

Participatory democracy experience embedded in a university training space in France

Experiencia de democracia participativa inserta en un espacio de formación universitaria en Francia

Experiência de democracia participativa inserida em um espaço de formação universitária na França

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RESUMO

O objetivo desta contribuição é trabalhar a hipótese de que a criação de espaços pedagógicos, como os workshops intermediários resultantes da Convenção Cidadã Estudantil (CCE) em uma universidade no leste de Paris, gera, apesar de certas limitações, uma educação para a democracia participativa universitária. Questionar a experiência participativa e deliberativa dos estudantes permite questionar a natureza do seu envolvimento e a ressonância com a sua cidadania, e saber se essa experiência é formativa no sentido em que constitui uma fonte de aquisição e aprendizagem de conhecimentos, competências e comportamentos em relação a uma forma de cidadania democrática. Por meio de discussões e da aplicação de um questionário sobre os ganhos da experiência resultante de sua participação em uma CCE, os estudantes (n=43) questionam uma práxis instituinte (Royer, 2019) de espaços pedagógicos na universidade, o que constitui a experiência (Schwartz, 2004) e sua continuidade (Dewey, 1968 [2018]) com o objetivo de traduzir a ação pedagógica (Boutet, 2016) como uma fonte de aprendizagem e desenvolvimento (Kolb, 1984) e de emancipação de um encaixe das práticas pedagógicas em configurações sociais, históricas e políticas. Produzidos por sua participação, deliberação e transação, os resultados mostram que eles participam do estabelecimento de novos projetos cuja implementação esbarra na centralização e concentração de poderes na universidade. Por fim, mesmo que nem todos os estudantes percebam que cultivar um sentimento

de pertencimento parece ser o motor de muitas iniciativas em favor da democracia participativa na universidade, entre as universidades, em grande escala, isso poderia influenciar no futuro as políticas públicas de ensino superior.

Palavras-chave: Experiência; Democracia participativa; Formação; Convenção cidadã estudantil.

ABSTRACT

This contribution aims to explore the hypothesis that the creation of pedagogical spaces such as intermediary workshops arising from the Student Citizens' Convention (CCE) at a university in eastern Paris can foster, despite certain limitations, a form of education for participatory democracy in higher education. Examining students' participatory and deliberative experience makes it possible to question the nature of their engagement, its resonance with their citizenship, and to assess whether this experience is formative insofar as it constitutes a source for acquiring and developing knowledge, skills, and behavioral competencies relating to a democratic form of citizenship. Through discussions and the administration of a questionnaire on the outcomes of their participation in a CCE, students ($n = 43$) interrogate an instituting praxis (Royer, 2019) of pedagogical spaces at the university, which constitutes an "experience" (Schwartz, 2004) and its continuity (Dewey, 1968 [2018]), with the aim of translating pedagogical action (Boutet, 2016) into a source of learning, development (Kolb, 1984), and emancipation from the embeddedness of pedagogical practices within social, historical, and political configurations. The findings, stemming from their participation, deliberation, and negotiation, show that students contribute to the establishment of new projects, whose implementation nevertheless collides with the centralization and concentration of power within the university. Finally, even though not all students perceive that cultivating a sense of belonging serves as a driving force for initiatives in favor of participatory democracy within and across universities, at a larger scale this dynamic could influence future higher education public policies.

Keywords: Experience; Participatory democracy; Training; Student citizens' convention.

RESUMEN

Esta contribución pretende explorar la hipótesis de que la creación de espacios pedagógicos —como los talleres intermedios surgidos de la Convención de Ciudadanos Estudiantiles (CCE) en una universidad del este de París— genera, a pesar de ciertas limitaciones, una forma de educación para la democracia participativa en la educación superior. Examinar la experiencia participativa y deliberativa de los estudiantes permite cuestionar la naturaleza de su compromiso, su relación con su ciudadanía y evaluar si esta experiencia es formativa, en la medida en que constituye una fuente para la adquisición y el desarrollo de conocimientos, habilidades y competencias conductuales relacionadas con una ciudadanía democrática. A través

de debates y la administración de un cuestionario sobre los resultados de su participación en un CCE, estudiantes (n = 43) interrogan una praxis instituyente (Royer, 2019) de los espacios pedagógicos en la universidad, que constituye una "experiencia" (Schwartz, 2004) y su continuidad (Dewey, 1968 [2018]), con el objetivo de traducir la acción pedagógica (Boutet, 2016) en una fuente de aprendizaje, desarrollo (Kolb, 1984) y emancipación de la inserción de las prácticas pedagógicas en las configuraciones sociales, históricas y políticas. Los hallazgos, derivados de su participación, deliberación y negociación, muestran que los estudiantes contribuyen al establecimiento de nuevos proyectos, cuya implementación, sin embargo, choca con la centralización y concentración del poder dentro de la universidad. Finalmente, si bien no todos los estudiantes perciben que cultivar un sentido de pertenencia sirve como motor de iniciativas a favor de la democracia participativa dentro y entre las universidades, a mayor escala esta dinámica podría influir en las futuras políticas públicas de educación superior.

