

How to enhance critical and reflexive practice in higher education. The case of the UPV Master's Degree in Development Cooperation

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How to cite: Calabuig-Tormo, C.; Fernández-Baldor, A.; & Fernández-Galiana, M. (2025). How to enhance critical and reflexive practice in higher education. The case of the UPV Master's Degree in Development Cooperation. In: 11th International Conference on Higher Education Advances (HEAd'25). Valencia, 17-20 June 2025. <https://doi.org/10.4995/HEAd25.2025.20182>

Abstract

Incorporating critical and reflexive practice in higher education is a relevant element to contribute to the formation not only of future professionals but also of global citizenship, in a world that requires profound transformations oriented to social and environmental justice. Based on previous research and experiences developed from the MsC Degree in Development Cooperation at the Universitat Politècnica de València (UPV), the paper presents a coordinated framework to connect classroom learning and internships, integrating ethical, political, and emotional dimensions into student development and considering the evaluative and follow-up elements. Findings emphasize the importance of institutional support, coordinated teaching and tutor engagement. For university managers, this research suggests that embedding reflexive and critical elements into curriculum and internship design can foster transformative learning, align with global justice principles, and better prepare students for professional environment characterized by complexity, uncertainty and power relations.

Keywords: *critical practice; reflexive process; higher education; internships; competences; capabilities.*

1. Introduction

The current global landscape is marked by deepening inequalities, ecosocial crisis and shifting international relations (Chancel et al., 2021; UNDP, 2020). Within this complexity, diverse and often conflicting paradigms coexist in education, including education for global citizenship (EGC), which stems from development education in international cooperation (Boni et al., 2020). The Dublin Declaration 2022 (GENE, 2022) highlights the need for a reflexive and critical education that addresses historical legacies, global power dynamics, and curriculum decolonization. Pais and Costa (2017) identify two ideological currents in EGC: one rooted in

critical democracy, emphasizing ethical values and active citizenship, and another aligned with market logic. This work aligns with the critical democracy approach, challenging university educators to address contradictions in practice.

This communication stems from years of experience by the teaching team of the Master's Degree in Development Cooperation (MUCD) at the Universitat Politècnica de València (UPV), guiding students' internships through a critical global citizenship lens (Boni et al., 2017; Calabuig et al., 2018; Delgado-Caro et al. 2023). These processes go beyond applying knowledge and skills, focusing instead on reflexive, critical, and attitudinal dimensions aligned with transformative cooperation. Studies have shown that critical and reflexive practice can be fostered under specific conditions and mechanisms. The challenge is to enhance these learnings further, emphasizing evaluation and monitoring throughout the degree, offering insights for the university community.

Focusing on critical and reflexive practice, this incorporates a change of focus in professional practice, since it raises the coexistence of different dimensions related to cultural, social, contextual, political and personal issues that inevitably come into play. Elements that, to be deployed in action "on the ground", must first be demonstrated and understood by the students

2. Critical and reflexive practice

Critical practice involves professionals considering the complex, political nature of development processes, including power relations and political influences. To better understand it, we differentiate between "critical vision" and "critical practice" (Boni et al., 2017). Critical vision rejects hegemonic development thinking, addressing injustices and inequalities, while critical practice requires active engagement, which doesn't happen automatically. Support during internships is essential to overcome the feeling of "impossibility of change." The "reflexive" component (Eyben, 2014) adds a personal and emotional dimension, urging individuals to recognize their contradictions, privileges and colonial past, aligning with restorative justice and acknowledging the partiality of their perspectives.

In this study, we align with a critical approach that emphasizes the political and complex nature of development, focusing on power relations (McCourt and Gulrajani, 2010; Eyben et al., 2015). Cooperation master's programs should enhance skills to navigate complex, power-laden contexts with openness, flexibility, and adaptability (Pearson, 2010). This is particularly relevant during internships, often in Global South contexts, where students learn to "understand, unveil and move in complex contexts embedded in power relations" (Calabuig et al., 2018, p. 1429).

