





# Service-Learning in the teaching of Sociology for future teachers

## Aprendizaje-servicio en la enseñanza de la Sociología a futuros docentes

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## **Abstract**

This paper reflects and gives an account of the Service-Learning (S-L) contributions to university teaching and, more specifically, to the initial teacher training. It is part of an innovation project carried out in the Faculties of Education in the University of Castilla-La Mancha (UCLM). It deepens into students' perceptions about S-L benefits for academic and skill learning. It also studies students' experiences at schools, where they were able to observe and apply their theoretical learning. Some of the objectives guiding this study are to assess the Degree skills acquisition, their ability to understand social problems that they will have to face in their professional future, as well as the feelings and emotions experienced. This empirical mixed methodology study (by an online questionnaire and student narratives analysis) reaches a 167 students sample. Results verify their high level of satisfaction with the S-L project, especially in those variables linked to the professional and personal skills, highlighting the critical and reflective skills that promote a significant learning in Sociology. All in all, this study verifies the renewing power of S-L in higher education, as this methodology effectively adapts to future teachers' competence and training performance.

**Keywords:** Service-Learning, Sociology of Education, teaching innovation, professional skills, students' perceptions, university social responsibility.

## Resumen

Este artículo reflexiona y hace balance de las contribuciones del aprendizaje-servicio (ApS) a la docencia universitaria y, en concreto, a la formación inicial del profesorado. A partir de la evaluación de un proyecto de innovación docente llevado a cabo en las Facultades de Educación de la Universidad de Castilla La Mancha (UCLM), se profundiza en la percepción de los estudiantes sobre la utilidad del ApS en el aprendizaje académicocompetencial y en las experiencias vividas en escenarios escolares reales donde han observado y aplicado sus aprendizajes teóricos. La valoración de la adquisición de competencias concretas del Grado, la disposición y desempeño para comprender problemas sociales que deberán afrontar en su futuro profesional, así como los sentimientos y emociones experimentadas, son algunos de los objetivos que guían nuestro trabajo. Se trata de un estudio empírico de metodología mixta, mediante un cuestionario online y el análisis de las narraciones reflexivas de los estudiantes con una muestra de 167 alumnos y alumnas. Los resultados revelan la elevada satisfacción del alumnado participante, especialmente en variables vinculadas con la adquisición de competencias profesionales y personales, destacando las destrezas críticas y reflexivas que favorecen el aprendizaje significativo de la Sociología. Con todo, la investigación corrobora el carácter renovador del ApS en la enseñanza superior, una metodología que se adapta con idoneidad al desempeño competencial y formativo de las futuras maestras y maestros.

**Descriptores:** Aprendizaje-Servicio, Sociología de la Educación, innovación docente, competencias profesionales, percepciones de los estudiantes, responsabilidad social universitaria.

## 1. Introduction

This article is part of the results obtained in the educational innovation project developed by the faculties of Education of the University of Castilla-La Mancha (UCLM), aimed at implementing the methodology of Learning-Service in the training of future teachers. Since its beginning (academic year 2017-18), the project has been formed by professors of the Sociology area in the grades of kindergarten and Elementary School. The project aimed to give subjects a more practical content, offering students the possibility of participating in altruistic projects in real learning contexts, which contribute to social transformation and the welfare of the community. At the same time, it sought to promote an ethical and moral relationship between students and the environment. This Learning-Service Project (hereinafter S-L) is based on the essential importance that competences such as teacher innovation, university social responsibility, academic quality and ethics have in the training of future and future education professionals (Pérez-Gómez, 1993). Over the threeyear journey of the project, involving more than three hundred students of first and second grades and twenty teachers, and the motivation and sense of learning represented by S-L has been observed, bringing future teachers and teachers a closer idea of real scenarios where they observe and apply the theoretical learning of the subjects involved.

From Sociology, the objectives were directed to identify and reflect on situations of inequality in the school context; analyze the impact that education has on society and vice versa; and identify the social processes, all this from a dual learning: Academic and experiential. Hence, the acquisition of competences and content in Sociology, as well as the development of skills associated with the foundations of thought and sociological action focus the interest of our study.