Palabras clave: Experiencia; Democracia participativa; Formación; Convención ciudadana estudiantil.

1. Introduction

In the Anthropocene age and facing various political, social, cultural, and ecological crises confronting educational institutions, and universities in particular, establishment of a student citizens' convention seeks to address the urgent need to strengthen the modes of recognition of student engagement. In this context, a network of deliberative universities has been formed, bringing together nearly twenty academic and research institutions¹, mainly located in Europe and particularly in France. Since 2023, collaboration among these higher education organizations has supported the development of deliberative processes inside them. As of 2019, for the first time in France, a university in Eastern Paris took the initiative to establish this type of convention, based on the voluntary participation of its students over the course of a semester. In this way, learners had the opportunity to engage in discussions and deliberations, confronting their representations while remaining within a dynamic that enabled them to experience principles of participatory democracy in practice, by questioning institutional policies on issues that directly concerned them.

This research was therefore designed around the implementation of a Student Citizens' Convention (SCC) at this university in Eastern Paris, with the aim of analyzing the outcomes of this experience in relation to the principles of participatory democracy. Hence, participation in university life requires sharing and pooling of particular interests and constitutes a pedagogical orientation that supports training initiatives aimed at fostering collective dynamics in favor of more inclusive teaching.

A few number of questions arose by themselves, such as how do students come to participate in learning spaces where they experiment with the principles of participatory democracy? What do they learn from the confrontation of ideas? How do they negotiate and engage with ideas about which they express disagreement?

For this purpose, this contribution aims to examine the hypothesis that the creation of pedagogical spaces, such as intermediate workshops stemming from the Student Citizens' Convention (SCC), generates, despite certain limitations, an education in policies that are consubstantial with participatory democracy at the university. Exploring students' participatory and deliberative experience within university life makes it possible to determine whether it constitutes a source of acquisition and learning of knowledge, skills, and behavioral competencies in relation to a form of democratic citizenship.

2. Research Context

Collective deliberation requires each participant to adopt a position that enables them to take an active part in discussions and exchanges of ideas, during which students confront arguments, challenge representations, and cultivate a principle of tolerance to the point of accepting to reconsider their previously firmly held views. Through the confrontation of ideas, the main aim is to place each participant's argumentative construction under debate, or to deconstruct sophistries, just in order to collectively assess what the verbal articulation of an idea can generate in relation to a strategy of persuasion. During the debates, student groups generate ideas or arguments and evaluate possible options in order to make a choice or solve a problem. "The deliberative process presupposes free public reasoning, equality, the inclusion of diverse interests, and mutual respect" (Frenkiel, 2025, p. 56). However, despite the random selection process used to constitute student groups, a lack of familiarity with certain themes (such as energy; infrastructures and mobility; implication and the fight against discrimination; democracy and citizenship; learning differently for the future; healthy and sustainable food; and common health—natural and human environments) may lead to forms of inhibition, or even withdrawal, which in turn limits participation in the debates. The research context is thus situated within the development of the 2024 Student Citizens' Convention (SCC), entitled "*The University of the Future – Acting for a Just Ecological and Social Transformation.*"

For this convention, students from all components of the university were invited to participate and to engage in a participatory democratic process aimed at co-constructing the university's ecological transition. Deliberative process, which lasted no more than two months (September–October 2024, November–December 2024), was structured around moments of training, exposure to diverse opinions and expertise, deliberation under favorable conditions, reflection, investigation, and the formulation of orientations and concrete actions aimed at fostering a more ecological and inclusive society at the scale of the university. It is worth noting that the SCC unfolded in three phases: the launch (3 days, October 2024), the intermediate workshops (October–December 2024), and the closing session (2 days, December 2024).

