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Acquiring ethical competences for the resolution of moral dilemmas in social work

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ABSTRACT

This study presents and analyses a teaching project focused on the acquisition of ethical competences to deal with moral dilemmas in the field of Social Work. The project used two pedagogical methods: Problem-Based Learning (PBL) and Theatre of the Oppressed (TO). The main objective was to raise students' awareness of the importance of applied ethics in social work and to help them develop reflective and critical skills to solve ethical dilemmas. Through PBL, students were able to practice emotional skills by simulating ethical dilemmas in a familiar environment such as the classroom. The use of OT, on the other hand, allowed them to recreate professional situations, fostering creativity in a collaborative and participatory way by acting out scenes and swapping roles. The results of the study reflect a positive perception on the part of the students toward these methodologies, indicating that they have internalized the ethical lessons learned during the teaching process and that they have acquired critical skills to solve professional dilemmas.

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Introduction

During the early development of social work as a profession, ethics education did not receive the focal attention it has today (Reamer, 1998). However, throughout the twentieth century, there was growing recognition of the importance of ethics in the field of social work in the United States, especially in the 1950s and 1960s. This increase in ethical awareness is attributed to influences such as the civil rights movement and a greater understanding of social responsibility and social justice. In this context, various codes of ethics were enshrined by prominent organizations such as the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), marking a milestone in the international recognition of ethics in social work. The Declaration of Ethical Principles of Social Work (General Assembly of the International Federation of Social Workers IFSW, 2018) has helped us to determine which skills to work on with students for the future practice of the profession.

The formulation of ethical principles in social work, such as the recognition of inherent human dignity, the promotion of human rights and social justice, not only

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guides professional behavior but also provides a framework for responsibility and accountability. These principles include combating discrimination and institutional oppression, respecting diversity, promoting equitable access to resources, challenging unjust policies and building solidarity. It also promotes the right to self-determination and participation, respect for confidentiality and privacy, holistic treatment of individuals, and ethical use of technology and social networks, all under the umbrella of professional integrity (Banks, 2012; Barsky, 2019; Reamer, 2018).

The interpretation of the ethical principles of social work, informed by the pedagogy of Paulo Freire (1970), emphasizes the importance of participatory methodologies and the conscientization of oppressed classes. This critical and reflexive perspective not only strengthens ethical practice in social work, but also promotes critical consciousness and community mobilization, which are crucial for structural change and social justice. Ethical principles thus move beyond their role as guidelines to become active tools for emancipation and social change. Moreover, recent advances in conceptual frameworks and practical resources for addressing ethical dilemmas have benefited greatly from the contributions of Banks (2012), Reamer (2018) and Barsky (2019), among others. These have provided a crucial foundation for equipping practitioners with the strategies needed to deal with ethically complex situations.

The complexity of the contexts in which ethical dilemmas arise in social work often makes it impossible to formulate definitive solutions. The multifaceted nature of these scenarios requires an approach that recognizes the inevitability of certain intractable conflicts. According to Banks (2012), 'social work practice often faces situations where there is no single right answer because of the diversity of values and perspectives at play, making some ethical dilemmas inherently intractable' (p. 13).

Although there are several philosophical approaches that advocate reflective practice in Social Work, our proposal is based on the foundation of Applied Ethics, given that this is grounded in experiential knowledge about real problems and providing answers for specific contexts, encouraging criticism and innovation (Banks, 2012; Schutz & Luckmann, 1977; Singer, 1993; Strom, 2022) through the participation of the various agents and disciplines involved in the reflection on the situation (Cortina & García-Maza, 2003). Within Applied Ethics, the principles of bioethics—benefit, non-maleficence, autonomy and justice—(Beauchamp & Childress, 2019; Gracia, 1991) become relevant in the approach to ethical dilemmas arising in the professional practice of Social Work. This involves considering diverse perspectives and views on the situation at hand. Applied Ethics reminds us of the importance of not only incorporating the principles of professional ethics in our responses as Social Work practitioners, but also understanding the various potential consequences of interventions, given the significant impact they may have on the lives of the people targeted by the intervention (Thompson, 2006). By applying the principles of Applied Ethics, such as justice, autonomy and beneficence (Reamer, 2018), social workers can ensure that their actions promote the well-being and dignity of their clients, while respecting their individual rights and values (NASW, 2017). By moving away from general, abstract moral theories and carefully assessing the potential ethical consequences of their decisions and actions, social workers can make a positive contribution to improving the social conditions and quality of life of the communities they serve (Hugman, 2005).

This approach goes beyond cause-effect relationships based on external observation of the behavior of individuals and communities and immerses us in a dialogic process between actors involved to achieve a greater understanding of situations. It enables direct knowledge sharing and critical analysis with the people concerned, respecting their individual values, intentions and contexts that give meaning to their lives and demand respect for their autonomy (Hugman, 2018).