S-L methodology, after a process of development and consolidation (Tapia, 2008), has a

relative institutionalization, as evidenced by the numerous national and international networks spread across the different continents, as well as the congresses, events and specific publications. Furco (2004) indicates the existence of more than two hundred different definitions of S-L published in English and Tapia (2014) identifies S-L as those practices that simultaneously meet at least three of the following characteristics: the provision of a solidarity service to the community, the participation of the students in the execution of the project, a clear articulation of activities in solidarity with the learning and the application of knowledge and explicit curricular competences.

Thus, the renewal potential of S-L has influenced university teaching, providing it with an educational model that combines the training of quality professionals and active citizens, capable of contributing to the improvement and transformation of society. In its commitment to quality academic training, which goes beyond learning content and developing skills, it incorporates the concern to educate the student in a real and social context, training him/her to analyze the social, ethical and citizen impact of the exercise (Rubio & Escofet, 2017, p. 20; Gutiérrez & Moreno, 2018). It is also proposed as a suitable methodology for working on the competences (Ferrán-Zubilaga & Guinot-Viciano, 2012).

The work presented focuses on two essential aspects: The contribution of Sociology to the initial training of teachers and its interrelationship with S-L. This is a very genuine and important contribution, as there is little information in this area.

The general objective has been to know the perception the students of UCLM Master Degree have on the contributions of S-L to their initial teacher training, starting from the professional competences and learning that teachers will face in the future. More specifically, the following areas were investigated: (1) their perception of the contribution of the S-L methodology to the learning of Sociology of Education; (2) to what extent they perceived that the skills employed by

the S-L methodology may favor the acquisition of teacher's competences (in particular, those related to the teamwork and the development of personal and professional skills); (3) the feelings associated with their S-L experience and (4) the overall satisfaction of students with the S-L project.

Although Sociology has a superficial presence in the curricula of current degrees of education, many analyses and specialists highlight its valuable contribution to the teacher training (McNamara, 1972; Daine & Foster, 1976, in Loubet-Orozco, 2018, p. 9; Perrenoud, 2002; Guerrero-Serón, 2007; Venegas, 2012). Authors such as Dewey defend the relevance of Sociology and, in particular, the Sociology of Education, and they agree in the critical and reflective attitude that it has in students who study education. Guerrero Serón (2007) considers the training of the teaching staff as a natural destination of the Sociology of Education, since it is an essential knowledge that gives the students "the theoretical and analytical instruments that allow them to understand and act on the social context where they are being formed and where they will work" (p. 10).

The main purpose of the Sociology subject is to understand the school-society interrelationship, paying attention to the basic variables of social inequality: Class, gender and ethnicity, as required by the regulations governing the teacher curricula. From this point of view, "sociological imagination" (Mills, 1959) is considered an essential quality to which all people have access, allowing us to realize that our way of thinking and acting individually is conditioned by the position we occupy in society (Obiol i Francés et al., 2019, p. 1086). Indeed, as stated by these authors, it is a basic competence in the training of future teachers and teachers, as it contributes to the training of reflective and critical teachers.

In the education career, the subjects of Sociology are usually placed in the first courses, as part of the basic training, being part of a module of competences called "Society, family and school". In UCLM curricula, this module is divided into two subjects of six credits each, enti-

tled "Sociology of Education" and "Education and Society", taught in first and second courses respectively. We highlight the following competences related to this subject: 1) relating education to the environment; 2) analyzing and critically incorporating the most relevant issues of today's society affecting family and school education, highlighting the social and educational impact of audiovisual languages, changes in gender and intergenerational relationships, multiculturalism and interculturality, discrimination and social inclusion and sustainable development; 3) knowing the historical evolution of the family, the different types of families, lifestyles and education in the family context.

The competences that are set for the education career are derived from various regulations. The Royal Decree of 2007, which regulates the organization of official university teachings, states that:

Training in any professional activity must contribute to the knowledge and development of human rights, democratic principles, equality between women and men, solidarity, environmental protection, universal accessibility and the promotion of the culture of peace (art. 3).sal y de fomento de la cultura de la paz. (art. 3)

Order ECI/3857/2007 of December 27, which establishes the requirements for the verification of official university degrees that enable the practice of the teaching profession in Elementary school, poses the need for "regular learning spaces that are respectful of human rights to collaborate with the educational community to promote education for active citizenship and to promote responsibility for a sustainable future" (art 3). The order ECI/3854/2007 for Early Childhood Education also includes "the development of the competence oriented to group reflection, acceptance of norms and respect for others" (art. 3), among other aspects.

