and creativity (48.5%). Meanwhile, self-confidence was mentioned by 42.3% of respondents, and problem-solving by 38.8%. The competence reported as least developed is digital skills, with 23% of students indicating its improvement in Figure 5.

Figure 5

Competencies that develop through active methods of teaching



Discussion

Main institutional and pedagogical challenges for applying theoretical knowledge in practice.

The difficulties in applying theoretical knowledge in practice lead us directly to the main institutional and pedagogical challenges. The fact that only a minority of students believe that the study program (16%) and lecturers (18%) facilitate the integration of theory with practice indicates structural deficiencies. Institutional challenges relate to study programs that appear to remain theoretical, while pedagogical challenges relate to the need for better preparation of academic staff to connect lecture concepts with real-life situations for practical civic engagement. Furthermore, the fact that problem-solving skills are developed in only 38.8% of students and digital skills in 23% shows that current methods are failing to sufficiently stimulate some of the most challenging, yet essential, competencies for the 21st century.

Students' perceptions on the connection between theoretical knowledge and practical civic engagement.

Students' perceptions regarding the connection between theoretical knowledge and practical civic engagement show us a high level of awareness, but also a clear division in their experiences. The study highlights that a considerable portion of students (31%) experience real obstacles, reporting direct difficulties in the practical application of what they learn in theory. However, they are fully

aware of the value of this process, as 32% of them acknowledge that practical application of knowledge is essential for the development of civic competencies. This shows that students do not deny the importance of practical engagement but are hindered by the lack of mechanisms to carry it out properly.

Student-centered teaching strategies, their impact on the effectiveness and motivation of students for the practical application of theoretical knowledge.

To address these challenges and strengthen the theory-practice connection, the data strongly suggest that student-centered learning strategies, particularly active teaching methods, are the most effective solution. Students show that they clearly understand these methods, with 71% identifying them as a combination of involvement, group work, and critical thinking. Most importantly, active methods are massively evaluated as catalysts for academic success: almost all students (98%) emphasize that they increase classroom engagement, and 92% confirm that they also increase their motivation.

The effectiveness of these strategies is also proven by the type of competencies that students have managed to develop the most. Social and interactive competencies, which are the basis of civic engagement, appear to be the most prominent: communication (72.4%) and group collaboration (65.3%). This proves that the integration of practices such as group work or interactive discussions, which are essential for active methods, overcomes traditional obstacles and equips students with the self-confidence (42.3%) and critical thinking (60.7%) necessary to become active citizens capable of applying theoretical knowledge in practice.

Conclusions

In concluding this research, by confronting empirical data with the theoretical framework, the following main conclusions are drawn:

High effectiveness and acceptability of active methods

Students demonstrate a deep understanding of student-centered teaching. The data confirm that when activities are interactive, including discussions, debates, or group work, their motivation and engagement increase significantly. Conversely, in traditional lecture formats, engagement drops. This consensus among students reaffirms the existing literature (Freeman et al., 2014; Prince, 2004), which argues that active methods are determining factors in increasing conceptual understanding.

The lack of connection between theoretical knowledge and practical engagement in the formation of civic competencies

Despite the desire to be actively involved, students face a real difficulty regarding the connection between theoretical knowledge and its practical application. Currently, teaching successfully manages to develop social competencies, communication, and collaboration, but it is not at the appropriate levels to stimulate complex skills such as problem-solving and digital competencies. As the theories of Kolb (1984) and Schön (1983) emphasize, students assess that theoretical knowledge is not enough; it is practical activities such as simulations, case studies, and community projects that are crucial for the formation of civic skills.

Challenges in implementing student-centered teaching

This stems from concrete institutional and pedagogical challenges. The dominance of traditional lectures, lack of time, the large number of students in classes, as well as the lack of facilitating mechanisms in the curricula, limit active participation. This aligns with the findings of Torney-Purta et al. (2001) and Schulz et al. (2016), who argue that the quality of this education is directly influenced by the environmental and organizational factors of the institution.

Impact on professional development and the necessity for change

For students, especially those in teaching programs, experiencing active and dialogic methods directly prepares them to be professionals who promote democratic values in the future. One of the conclusions of this paper is that overcoming these challenges requires a radical institutional change. This includes the necessity of practical integration into the curricula and the specialized training of lecturers (Darling-Hammond, 2006), as the only path to forming active citizens and professionals with full competencies.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study and to overcome the identified challenges, an integrated intervention is suggested, which focuses on two main directions:

Recommendations at the institutional and curricular level

Curriculum review for theory-practice balance: Higher education institutions must review study programs to ensure a sustainable integration between theoretical and practical knowledge. The mandatory inclusion of real community projects, case studies, and practicums that directly develop civic skills and critical thinking is recommended.

Institutional support and infrastructure: To enable student-centered teaching, a facilitating environment is required. Flexibility of curricula, reduction of group sizes, and the provision of appropriate resources and spaces for the development of practical activities and group work are recommended.

Continuous assessment and reflection: Institutions must break away from strictly memory-based assessments and encourage the use of alternative assessment tools. These tools should measure real engagement, reflection, and civic competencies, allowing programs to adapt strategies according to students' needs.

Recommendations at the pedagogical and academic level

Professional development and lecturers: The academic staff must be supported with continuous training on active methodologies and the student-centered approach. Lecturers should be equipped with the appropriate skills to implement activities that facilitate reflection and the practical application of democratic concepts, gradually breaking away from traditional lectures.

Reinforcement of interactive methods in democratic civic education: Considering that students massively value (over 90%) the increase in motivation through engagement, lecturers should increase the use of interactive methods in democratic civic education. This includes the use of debates, case analysis, inquiry-based learning, simulations, and community projects, serving as connecting bridges between theory and practice.

Special focus on underdeveloped competencies: During classroom work, lecturers should pay targeted attention to the development of digital skills and problem-solving abilities, which emerged as the least developed in this study, reported by 23% and 38.8% of students, respectively. The inclusion of complex technological tasks and those based on problem-solving would significantly help in improving these indicators.

Referenses

Butin, D. (2010). *Service-learning in theory and practice: The future of community engagement in higher education*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Council of Europe. (2018). *Reference framework of competences for democratic culture*. Council of Europe Publishing.

<https://wergelandcentre.org/content/uploads/2020/02/Reference-Framework-of-competences-Vol-1-1.pdf>

Darling-Hammond, L. (2006). Constructing 21st-century teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 57(3), 300-314.

Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. Macmillan.

Freeman, S., Eddy, S. L., McDonough, M., Smith, M. K., Okoroafor, N., Jordt, H., & Wenderoth, M. P. (2014). Active learning increases student performance in science, engineering, and mathematics. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 111(23), 8410–8415.
<https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1319030111>

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Herder and Herder.

Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Prentice-Hall.

Prince, M. (2004). Does active learning work? A review of the research. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 93(3), 223-231.

Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. Basic Books.

Schulz, W., Ainley, J., Fraillon, J., Losito, B., & Agrusti, G. (2016). *IEA International Civic and Citizenship Education Study 2016 International Report*. Springer.

Torney-Purta, J., Lehmann, R., Oswald, H., & Schulz, W. (2001). *Citizenship and education in twenty-eight countries: Civic knowledge and engagement at age fourteen*. IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement).

<https://www.iea.nl/publications/study-reports/international-reports-iea-studies/citizenship-and-education-twenty-eight>