In the daily practice of Social Work, professionals are often faced with deliberative processes that influence professional intervention. Ethical dilemmas, as pointed out by Salcedo (1998), Bermejo (2002), Úriz et al. (2007) and Ballesteros (2009), occupy a central place in this practice, arising when there is a conflict between professional ethical principles that require a justified choice (Banks, 2012, 2021; Mattison, 2000; Reamer, 1982; Salcedo, 1998; Strom, 2022). In order to articulate the answers to these dilemmas, future social work professionals should have been made aware of the contributions being made from the field of bioethics (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019; Gracia, 1991) during their training. Although some teachers may resort to the approach of codes of ethics to teach students how to deal with ethical dilemmas, the complexity and specificity of each situation require a more reflective approach that includes methodological tools to manage ethical conflicts (Barsky, 2019; Hugman, 2005) and to promote decisions that are not only morally defensible but also sensitive to the complexities and challenges of the practical environment (Banks, 2021).

Research such as that conducted by Pugh (2017) and Sanders and Hoffman (2010) indicates that, despite these advances in the ethical training of social work professionals, there is an underutilization of formal ethical frameworks among social work professionals in their everyday practices. Personal values and institutional contexts are often the main determinants of ethical decisions. This finding underscores the importance of comprehensive ethics training that addresses emerging challenges and integrates emotional, creative elements and human interactions (Banks, 2012, 2021; De Laine, 2000; McIntyre, 2007). However, there are some risks associated with focusing only on emotions (Keinemans, 2015). Remembering the importance of emotions in decision-making alerts us to the complexity of resolving and addressing ethical dilemmas.

The authors of this paper, however, believe that professional response cannot be dictated entirely by emotions. Relying solely on emotional responses in ethical decision-making may expose professionals to biases and hinder their ability to professionally identify the conflicts that underlie their personal values and beliefs and institutional pressures. The use of ethical reasoning is essential to ensure professional responses. This requires not only training in ethical theory but also pedagogical tools to facilitate future professionals' expertise in dealing with ethical dilemmas.

In this context, we consider that Problem-Based Learning (PBL), which emphasizes experience, reflection and conceptualization, is an interesting approach to the ethical training of future social work professionals and fits well with the participatory approaches of Freire (1970) from which we started. Along the same lines, authors such as Sewpaul (2014) and Ryan and Deci (2017) point out that teachers training future social work professionals need to incorporate creative, experiential teaching/learning strategies based on student empowerment and motivation. We consider the contributions of Dewey (1916) to be relevant in relation to prioritizing an immersive experience for students in real contexts as a facilitating element in their cognitive process through the

formulation of preliminary solutions to the problem posed, as well as the importance of practical application to validate their understanding. In this sense, Davies (2004) highlights the need to integrate ethical theory with practice through the use of case studies and the active participation of students in ethical discussions and problem solving. The PBL approach and its application in the teaching of ethics makes it possible to work on deliberative processes with future professionals, facilitating understanding through the comparison and exchange of ideas with their peers (Castro & Silva, 2022), actively collaborating in the resolution of problems while the teacher guides the teaching process to generate critical awareness in the students (Freire, 1970). This pedagogical tool enables students to 'be prepared for effective and meaningful civic participation' (Dodd & Jansson, 2004, p. 17). In addition, we must keep in mind that social work practitioners face ethical tensions arising from the institutional and cultural dynamics that affect marginalized populations.

Levinas (1997) notion of 'otherness' challenges the possibility of gaining a complete understanding of users, highlighting the limitations of empathic relations. This is not because the tools for approaching them are flawed, but because, ontologically, there is always something about the other person that escapes the description of frames and categories. The role of social work educators is to draw students' attention to the limits of such an understanding and the need to employ a dialectical use of experiential knowledge for the appropriation of professional skills and strategies (Tsang, 2017) in the resolution of ethical dilemmas.

Ethical training for future social work professionals should alert them to the complexity of professional responses to ethical dilemmas and provide tools to simulate and practice everyday situations in the classroom. This training should integrate both rational elements, such as the principles, values and standards contained in codes of ethics, and the emotional aspects of dealing with ethical dilemmas that arise in practice. In addition, ethical principles, while providing a sound basis for decision making, need to be applied with a critical understanding of the context and a willingness for collective deliberation among all parties involved (Banks, 2021). This ensures that professional responses are sensitive to the complexities of the practice environment and include relational aspects.

In order to train future professionals in these competencies, we consider it interesting to combine the pedagogical elements offered by PBL with the pedagogical tools offered by the Theatre of the Oppressed (TO).

The representation of case studies using tools offered by the Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) (Boal, 1979) enhances critical thinking in future professionals through reflective dialogue (Giroux, 2020). At the same time, it strengthens interpersonal communication skills by enabling the representation of different moral proposals (Fantus, 2020). TO, developed by Augusto Boal, provides a safe and creative environment for people to express and explore individual and collective experiences of oppression. Using techniques such as 'image theatre' and 'forum theatre', participants can represent and analyze problematic situations, consider different perspectives and experiment with possible solutions. This methodology promotes internal and external dialogue, encourages the creation of support networks among participants and strengthens interpersonal communication skills by allowing the representation of different moral propositions (Fantus, 2020). By challenging hegemonic narratives, it can inspire participants to organize and work together to address social injustices and promote change. This critical awareness and community mobilization is essential for social work aimed at social justice and structural change.

The notion of 'felt experience' emerges as a central concept in Boal's (1979) theater pedagogy to generate meaningful and transformative knowledge. This felt experience not only forms the basis for theatrical exploration and the creation of authentic characters, but also serves as a powerful medium for critical reflection and social awareness. Boal posits that felt experience is central to the process of individual and collective liberation and empowerment, as it enables TO participants to recognize and transform their oppressive realities through authentic, visceral experience.