S-L by combining academic learning with the provision of community service oriented

toward its transformation and improvement, is an ideal methodology for developing the above competences. But to what extent does participation in S-L projects favor the development of the skills in the career? Table 1 shows the strong relationship between the competences of the career and, more specifically, the subject of Sociology of Education, with the S-L methodology in Elementary school.

Table 1. Competences of the Education career related to S-L and Sociology

Principles that should inspire university degrees. RD 1393/2007, art. 3.5	General competences that students must acquire (related to the S-L). Order ECI/3857/2007, Annex, Paragraph 3	Competences of the Society, Family and School module (related to Sociology and the S-L project).  Order ECI/3857/2007, Annex, Paragraph 5
Respect fundamental rights and equality between men and women. Promote human rights and the principles of universal accessibility. Contribute to the values of a culture of peace and democratic values.	<ul> <li>Design and regulate learning spaces in contexts of diversity addressed to gender equality, equity and respect for the human rights that make up the values of citizens.</li> <li>Collaborate with the different sectors of the educational community and the social environment. Assume the educational dimension of the teaching function to promote democratic education for an active citizenship.</li> <li>Value individual and collective responsibility in the achievement of a sustainable future.</li> </ul>	Relate education to the media. Cooperate with families and the community. Analyze and incorporate the most relevant issues of today's society affecting family and school education: Social and educational impact of audiovisual languages; changes in gender and intergenerational relationships; multiculturalism and interculturality; discrimination and social inclusion and sustainable development.

Source: Own elaboration from ORDER ECI/3857/2007 of December 27 and Royal Decree 1393/2007 of October 29.

This formative performance from Sociology seeks to place students in the educational processes and in the challenges they will face in their professional future (Trottier & Lessard, 2002, cited in Venegas, 2012, p. 407). This purpose is the main basis for the subject Education and Society, taught in the second course of the career. In its curriculum, the subject of Sociology introduces students to the basic principles of social research, familiarizing them with the methodological principles, approaches, categories and most common techniques in education. In connection with this exploratory learning, current social issues related to the educational and family environment are explored

and examples of specific studies are presented, seeking to show students the balance between research and its professional application. Hence, S-L projects developed included a wide range of actions, aimed at responding to the demands made by the collaborating schools: support to literacy in Spanish and English, dynamization of recreations, inclusive courtyards, interactive groups, promotion of equality, school support, healthy education, library dynamization, storytellers, etc.

Thus, a learning for students who have participated in S-L experiences has been the discovery (or awareness) of beliefs, prejudices or preconceptions that we as professors create on the student. To confront the meritocracy of teaching thought and its implications as predictors of academic achievement is a necessary learning to unmask the social construction of these judgments or representations that, as we know, the teachers begin to internalize in the initial formation (Tarabini, 2015; San Román et al., 2015; López-Gamboa, 2019; Kaplan, 2012; Brozmanová et al., 2016). Hence its potential in the training of university professors (Álvarez-Castillo et al., 2017).

It is precisely in this real context offered by the S-L that the meaning of the concepts, ideas and theories that allow to move in the formation of practical thinking of the students, "where they construct resources of understanding and act as apprentices" (Pérez-Gómez, 2010, p. 48), and it will be confirmed later with the most relevant results of the qualitative exploration carried out, as expressed by its protagonists: the students.

## 2. Methodology

The study has a mixed approach, combining the collection of quantitative data (via online questionnaires) and qualitative data (through the narratives of experiences in the memories presented by students for the evaluation of the subject). Therefore, it is mainly descriptive.

The sample is set up by the university students of the UCLM's Faculty of Education, who studied the subjects of Sociology of Education in the first course and Education and Society in the second of the degree in Primary Education, in the academic courses 2018/2019 and 2019/2020.

The questionnaires were addressed to first-year students, while the reflective memories were addressed to second-year students with more experience in the field of Sociology.

Regarding the questionnaire, all students involved in the S-L project were invited to participate through the Moodle platform of the subjects (Virtual Campus UCLM), reaching a response rate of 47% (117 students).

The sample chosen for the qualitative analysis of the memories has been intentional, selecting those focused on the contents that best fit the objectives of the research. The memories of fifty students have been analyzed.<sup>1</sup>

Table 2. Sample of the UCLM Degree in Primary and Early Childhood Education

Online quiz	117
Reflexive narratives	50
Total	167

Source: Own elaboration from study data.