In summary, critical and reflexive practice in development cooperation requires competencies such as political commitment, accountability, understanding power dynamics, navigating

complexity, generating alternatives for change and fostering social transformation. It also demands critical self-awareness, adaptability and constant reflection (Belda et al., 2012).

3. Context and case study

3.1. Characteristics of the MUCD

The MUCD is a 90 ECTS official degree, belonging to the branch of Social Sciences, which has been incorporating educational innovation in its teaching at UPV from 2011. It has a first year of classroom teaching of 60 ECTS, divided into five major subjects regarding development concepts, international cooperation system, research methodologies or project cycle management, and a second year of 30 ECTS for external internships and the Final Master's Thesis (as shows figure 1). The speciality of the master is Project and Processes Management.

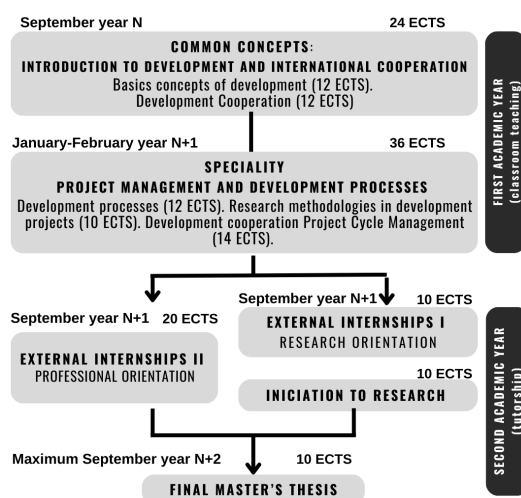


Figure 1. Structure of the MsC's degree in Development Cooperation by UPV. Own elaboration

The teaching actions aim to bring students as close as possible to their real practice, either with the presence of agents and entities in the classroom, working on new and current theories and approaches or carrying out visits in the different subjects. In fact, in the subject of Development Processes action learning (AL) is carried out, a methodology from the Action-Participatory Research family that is applied in neighbourhoods in the city of Valencia. In AL, students tackle complex problems and learn by exploring new opportunities, rather than applying the routines of pre-established systems (Pedler and Burgoyne, 2008). From the MCUD we recognise in this type of learning in real contexts also an ethical dimension (Calabuig et al., 2018) that connects in a very direct way with what is experienced in the subsequent practices or internships of the second year. For the MUCD, these external compulsory internships have a duration between

500 or 250 hours. They aim for students to develop capabilities and skills for a possible future critical practice as development and cooperation professionals. Regarding the group, every academic course 23-25 new students begin the first year of presential teaching, as there are normally another 20-25 students that develop their external internships in Spain or internationally.

3.2. Motivation of the study

The MUCD has long aimed to foster meaningful learning in students both inside and outside the classroom. However, there is now a need to integrate and explicitly connect the compulsory second-year internships with the first-year coursework, an area that has been underdeveloped. The role of tutors (from both the UPV and host entities) is crucial in facilitating critical and reflexive practice. To address this, we propose exploring these issues from the start of each academic year, establishing an initial baseline and including the entire student cohort to avoid bias. Previous studies focused mainly on students assumed to have developed critical practice, missing the opportunity for a control group. While various actions have been implemented in the first and second years, they lack enough connection and tutor involvement.

4. Methodology

The research has been approached from a constructivist paradigm and with a mainly qualitative focus (Corbetta, 2007). The methodology used for the study has been divided into four stages, with different specific objectives, given that the process combines a more investigative dimension with an eminently practical one (improving the MUCD procedures not only to favour the acquisition of critical practice in students but also, in the future, to have more rigorous evaluations that allow us to confirm the usefulness of the approaches used). We will focus our discussion in stages I, II and III. With regard to ethical issues, all participants have signed the informed consent to participate in the study and their data have been treated with strict anonymity. On the other hand, the study has been funded by the Institute of Education Sciences of the UPV, through a Project for Educational Innovation from 2023 to 2025.