Working with real cases, through these two pedagogical tools, allows students to confront ethically complex contexts and develop strategies to make informed and justified ethical decisions in their future professional practice as social workers. In addition, it allows for the incorporation of emotional elements and encourages democratic participation (Freire, 2005) and collective reflection on ethical issues, offering students a safe space to explore and debate diverse ethical perspectives, thus promoting a greater understanding of work implications and cultivating a sense of ethical responsibility toward their clients and communities. Ethically shaping future professionals involves not only introducing them to the main theoretical approaches to social work such as John Rawls' ethics of justice (law and happiness), Carol Guilligan's ethics of care (relationships and emotions), and Hannah Arendt's political ethics (critique of society). It is also ethically formative to foster a methodology that allows for reflection on practice. Such a methodology consists of conscious habits of thought in order to become responsible practitioners who can account for their own practice (Hugman, 2005).

Methodology

The context of this teaching experience, which chiefly sought to enable students to acquire skills to resolve professional ethical dilemmas from a critical perspective, is the subject Ethics for Social Work, taught in the fourth year of the Bachelor's Degree in Social Work, fifth year of the Double Degree in Social Education and Social Work and fifth year of the Double Degree in Sociology and Social Work at the Universidad Pablo de Olavide (Seville, Spain).

The subject is divided into 28 hours of Basic Teaching -theoretical- (BE) and 14 hours of Practical Teaching (PTE). The practical teaching experience (PTE) is divided into 7 sessions of 2 hours each. The proposed activity has been developed within the 14 hours of the PTE, specifically between the 5th and 7th session (6 hours in total). It is a compulsory activity.

A total of 123 students participated.

This placement of the subject within the programme responds to the need to overcome two obstacles (Fantus, 2020):

- This type of activity requires the group maturity of the students.
- The creation of theater and drama-based activities requires the necessary preparation and training for the trainers. Throughout the year, teachers receive several training seminars on the subject.

The proposal we made to the students was to analyze practical cases of real experiences of social work professionals in which ethical dilemmas arise, cases that the students themselves requested from their internship tutors. For example, the following case (FLO_L3_PAP):

> A woman called 'X' comes to the Community Social Services (SS.SS.C.) indicating that she wants to apply for the Minimum Living Allowance (IMV). She is given the necessary documentation to apply for it.
>
> When she hands over the documents, it is clear that she is divorced from a man called 'A' and that the father of the children has a child support order against her and her children. Furthermore, they are registered at different addresses.
>
> The SS.SS.C. are aware that both X and A are still together and that they live at the same address, so their situation should be regularised. In addition, X brings bank statements to prove that her ex-husband is paying her regular maintenance. The problem with this is that the family is committing fraud and acting in bad faith, as they have an income from both parents that will not be taken into account in the application for the IMV, because bureaucratically everything is correct, but the reality is that they are together.
>
> The ethical dilemma is whether to report the fraud to social security or not to do anything about it.

In general, coinciding with Viscarret (2019, p. 118), the subject matter of the case studies collected was related to information (duty to inform third parties, confidentiality and telling the truth), aspects intrinsic to the professional intervention (autonomy of the user, duration of the intervention and distribution of resources), aspects extrinsic to the professional intervention (malpractice of other professionals and hierarchical decisions) and relational aspects (limits in the relationship between professional and user).

Once they were collected, they were presented in the classroom and a methodological phase began, which we call the *Study of Ethical Dilemmas*, which revolves around the formation, analysis and description of these case studies from the point of view of Ethics applied to Social Work. The second phase corresponds to the *Forum Theatre* where we moved on to the organization, rehearsal and performance of the case studies in each group.

The data collection tools consisted of a questionnaire.

The pedagogical techniques used were Problem-Based Learning (PBL)[1] and Theatre of the Oppressed (TO).[2]

Phases

Training

Students receive theoretical training aimed at acquiring knowledge about moral dilemmas, as well as the principles and values of professional ethics (Viscarret, 2019). At the beginning of the course, they are given an ethical dilemma record sheet to be filled in by the professional placement supervisors (social worker) with a dilemma experienced by him/herself.

In addition to the affiliation and institutional data, the following elements are included on the form:

- Presentation of the case.
- Law or regulation affecting the dilemma.
- Dilemma options.
- Decision-making process.

- Outcome, critical review taking into account the consequences.
- Name at least three strategies that helped you make the decision.

The texts obtained are shared in class to create a space in which to discuss doubts, reflections, surprises (pleasant and unpleasant), singularities, disagreements, complaints, concerns, etc., about the process of completing the dilemma sheet.