2.1. Intermediate Workshops of the SCC and the University Learning Space

Thematic groups to which students were assigned were themselves divided into subgroups of ten to twelve participants, each accompanied by facilitators. The purpose of the subgroup deliberations was to produce concrete proposals for action at the end of the three-day launch phase. The closing phase aimed to provide a general restitution of the work carried out during the intermediate workshops and to refine the recommendations emerging from the deliberations on each theme. Students then prioritized, through majority judgment, the major proposals as well as those that needed to be revised or discarded. The final proposals were completed and sometimes merged, and were then discussed with the various stakeholders involved. It should be noted that this restitution of results was organized in the presence of both the university's decision-making bodies and representatives of the local authorities with which the university has established partnership relations.

Intermediate workshops were therefore intended to continue the reflection on the proposals retained at the end of the initial launch phase. However, the reflective dimension required for analyzing the experience developed by students within the framework of the SCC has led to the creation of a space for debate and reflection, with the aim of preparing future deliberations regarding the possible evolution of the next SCC in 2025. This is why the intermediate workshop, embedded within a training pathway at the Master's level in Educational Sciences and serving as the framework of our research, was entitled "*Meaning and Experience of Participatory and Deliberative Democracy within the SCC 2024.*"

This intermediate workshop, designed to debate the meaning of individual and collective participation and deliberation within the framework of university democracy promoted by the SCC, was informed by results and analyses produced by students from several academic components. These included students enrolled in a Master's program in Educational Sciences, specializing in International Project Expertise and Engineering (EIPi) within the UFR of Education and Social Sciences and STAPS (SESS STAPS), who worked alongside those from the Master's program in Teaching, Education, and Training (MEEF) for primary school teachers at the National Higher Institute for Teaching and Education (INSPE), as well as several students from the Institute of Political Studies (IEP). The latter were particularly involved in the SCC, as their participation was made compulsory through integration into the curricula of this Training and Research Unit (UFR).

3. Conceptual Framework

Our conceptual framework was grounded, on the one hand, in instituting praxis as a key issue in the democratic reinvention of pedagogical spaces within the university (Royer, 2019), and, on the other hand, in the notion of lived experience (Schwartz, 2004) and its continuity (Dewey, 1968 [2018]). This perspective sought to interpret pedagogical action (Boutet, 2016) as a source of learning and development (Kolb, 1984), as well as a means of emancipating pedagogical practices from their embeddedness within social, historical, and political configurations.

Against the backdrop of the protest movements of May 1968, the Edgard Faure Act, promulgated in November 1968, brought about a major reconfiguration of governance in French higher education. Article 13 states that “public establishments of a scientific and cultural character shall be administered by an elected council and headed by a president elected by that council. Teaching and research units shall be administered by an elected council and headed by a director elected by that council [...] In a spirit of participation, councils shall be composed of teachers, researchers, students, and members of the non-teaching staff.” The Act thus marked a significant turning point in the development of more democratic forms of governance and institutional organisation within French higher education.

This orientation was further embodied in the creation of the University of Vincennes in 1969 under a special derogatory status that established it as an experimental institution. This status enabled the university to organise its teaching with a substantial degree of autonomy and to innovate both pedagogically and institutionally by placing teachers, teacher-researchers, and students at the centre of organisational and decision-making processes (Berger, Courtois, & Perrigault, 2015). Its guiding principles drew on the legacy of the popular universities of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which were typically organised as associations and therefore grounded in elective and representative democratic practices, while also embracing the emancipatory pedagogy associated with Paulo Freire (1968/1974).

Since then, higher education has undergone profound transformations that have progressively reshaped teaching practices and fostered the development of university pedagogy. These changes have been driven by broader social and societal developments, including massification, the expansion of digital technologies, the rise of artificial intelligence, changing relationships to knowledge, new aspirations, increased student mobility, and the diversification of pedagogical approaches. At the same time, new forms of teaching have emerged alongside renewed modes of assessment, prompting a closer alignment between pedagogical practices and participatory, if not democratic, modes of governance.

Indeed, approaching the experience of university democracy from the perspective of a learning space requires clarifying the realities lived by students through their participation in such a space, which is intended to function as a site of learning grounded in a pedagogy aimed at developing the competencies necessary for democratic life within the university. Royer’s work (2019) shows that “against the backdrop of the dissolution of the specificity of the political sphere, the experience that each individual may have of participating in the civic sphere seems to diminish further each day” (p. 37). Thus, confronted with a dominant social imaginary shaped by the worlds of entrepreneurship and neuroscience, students in Educational Sciences, as well as in Political Science, encountered a naturalisation of power relations. This is why their engagement in the public sphere resonated with their desire for emancipation from a behaviourism insidiously imposed by the political and economic functioning of French society.