The methodology designed and applied consisted of the following phases:

STAGE I. DIAGNOSIS, to review the mechanisms already put in place by the MCAD about the approach to critical and reflexive practice (definition, dimensions, implementation) in both academic years. The techniques were mainly documentary review and one focus group meeting with teaching staff, master's degree students and pre-doctoral students researching development issues and learning processes in higher education. Six teachers and four students actively participated in this stage and the next, discussing and debating the mechanisms put in place.

STAGE II. DESIGN OF IMPROVEMENT ACTIONS, with the purpose of defining coordinated procedures to incorporate the postulates and dimensions of critical and reflexive practice, both in first-year teaching and in second-year external internships. Also to define procedures for the assessment of critical and reflexive practice during both years (see figure 2).

STAGE III: IMPLEMENTATION OF MECHANISMS AND ASSESSMENT, to identify the degree of student reflexivity with respect to the dimensions of critical and reflexive practice. Between the mechanism included (see figure 2), there has been possible to apply the personal reflexivity exercise and the individual external internship report.

5. Results

The main results of a year and a half study's progress are exposed below. Some results have been considered as outcomes because bring us a valuable information to improve the new and old mechanism to promote the critical and reflexive practice in the MUCD.

5.1. Outputs of the process

5.1.1. Regarding master's procedurals

With regard to the procedures available in the Master's degree, the work carried out has made it possible to better connect the different subjects of the first year with each other and with regard to the second year of internships. Figure 2 shows the dashboard or roadmap that has been designed specifically to coordinate subjects, incorporating techniques and evaluation mechanisms in both the first and second years, some of which are currently being developed:

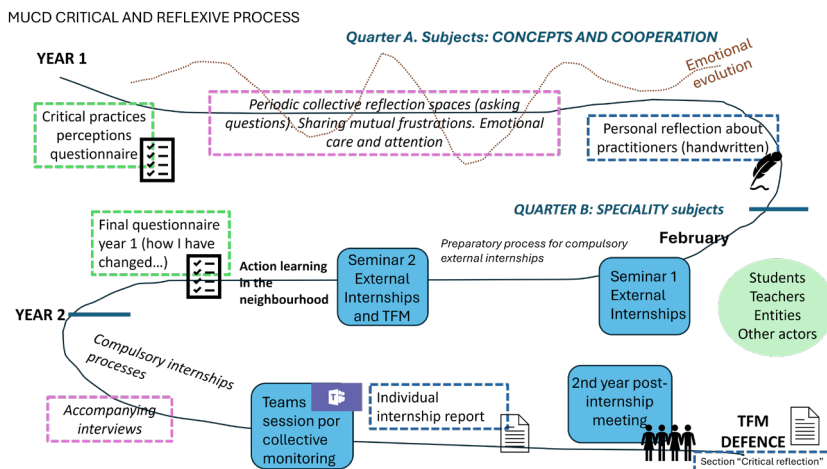


Figure 2. Original dashboard created to improve the coordination inside the MUCD. Own elaboration

On the other hand, essential documents have been reviewed and modified, such as the explanatory dossier of external internships and the personal reflection exercise that students carry out in the first year. This exercise includes specific questions related to what they consider they should be like as practitioners in the future if they wish to promote transformative cooperation; what attitudes and skills they value as essential; or how they consider they should face the contradictions, complexities and power relations in their professional practice.

5.1.2. Regarding new mechanism to evaluate perceptions and learnings

A questionnaire has been elaborated and will be distributed in spring 2025 to the host organisations, mainly Development NGOs. The questionnaire gathers the items and variables expected to be identified in a critical and reflexive practice and allows us to have the vision of the host entities of internships (this questionnaire incorporates elements that are being included in a second questionnaire, aimed specifically to students, to be distributed on June 2025). Among the questions, one refers to what abilities the entities consider as essential that a future professional in development cooperation develops, such as: engaging in social change, knowing how to live with and value differences, navigating complexity or recognising and managing power relations. Another question refers to the degree of importance that the institution gives to certain attitudes of students in internships, such as commitment, solidarity, critical reflection, non-conformism, resilience or the willingness to take a stand for justice.