Analysis of cases

The case studies provided by the social workers are subjected to in-depth analysis. We work sequentially on the following points:

(a) Identification of the problems posed by the dilemma.
(b) Comparison with other cases presented.
(c) Study of the circumstances surrounding the case.
(d) Consideration of possible courses of action. At this stage it is important to
    (i) Know the degree of competence, suitability and capacity of each of the people involved (user, the professional himself/herself, other participants).
    (ii) Find the relationship with the principles of bioethics (Gracia, 1991), which are:
        - Principle of NON-maleficence: avoid doing harm.
        - Principle of BENEFIT: acting for the good of the patient in therapeutic terms, i.e. doing good and avoiding harm.
        - Principle of EQUITY: requires that all persons be treated with equal consideration, without discrimination on grounds of sex, race, ideology, age, etc.
        - Principle of AUTONOMY: respecting the subject's decision to make decisions about his or her current situation.
    (iii) Deploy skills drawn from the Declaration of Ethical Principles of Social Work (Asamblea General de la Federación Internacional de Trabajadores Sociales IFSW, 2018).
    (iv) Assessment of personal, family and social circumstances.
    (v) Evaluation of the consequences. Once the action has been identified, the foreseeable consequences, both positive and negative, of the decision are assessed. Analysis of the potential risks and side effects of decisions prepares them professionally for implementation.
(e) Decision-making and implementation. It is important that the decision is justified on the basis of one of the proposed principles. When it comes to implementation, practitioners need to bring all their professional competences and skills into play. Therefore, they will have to select an option, justification and implementation.

Theatrical creation

We felt that in order to achieve the objective of the activity—to acquire skills for the resolution of ethical dilemmas from a critical perspective—theatrical performance complemented the previous rational reflection well. The process followed in this second step is as follows.

Firstly, the groups rehearse these *cases according to* the following outline:

– Reading case studies
– Views on the case in terms of roles or statuses highlighted, given circumstances, setting in which it is contextualized, etc.
– Distribution of functions within the group taking into account the following areas of action:
  (a) Actors/actresses: who will develop the performance part of the practical-professional case study.
  (b) Jokers: two participants in charge of facilitating the process within the group to answer questions and support the rehearsals. In the performance, they will also be the group's MCs/moderators, as described in the last section of this second phase.
– Rehearsals

  The case study is dramatized in the group, which consists of writing a script or outline for the role-play. The dramatization serves to rehearse the outline devised in the group. To encourage this part, the teachers propose the following dramaturgical approach:
  (a) Start of the case.
  (b) Development—conflict.
  (c) Solution or end of the case depending on how each group wants to deal with it.
  (d) The cases are rehearsed as many times as each group deems necessary for the performance.
– Theatrical performance

  Once the groups have rehearsed the cases, they move on to the last part of this phase, which involves performing them in front of their classmates and teachers. Each performance lasts a maximum of 10 minutes. The group performing the case study presents its argument according to the rehearsed dramatization. However, in the first performance, only the beginning and the conflict will be staged, leaving the audience to participate in the possible solutions to the dilemmas posed in the scene. To do this, they will be asked how they would resolve the conflict or dilemma. The ending rehearsed by the group will then be shown as an alternative to be discussed in class. This is the core part of the project because it is where conflict resolution skills are acquired[3] and it is also the moment to carry out contextualized reflective practice (Fook & Gardner, 2012; Schön, 1987).

Results

The evaluation of the forum's theater activity combined several qualitative and quantitative techniques.

a) To evaluate the students' activity we created a rubric (Table 1), incorporating different items to assess the acquisition of skills for the resolution of ethical dilemmas while assigning a grade for the subject:

All students achieved at least a 7.5 and more than half of the class got a 10 in the activity.

b) We carried out a survey of the participating students (students enrolled on the subject of Ethics in Social Work in the three degrees on which it is taught: Degree in Social Work, Double Degree in Social Education and Social Work, and Sociology and

Table 1. Rubric for evaluating the forum theatre activity. ethics for social work.

	SCORE				
ITEM	0	2,5	5	7,5	10
Choosing the ethical dilemma	No ethical dilemma sheet	Late and incomplete sheet	They hand in a late or incomplete sheet	They hand in a completed sheet on time	They hand in a completed sheet on time and it is of great interest.
Preparation of the play	They improvise the whole play	They improvise most of the play	They improvise part of the play	They prepare the whole play	They prepare the whole play excellently
Text	The text in no way represents an ethical dilemma.	The text is a very poor representation of an ethical dilemma.	The text presents an ethical dilemma, but lacks clarity	The text clearly presents an ethical dilemma	The text presents an ethical dilemma in a profound, critical and brilliant way.
Expression	Verbal and non-verbal expression is greatly neglected.	Verbal and non-verbal expression is neglected.	Verbal and non-verbal expression is somewhat neglected.	Verbal and non-verbal expression is carefully considered.	Verbal and non-verbal expression is very carefully considered.
Public participation	Non-participants	They participate little and with inconsequential comments.	They participate little or with inconsequential comments.	They participate quite a lot with comments that delve deeper into the dilemma posed.	They participate a great deal with comments that explore the dilemma posed in great depth.
Choosing the ethical dilemma	Refers to the descriptive capacity of the ethical dilemma presented on the practitioners' worksheet.				
Preparation of the play	Refers to the observable result in the performance of the play, showing whether it has been rehearsed and worked on or not.				
Text	Refers to whether the play's dialogues capture the main points of the ethical dilemma				
Expression	Refers to whether the group enters into the dynamic realistically and represents a situation in a credible way.				
Public participation	Refers to the moment when the group is not performing, but comments on and participates in the work of another group.				

Authors' own.