Moreover, the “harmful effects on citizens’ everyday democratic experience are further reinforced by the injunction to innovate, by the call for an accelerated pace in the development of so-called ‘new’ technologies... This injunction contributes to making it unthinkable to conceive the evolution of the social sphere in terms of conflict: technological innovation, in fact, takes the place of social progress” (Royer, 2019, p. 38). In addition, several transformations have reduced student power as a result of successive reforms in university governance, particularly the 2007 LRU law and, more recently, the successive mergers of institutions, in which the diminished role of student organisations on governing boards has favored actors external to the academic community. Students also observed a decline in traditional union structures, and their involvement in the democratic life of the university raised questions about the forms of competition generated by comparison with other, more “valued” forms of engagement (Stuppia & Haute, 2021).

Furthermore, students declared themselves attached both to the etymology and to the most widespread definitions of democracy as “government of the people, by the people.” By transposing this to the university context, they argued that it should entail a governance of the institution by its representatives, among whom students should be more adequately represented. In this way, the principle of representative democracy is called into question, giving greater weight to participatory democracy. This points to the necessity of making democracy “genuinely” participatory, which, as Pourtois and Pitseys (2017, p. 30) argue, “would require inventing new practices and new procedures enabling citizens to be actively involved in the making of public decisions.” By analogy, in the case of our study population, the pedagogical space—particularly the intermediate workshop—embodied the idea of participatory democracy insofar as it most often sought to involve students, who were and still are also citizens, as stakeholders in the shaping of public policies. Indeed, they were directly concerned by participatory budgets, neighbourhood councils, citizens’ assemblies, and by the political orientations of the institutions in which they completed internships as part of their academic curriculum.

« The learning space in which students work on their representations and debate the validity of their arguments provides an opportunity to analyse the more or less formal “rules” underlying the functioning, structuring, and organisation of the university. Moreover, the outcomes of discussions and deliberations may corroborate the idea that, when a practice aligns with heteronomous social norms—externally determined by expert knowledge—it tends to conform to the social institution, thereby functioning as a mechanism for the reproduction of that very institution. Yet a practice may also serve as a powerful means of internalising of new norms or even generate new rules, such that the heterogeneity of practices and their potential for conflict become valuable indicators of the quality of a democracy, particularly when reflecting on the timing and conditions of their institutionalization” (Royer, 2019, p. 39).

With regard to experience in relation to training, Schwartz’s work offered a distinctive perspective insofar as it enables an understanding of training strategies, since questioning the formative dimension of experience entails the principle of consubstantiality. Indeed, while experience allows for reflection on its formative character, the formative dimension, in turn, fosters an analytical and reflexive gaze

upon experience. Each, thus provides the means to reflect upon the other, reciprocally. Thus, *“for the question of the formative role of experience to have meaning, it is necessary to posit a polar opposition—that is, both an opposition and a continuity, a possibility of articulation between what might constitute knowledge, academic knowledge (which can be transmitted through concepts), and something that would also have the dimension of knowledge, on the side of experience, but without holding the same status... If they are not genuinely different, the question of whether experience is formative leads to a tautology; if they are radically different, one cannot ‘form’ the other”* (Schwartz, 2004, p.12). Thus, by participating in this intermediate workshop, students sought to valorize their experience in the service of a more inclusive and harmonious society. They thereby wished to defend an experience of engagement conceived positively, insofar as collective interest prevails over individual interests, and can be understood as an indispensable complement to understanding, essential to social life. Moreover, democracy here implied the idea that students would resolve their common problems more effectively together than in isolation, each otherwise confronted with an abyss of perplexities or delegating their participation to an authority sometimes scarcely representative of their interests. Thus, democracy could rest upon a belief in the capacity of shared experience to pursue common objectives: “So stated, democracy is belief in the ability of human experience to generate the aims and methods by which further experience will grow in ordered richness” (Dewey, 1939, p. 229).