Previous studies were taken as reference in the design of the questionnaire (Capella et al., 2014; Campo, 2015; Folgueiras et al., 2013). It was composed of 21 questions, aimed at collecting information on organizational issues, group work, involvement, relationship with the subject and opinion on aspects linked to it, along with the perception of lived feelings and satisfaction with the S-L project, using a 5-point Likert-type rating scale (being 1 very little and 5 a lot).

Regarding the qualitative contribution of the productions written by the participat-

ing students, the use of reflective memorials or portfolios, among other evaluative modalities, are common techniques in similar research (Folgueiras, 2017; Loubet-Orozco, 2018). The aim was to obtain perceptions and experiences that would complement quantitative analysis and allow for further discussion of the aspects of interest. As presented below in the testimonials selected to support the results of the questionnaire, students reflect on the personal experience (individual and group), and they are aware of the observed social situations and contexts and iden-

tify the academic (theoretical-practical) learning in the framework of the Education and Society. Therefore, there are three fundamental axes that combine students' perceptions with theoretical thinking and practice.

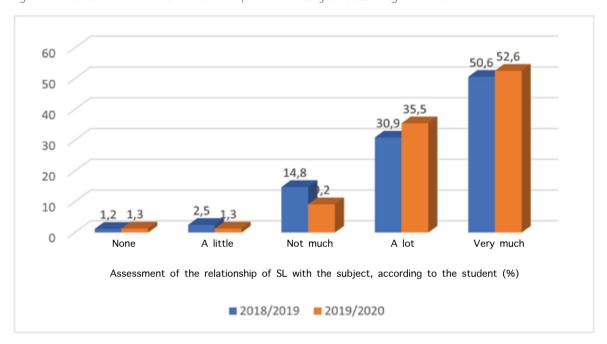
The analysis of the questionnaire data was carried out using SPSS Statistics 24 program. For the qualitative analysis, Atlas.ti 8 program was used.

the connection between the development of the project and the contents of the subject of Sociology of Education. Figure 1 shows a high ratio of both being perceived by students with more than 50%, being at the highest score (5). The average assessment of this aspect in the course of 2018/2019 is 4.27 out of 5 (DT: 0.895), increasing slightly in the course of 2019/2020 (mean: 4.37; DT: 0.814).

## 3. Results

One of the first questions raised in this study was to what extent students perceived

Figure 1. Assessment of the S-L relationship with the subject according to the students



Source: Milla (2020, p. 18).

Students mention that their S-L experience has helped them to better understand the subject's content (mean: 3.93; D: 1.024) and,

especially, to find a better relationship between the theory, the practice (mean: 4.14; D: 0.989) and the daily life (mean 4.43; D.T.: 0.869).

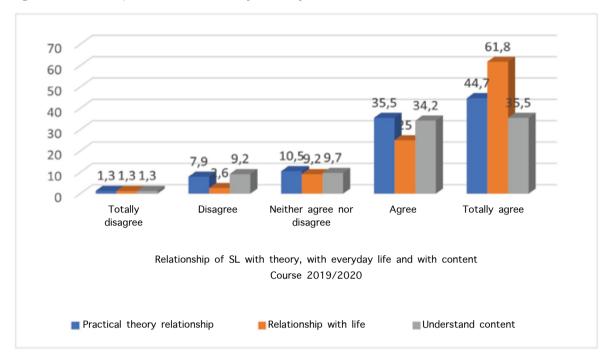


Figure 2. Relationship of S-L with the theory, the daily life and the contents. Course 2019/2020

Source: Milla (2020, p. 18).

In the same way, the results of qualitative exploration show the effectiveness of the experience in identifying and understanding sociological problems, based on the observation of real situations in the school context. The meeting with social inequalities, cultural diversity and gender inequality has an influence in the reflections of students:

We have seen children and families with difficult social and economic situations, as there are a large number of migrant refugee students. This has made me see life from another perspective, we have to challenge ourselves in order to be able to address the needs that arise and not to play safe, since all of us have the right to be educated. (M-4)

In the case of gypsy culture, my experience in L-S has surprised me and I must say that it has helped me to clarify certain aspects of their way of living life, their education and their culture in general. Society sets them very strict rules and as people, we must be able to prioritize the interior of our peers and give an opportunity to know the experiences of each person. (M-13)

(...) having worked with gipsy children, and see that they are like the others, with the same imagination, creativity and ability to learn. (M-18)

We observed that sexism is very present in the classroom, and girls did not want to relate to a boy who was approaching them because they said that he was a boy. I tried to mediate by making them see that they did not have to discriminate him by being a boy, that they were all equal, regardless the sex. (M-22)

We note from the testimonies gathered, that the situations experienced in the implementation of the S-L projects have favored reflective practice as a tool of teaching work in the classroom. It should be recalled that this methodology has been theorized and disseminated

as a training model for teaching professionals (Domingo, 2013; Lupión-Cobos & Gallego-García, 2017) and for the educational change (Mayor & Rodríguez, 2016).