Social Work at Universidad Pablo de Olavide). This survey was conducted by the same professors who had taught and carried out the activities described above.

123 people participated with the following age distribution: 53% were between 19 and 22 years old, 40% between 23 and 26 years old and 7% 27 years old or older. It was not necessary for them to sign the consent form because the research process guaranteed their anonymity, and we did not ask for any personal information that could identify them. However, they were informed of the aims of the research and the use of the information obtained, as well as the commitment to inform them of any situation that might be of interest to them.

In terms of gender distribution, 91% were women and 9% were men.

Within the affiliation data, we found it interesting to ask students how they rated their own academic record (Figure 4). In the results, we will discuss the interesting questions this variable raised.

We introduced a variable that we found interesting and which subsequently yielded representative results: self-perceived academic performance throughout their university studies. Each student had to assign themselves a grade:

79% assigned themselves a grade of 'good', 13% 'sufficient' and 8% 'outstanding'.

The survey is adapted from the work of Madrigal (2021) and Astudillo et al. (2017). A total of 17 statements with closed options were included: they were scored between 1 and 5, with 1 = Strongly disagree and 5 = Strongly agree (Figure 1).

The last two questions performed a control function in that a high score on them should mean a low score on the rest and vice versa. In this sense, it worked correctly, as we will see in the graph below (Figure 1).

The results presented (Figure 1) refer to the total averages obtained, and their value, in general, is higher than 4. The lowest values, as expected, correspond to the control questions on whether it was necessary to combine the two methodologies, so we consider that they are not taken into account.

It is worth noting that the most highly valued aspect was teacher training, validating the previous preparation work, to a certain extent.

The next block that received a high score corresponds to the methodology itself (4.4 or more) and to immediate practice:

- The method is considered useful for improving the resolution of moral dilemmas.
- The involvement of the group has been conducive to learning.
- The combined approach of PBL and TF has gained wide acceptance.
- Possibilities have opened up to think about different options for solving moral dilemmas.
- There is a better understanding of what an ethical dilemma is.
- Critical thinking and decision-making are encouraged.

With a slightly lower score (4.2), we find the motivation to learn (the development of empathy and the improvement of professional skills, all of which are related to medium-term personal processes that require maturation.

The lowest rated items (3.9) were the following: greater confidence and the appropriateness of the exercise to theoretical knowledge.