5.2. Outcomes of the process

5.2.1. Regarding teachers' labour

There has been a strong involvement of a large part of the teaching staff of the MUCD and the collaborating doctoral students, although greater coordination is needed in this respect. The existence of an educational innovation team in the MUCD has undoubtedly favoured the first stage of the study and will do so in the third. The great challenge is how to incorporate teachers who are less involved in such as this research, or who do not necessarily subscribe to the approach of critical and reflexive practice, even though their work as internship tutors.

5.2.2. Regarding learnings in students

A total of 25 first-year students of course 2024-2025 and 23 students who have completed their external internships in 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 will receive the new questionnaire on June 2025. Regarding the other mechanisms, 22 and 23 first-year students have made freely a handwritten individual reflection on December 2023 and 2024, respectively. On the other hand, the individual internship report has been applied, which contains specific sections that question them about key moments in the process, so that they can reflect critically and compare their experiences with their previous fears, expectations, as well as with the learnings in the MUCD first year. The evidence of the application of both mechanisms are currently being analysed in

depth. On the one hand, 21 students who did their internships in 2023-2024 and another 3 ones in the current academic year 2024-2025 express in their reports items that reinforce the evidence obtained from previous research. Firstly, the ethical-reflexive questioning, the immersion in a different socio-cultural environment and the accompaniment of processes and communities are the most valued aspects by the students after having completed their external internships. Secondly, the process is valued as enriching and has allowed them to learn in a real way what it means to work in cooperation; however, the teachers' overload and the limitation that this entails for even greater accompaniment is evident. Thirdly, the skills linked to personal development, such as the social circle, take on an important dimension, being a determining factor when it comes to assessing the experience and providing resources and support to students in the different changes that the internship experience may entail. Finally, the attitudes expressed by the students in their handwritten individual reflection show elements of critical and reflexive practice and have been, among others: empathy, deconstruction, humility, active listening, kindness, accompanying, building trust, respect and understanding of other cultures; however, attitudes such as recognising the complexity of development processes or accepting uncertainty (although they do mention resilience) are not so present at the start of the MUCD.

6. Conclusions

The study carried out, although it has not yet been completed, provides valuable evidence to question the approaches adopted by the master's degree, the mechanisms developed and the coordination between subjects. Firstly, the contents worked on in the classroom, the meeting spaces and the accompaniment given to the students are key for the development of critical and reflexive practice; students demonstrate the development of agency, the consideration of power issues and the implementation of reflexivity, according to Boni et al. (2017). On the one hand, the study makes us question the conceptual working assumptions, reflecting on education for critical global citizenship and whether we are consistent with a truly transformative, decolonial approach that challenges a system that is basically driven by the logic of the market (Peris and Costa, 2017) as we previously reflected in Delgado-Caro et al. (2024). Secondly, it allows us to identify the critical points of the process and to what extent it's possible to achieve a coherent roadmap for the interconnection between first- and second-year subjects, well dimensioned in terms of time and not excessively burdensome for students, teaching staff and the external entities involved. Thirdly, the study highlights the importance of continuing to focus on critical and reflexive practice, but developing more and better qualitative and quantitative evaluation mechanisms to reinforce the rigorousness of the evidence and to allow new learning to emerge from these processes. In this sense, the research aims to inform higher education managers to reflect about this alternative way to conceive more reflexive internships at different degrees. Finally, and from an ethical perspective, the study has allowed us to reflect self-critically on the role of university teaching staff and their commitment to educational processes as Boni et al.

(2020) propose, especially highlighting the often forgotten final phase of returning research processes to the people who have been active subjects in them; we are referring in particular to our students, to whom we owe it to them to accompany their learning process.

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