Experience has provided us knowledge from various perspectives to develop our critical, abstract, reflective and innovative thinking, to understand what is happening inside and outside school. It has helped us to relate concepts, learn new methodologies, taxonomies related to learning processes and cognitive skills, assessment and needs for change in the educational field... (M-9)

The yard is an essential space in the school context and especially in Early Childhood Education. Recreational time is when children have more freedom to play, explore, move and relate to their peers. We have seen this and understood it with the S-L active recreation activity. (M-27)

Another sample of the value of the S-L project in student training is shown in the high scores given by the students' responses, when they are asked about the possibility of including this methodology in other subjects 81.6% strongly agree (Mean 4.75, D.T.: 0.635), as with this experience they have been strengthened their vocation (73.7% strongly agree, Mean 4.58; D.T.: 0.868).

Thanks to the development of the S-L activity, students perceive a development of their own knowledge by connecting previous learning with new contents (mean 4.41; D.T.: 0.836), a greater motivation toward the subject (76.3% agree or strongly agree; mean 4.04; D.T.: 0.916) and, to a lesser extent, increased attention (mean 3.71; D.T.: 1.056).

With regard to the development of competences linked to the S-L experience, the assessments are also high, both for professional competences (57.9% strongly agreed; average 4.37; D.T.: 0.877) and for cross-cutting competences (53.9% strongly agreed, average 4.30 and D.T.: 0.924).

Almost 54% of respondents believe they would not have learned more if the time spent on S-L had been spent by teaching in the classroom.

Other important aspects are their assessment of the contribution of S-L to understanding its role as future teachers (Mean 4.50; D.T.: 0.887) and their acquisition of knowledge about how an educational center works (Mean 4.47; D.T.: 0.774).

In short, the usefulness of the S-L experience in his/her teacher training is highlighted, giving an average rate of 4.71 out of 5 (D.T.: 0.670) and that is reflected in these words, expressed by a student:

(...) The role of the teacher is not limited to imparting knowledge to his/her students, but it goes far beyond education, since the professor has to be a guide and mediator in times of conflict or complex situations... not always in a favorable context. Hence, the school must act and provide the student the necessary tools to ease the situation possible and to implement all the techniques possible to improve the situation. (M-4)

Taking a step further, we consider deepening the contributions of the S-L project to the acquisition of specific professional competences: those related to the teamwork and the development of personal skills. It is noted that these are highly valued by most students and that they also show a positive correlation with overall satisfaction with the S-L project.

It should be said that part of the success in the development of these activities is related to the good functioning of the team work mentioned by the students (mean 4.59, D.T.: 0.677) and which shows a significant correlation with the expressed satisfaction (bilateral at 0.01; r<sup>2</sup>: 0.252). The assessments presented in the memories also emphasize cooperation and teamwork as one of the lessons learned:

We were working cooperatively in a group every day, and this caused and facilitated the proposal for S-L to be more effective, dynamic, motivating and productive. (M-31)

S-L has been a very practical and reflective subject, which helped us learn from our mistakes, to self-evaluate ourselves in a critical way, as well as learning to work as a team and increase creativity. (M-11)

As stated, the evaluation shows that participation in these projects favors their training in the knowledge necessary for their professional future. As Uribe (2018) points out, this is one of the essential aspects that derive from the conduction of these activities. Specifically, S-L benefits the training as teachers, linking their learning

with life, developing their own emotional competence (Ibarrola-García & Artcuh, 2016; García & Sánchez, 2017) and therefore strengthening their vocation.

Part of these learning comes from the development of competences linked to their personal skills. When students were asked about the emotional perceptions in developing their S-L experience, most of them said they were very interested, excited, satisfied, active, enthusiastic, focused, awake, inspired and strong.