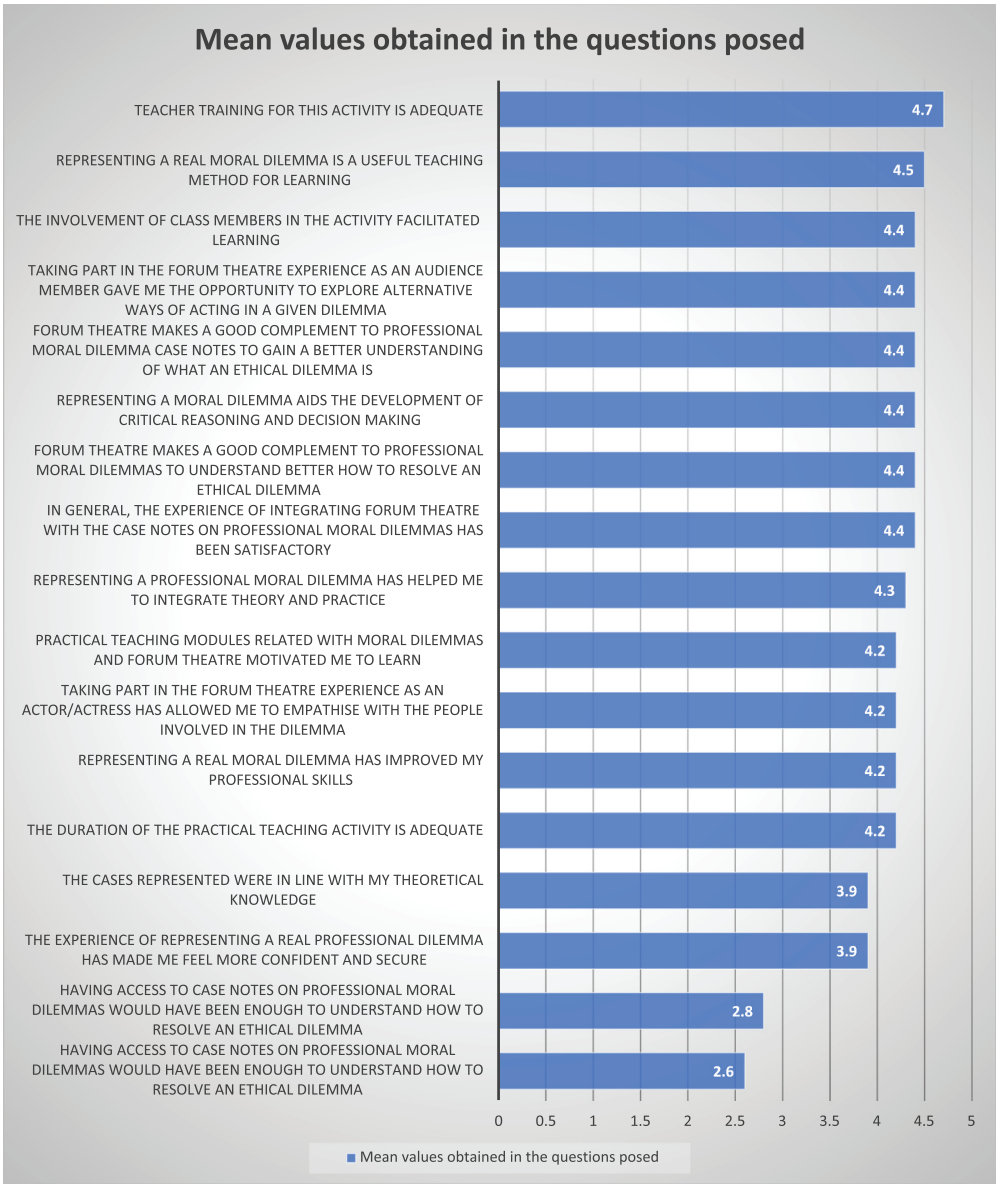

Figure 1. Comparative averages about dilemmas as a learning method.

As for our subject, we would like to reflect on the contents of the course in the future in order to reinforce the theory of professional moral dilemmas. However, given that the subject is studied in the final year of the degree course, a critical review of the entire syllabus would seem to us to be equally valuable in terms of the perceived insecurity it leaves in the students.

Other data which we consider striking are those which discriminate according to grades. As previously mentioned, students freely assign themselves to one of these categories (sufficient, good, outstanding). In this sense, there are very significant

differences between 'sufficient' and 'outstanding' students, as shown in the following graphs (Figures 2 and 3).

In both cases (Figures 2 and 3), the students with the best marks (outstanding) rated the activity more positively than the students with the worst marks (sufficient). This relationship is maintained in practically the entire survey, except for one result that we found noteworthy (Figure 4).

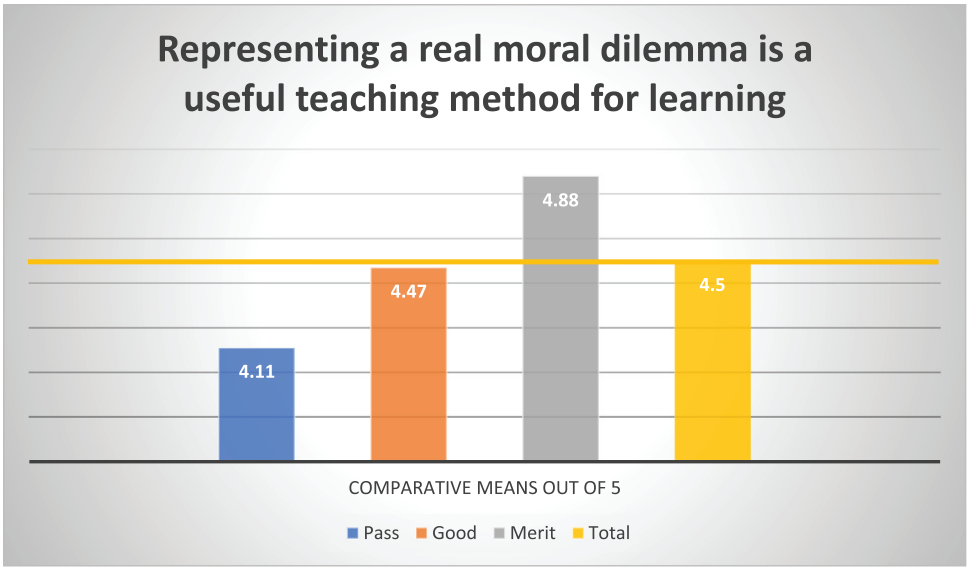

Figure 2. Comparative averages on dilemmas as a method of criticism and decision-making.

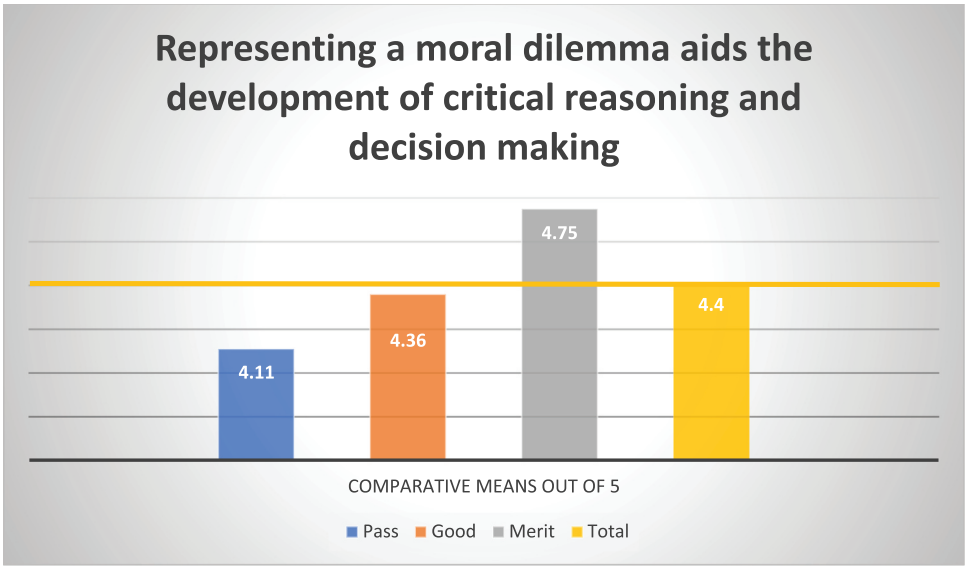

Figure 3. Comparative averages on adaptation of theoretical knowledge.

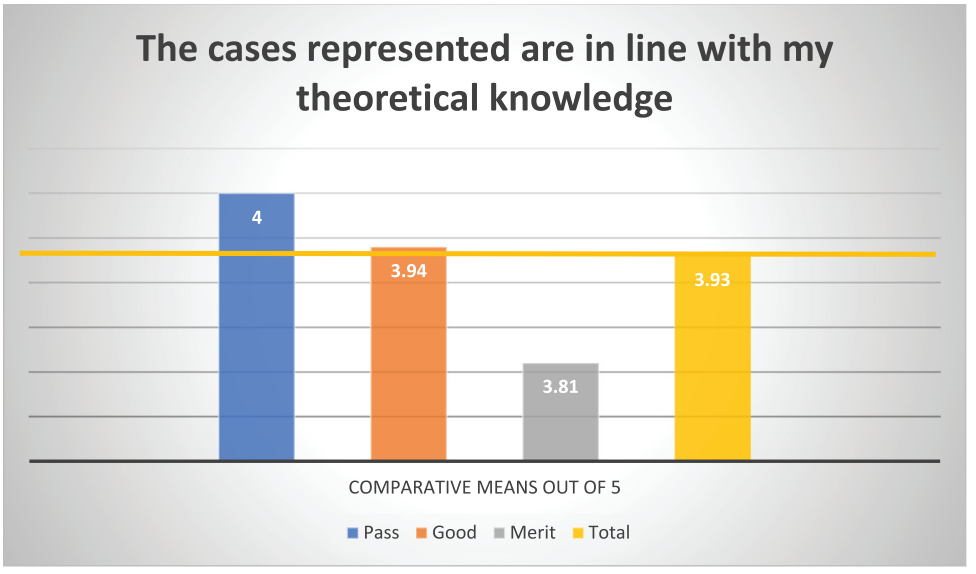

Figure 4. Comparative averages on adaptation of theoretical knowledge.

In this graph (Figure 4), students with a sufficient grade are extremely optimistic about their knowledge (4), compared to the doubts raised among students with an outstanding grade. This seems to be related to the ability to recognize the ambiguity and complexity inherent in any dilemma, as dilemmas may have no 'right' solution, or no solution at all.

The learning process also provided written and audiovisual material[4] generated with the participation of all the agents involved in the process, for incorporation into the subject.

(c) Observation

Thanks to the contributions of forum theater (Boal, 1979), the students have been able to investigate ethical dilemmas using the word and the body as a means of communication. This is an investigation in which students explore, through creativity, expressions that allow them to feel a connection with users, family members and social work professionals. The students' physical expressions and voices provided a vehicle for manifestations both imaginary and real where *otherness* (Levinas, 1997) with 'the Other' was made possible, recreating professional situations that have allowed them to connect to experiences of indignity/dignity felt by users during social intervention processes.

Discussion

During the 'table work' carried out by each working group, we applied Problem-Based Learning. Thanks to this technique, the students were able to establish connections with theoretical aspects that were related to the real situations included in

the case studies. The Study of Ethical Dilemmas made it possible to advance in the analysis and description of the cases from the perspective of Ethics Applied to Social Work. At the same time, ongoing debate on the multiple possibilities of response offered by Professional Ethics to the issues raised was always present. All of this, as Castro and Silva (2022) state, will enhance motivation, significant learning, the transfer and stimulation of critical, creative and integrative thinking at the level of knowledge.

The analysis of case studies, contextualized in the Social Work profession and based on the detection of dilemmas situated in concrete experiences (Reamer, 2017; Barsky, 2019; Banks, 2012, 2021) has allowed for an observation that in this case we can call *distanced*, due to the fact that the students are not present in the concrete situation. However, this situational study of each case has allowed us to reach a proximity that became more evident in the experimentation with forum theater.

The rehearsal of professional case studies during the forum theater generated a *heartfelt experience* in the students as they took on the main roles, giving rise to moments of extensive reflection in the classroom on ethical dilemmas as a category of the discipline, the relevant role of ethics in the profession and the importance of aspects such as emotions, the level of communication, the position of the professional and their degree of involvement according to the cases dealt with, etc (Mattison, 2000). As for the central role of emotions as an inseparable element of professional intervention, this was reflected in the expression of fears, frustrations or indifferences embodied by the students. Along these lines, the reproducible emotion in the case-scene triggered a dilemma in itself among a considerable number of students: how to manage emotions during the professional intervention (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

The incorporation of creativity as an element that opens up new avenues of active thinking in the classroom has been crucial in empowering students as participating learners (De Laine, 2000). An obvious example is narrative (Banks, 2021; Ricoeur, 1994) as a preparatory stage for forum theater performance. In this sense, the role reversal in which students become active participants in the narration of the physical writing of scenes resulted in a legitimization that is not accidental. It is part of liberatory pedagogy in which they are bringing their own experiences (Morris, 2021), their ways of thinking and above all their morals and ethical principles to the narration of the professional cases. In other words, it enables a dialogue that validates learning through the exchange between theorization, experiences, professional cases and, therefore, the involvement of all (students and teachers) in the knowledge that is constructed within the classroom praxis (Giroux, 2020).