To a lesser extent, they were nervous and give the lowest average scores to "negative" emotions, such as irritability, fear, anguish, etc. The following table shows an order of the ratings given to each feeling.

Tabla 3. Valoración de los sentimientos en los participantes del ApS. Curso 2019/2020

Interested	Mean (1-5)	D.T.
Excited	4,78	0,479
Satisfied	4,7	0,589
Active	4,57	0,806
Нарру	4,54	0,642
Concentrated	4,47	0,856
Awake	4,29	0,780
Decided	4,11	0,918
Inspired	4,01	0,902
Strong	4	1,143
Nervous	3,93	0,971
Affected	2,33	1,076
Hectic	1,76	1,082
Scared	1,64	0,919
Angustiated	1,58	1,036
Fearful	1,46	0,807
Ashamed	1,43	0,806
Guilty	1,37	0,780
Irritable	1,28	0,704
Aggressive	1,24	0,586
Agresivo	1,12	0,431

Source: Own elaboration based on study data.

Therefore, it can be said that this experience is a source of positive, stimulating sensations and professional and personal development for the students of the career. This first contact with the educational reality at the beginning of the career means a remarkable experience for the students (Milla, 2020). All this leads to a high overall satisfaction with the S-L project. 60.5% of students in the 2028-19 academic year give the highest score on this issue (mean: 4.43; DT: 0.805), increasing to 73.7% in the 2019-20 academic year (mean: 4.67; D.T.: 0.619).

In a gender analysis, no statistically significant differences related to expressed satisfaction have been found (Kolmogorov-Smirnov test: p: 439; effect size: D Cohen: 0.18), while many students express this satisfaction in their speeches on "Education and Society" at the Childhood Education Career, where all participants are women:

S-L has helped me know myself and know the things I need to improve in my teaching performance. (M-23)

This experience has been very rewarding, not only have we learned, but we have also been able to help. (M-11)

(...) I consider this experience to be a professional enrichment and a great satisfaction for helping (...). (M-4).

### 4. Discussion and conclusions

Our research findings have shown the methodological possibilities of S-L in initial teacher training, combining learning from academic content with a service to the community. But S-L is also an educational philosophy linked with the transformative dimension of education that advocates all critical pedagogy. In this sense, we have seen the greatest contribution in this aspect.

The analysis of the assessments of the students reveals the high satisfaction and con-

nection of the formative experience with the curricular competences and learning objectives of the Sociology subjects. We note the positive influence of S-L in strengthening and enriching the role of Sociology in the teacher training, a challenge pursued from our knowledge area and from the Faculty of Education.

As regards with other studies that aim to extend S-L at the university (Esparza et al., 2018), we emphasize the positive impact of our experience with the different groups involved. Based on our students, we can say that they have increased their motivation, contextualized their academic learning and are able to use them to serve the community. The Faculty's classes have become more dynamic and participatory thanks to their involvement in the project. Children's and primary schools have been able to meet some of their needs, benefiting children in school. Therefore, the Faculty of Education has increased its social impact, contributing to the exercise of the social responsibility of the university.

The need to promote synergies among all educational resources available in the community was highlighted in international education reports such as Coombs (1968), Faure (1973) or Delors (1996). In this regards, different educational proposals have been developed, such as the Educational Cities, the Learning Communities, the educational environment plans and the local educational networks, the Atlantida Project, etc. (Mayor-Paredes & Rodríguez-Mar, 2015). S-L is added to that list, but with the characteristic of allowing university students to be true protagonists.

Finally, we must add the perception of the professors of the Sociology Area that have led the implementation of S-L projects, who agree with the fact that the experience has improved the difficult coordination of teachers in shared subjects (like Education and Society), synchronizing styles and teaching strategies that promote the development of the competences proposed in

the career. In this sense, the advances shown represent a significant advance that will have to be investigated in a sustained way in the future, asking ourselves whether S-L can improve didactic strategies and the motivation and evaluation of the university student by stimulating the renewal and creativity that the teaching of Sociology needs (Feito, 2020). This challenge helps to set the foundation for a learning community with the participation of the teacher and the student.

#### Note

The fragments included throughout the text are identified by a code (M-1 to M-50) corresponding to the number assigned to each reflective memory. The authors of these memories are students coursing the 2nd grade of Early Childhood Education of the Campus of Ciudad Real, and they have a relatively homogeneous sociodemographic profile: Young women between 19 and 26 years old, who live in Ciudad Real or nearby.

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