Taking the classroom as a stage for the performance of professional scenes has allowed us to create a relational sphere (Nussbaum, 2003). By applying the forum theater technique, we have managed to replicate the central points of critical pedagogy in the university classroom (Freire, 1970, 2005; Giraux, 2020). In this way, the banking model of education is displaced by a liberating educational proposal where the student is no longer a passive subject and becomes a protagonist (Morris, 2021). This learning can be extrapolated to the context of social intervention where, as opposed to paternalistic models, models based on the autonomy of the person are valued, as professionals become companions of the experiences and decisions of the people affected (Barsky, 2019).

Through performance and representation, the reenactment of professional case studies (Banks, 2021; Reamer, 2018) also favored the development of individual and collective creative narratives (De Laine, 2000; McIntyre, 2007; Ricoeur, 1994). Each person shared alternatives to the dilemma and the situation presented in its entirety.

The theatrical performance in the forum allowed scenes to develop that then sparked a new improvisation (at the level of the performance) and different hypotheses to argue potential responses to the dilemma by assessing the possible consequences for all the people involved in the case (Foot, 2002).

One essential contribution is that the groups created spaces in which to test out alternative models of action to the dominant reality in the field of socio-educational intervention with disadvantaged groups. In the new scenario developed in this experience, the practice of theater as a participatory research methodology facilitates a type of productive interaction based on collective wisdom, generated from human experiences and narratives, which manage to connect the personal and subjective with the socio-historical context.

In short, we believe that the methodology used has helped them to acquire critical skills in the resolution of ethical dilemmas, although we do not know, and it would be interesting to know, how this will influence their future professional judgments.

Conclusions

The choice of the methodological proposal is based on the commitment of social work professionals to the ethical principles of Professional Ethics (Banks, 2021, 2021; Reamer, 1982; Salcedo, 1998). The novelty of this learning process is its eminently empirical and participatory nature, as it is based on the study of professional cases (Reamer, 2018), analyzed through the Problem-Based Learning Technique, which the group-class recreates by means of critical representation through Forum Theatre (Boal, 1979). It is based on the experience of working professionals with the aim of motivating students to acquire direct knowledge of professional ethics by playing a leading role in the teaching-learning process (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2020) through action in the study and analysis of Ethical Dilemmas (PBL) and their representation (TO). This proposal aims to provide, above all, an example of good practice in the acquisition of ethical competences in the university environment.

Students react very positively to teaching initiatives that place them in the center and are novel, especially those who have higher expectations or demands with regard to their degree. Students' ownership of the process facilitated both vocational training and the integration of theoretical contents, at least the possibility of expressing doubts about both.

This type of meaningful, reflective, critical and autonomous learning involves the acquisition of a tool not only for their professional future, but also on a personal level, in its rational, relational and affective aspects. The whole process allows for the development of communication skills, favors the transmission of opinions, as well as the ordering of ideas and the presentation of arguments to convince and mediate in conflicts, composing critical skills for the resolution of ethical dilemmas based on the principles of the IFSW (2018) and using the principles of bioethics as a tool.

Methods such as these encourage the active participation and emotional involvement of individuals in learning situations. Through 'felt experience', future professionals not only connect with their experiences, but also critically reflect on the responsibilities and consequences of their professional actions, better understanding their personal and contextual implications.

This type of reflective and critical learning is a valuable tool for future professionals to develop rational and relational aspects. It encourages the expression of opinions, teaches effective argumentation and a disposition for dialogue and collective deliberation, and demonstrates the critical skills necessary to face ethical dilemmas.

Notes

1. As Castro and Silva (2022, pp. 80–81) point out, PBL is a learning methodology that places the student at the center and which starts from an authentic problem situation. It has proven to be effective in the university context insofar as it prepares students for future professional action and further study, as well as generating motivation, learning significance, transfer, stimulating critical and creative thinking and integrating knowledge.
2. TO activities are used to represent incidents of institutional oppression and macro-systemic conflicts through theater (Boal, 1979). The aim is to build a space to foster critical discourse and promote community activism for social and political change, through the representation of real life, using it as a mechanism for understanding, addressing and resolving conflicts (Fantus, 2020). The main reason that justifies its choice is the existing confluence between theater and critical pedagogy thanks to the contributions of Paulo Freire to Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed (Baráuna & Motos, 2010). This type of learning methodology encourages the teacher/student/student pair to reflect critically (Shor & Freire, 1987) on the different professional responses to the ethical dilemmas posed.
3. A sample can be found at https://upotv.upo.es/video/62b969e0abe3c691518b4568
4. https://upotv.upo.es/video/62b969e0abe3c691518b4568 (Pill about the work done with students through the Theatre of the Oppressed). https://www.upo.es/dets/dossier-seminario-dialogos-creativos-ddhh-2-V.pdf (Dossier on Ethical Dilemmas in Social Work). https://upotv.upo.es/video/628620cdabe3c6abc58b4569 (Round table on ethical dilemmas and resolution strategies).

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