Students’ will may be interpreted in light of what Schwartz referred to as the Kantian separation between knowledge and experience: *“It is knowledge itself that is bound to experience, that unfolds within experience... What Hegel calls knowledge, absolute knowledge, is only accessible retrospectively, once history has unfolded its different moments, and thus cannot be anticipated”* (2004, p. 14). In Dewey (2018 [1916]), his pedagogical theory may be summarised in three principles such as thought is experience, every experience is educative, and education is the continuous recognition of experience. As with students, for Dewey, the very nature of experience tests those who, consequently, may undergo the effects it generates. In other words, when pedagogical activity extends over time and the experience of learning democratic principles, principles that govern students’ interactions, particularly during discussion and subsequently throughout deliberation, unfolds, it may be experienced as constraining or even endured by some of them. When the change in thought produced by argumentative exchanges, that is, when the outcome of individual and collective action “is reflected in a change that occurs within us, the simple flow becomes imbued with meaning. We learn something” (2018, p.193). Boutet’s (2016) work highlighted the pedagogical intent of conceiving the learning of democracy as inherently experiential, through an educational approach that sought to reduce the formalist constraints of a learning process limited solely to understanding and accumulating knowledge. To follow Dewey’s principles, this involves a transaction between the human being and their physical and social environment, while anticipating the lack of continuity in experience, whether academic or beyond the realm of higher education, which belongs to a process of learning or inquiry in research. Decision-making must be based on team consensus. According to Blanquet (2010), the logic of “exchange sessions in the form of daily reviews constitutes a means of reinforcing the idea that

the child develops and learns more when gaining a sense of the values of mutual cooperation and the importance of working for the good of a community” (p.25). At the level of student engagement, this logic is reflected in their willingness to cooperate for a benefit envisioned less for themselves than for future generations, situating their project of transforming higher education institutions within a long-term perspective dictated by the temporalities inherent to any institutional change. “Once again, it is possible to establish close connections between a pedagogical practice (project-based pedagogy) and a philosophy of education, namely that of Dewey” (Boutet, 2016, p.26).

Finally, with reference to Kolb’s (1984) theory of experiential learning, the intermediate workshop was structured according to a learning process closely aligned with the work of Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget. Our research hypothesis rests on the idea that experiential learning and its different phases are experienced by students through the functioning and organization of this workshop: by engaging in concrete experience through peer interaction, by being prompted by the teaching staff to undertake reflective observation, by developing thought through the analysis and confrontation of arguments, and by extending active experimentation in order to consider the transferability of the results generated in this setting.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Participants

Our methodological approach relied on administering a questionnaire to students (33), focusing on variables drawn from the conceptual framework to explore their participatory and deliberative experience within university life, in the context of the fourth Student Citizens’ Convention (CCE). This experience was considered a source for acquiring knowledge, skills, and behavioral competencies related to a form of democratic citizenship; the data were complemented by insights from the participant observation of a teacher-researcher. The training scheme, organized as an intermediate workshop within the framework of a Student Citizens’ Convention (CCE), was aimed at underprivileged students from diverse academic backgrounds and varied economic, social, and cultural origins, with half of the participants coming from foreign countries. The sample therefore consisted of 33 students enrolled in the ‘Expertise, Engineering, and International Projects’ pathway of the Master’s program in Educational Sciences (first and second year), including 8 male and 25 female students, aged between 21 and 41, originating from several continents (Latin America, Africa, and Europe).

4.2 Participant-observation stance

In addition to administering a questionnaire, one teacher-researcher, acting as pedagogical coordinator of the EIPI programme, facilitated the workshop with the explicit aim of securing the participation of all students, while paying particular attention to those from other academic units in order to ensure a balanced distribution of

speaking time. A second teacher-researcher was responsible for constituting the groups and for keeping field notes on the verbal exchanges and their evaluation. These notes captured both the convergences and divergences that emerged around proposals for improvement and the processes through which ideas were subsequently translated into action through project monitoring. These roles were ultimately alternated within the same experimental setting.

4.3 Data Collection and Analysis Approach

Administration of a questionnaire made it possible to build an initial corpus of data based on the answers provided by the students to the following questions: Among the six (6) themes, which thematic workshop did you take part in? What is your perception of the exchange of ideas within this thematic workshop? Did you perceive any barriers (obstacles) to your participation? If yes, could you describe them? Did you perceive any facilitators that supported your participation? If yes, could you describe them? How do you view your own participation in the exchange of ideas? How do you view the deliberation within this thematic workshop? Did you perceive any barriers (obstacles) to the deliberation process? If yes, could you describe them? Did you perceive any facilitators in the deliberation process? If yes, could you describe them? How do you view your own participation in the deliberation process? How do you view the restitution of the thematic workshop in which you took part? Did you perceive any barriers (obstacles) to the restitution process? If yes, could you describe them? Did you perceive any facilitators in the restitution process? If yes, could you describe them? How do you view your own participation in the restitution process? Finally, how would you synthetically describe your overall experience of the exchange of ideas, deliberation, and restitution in relation to your participation in the CCE activities?

This initial corpus became the subject of confrontations, discussions, and deliberations between these 33 students and about ten students from other faculties (IEP and INSPE), with similar profiles, who were also motivated to enhance the recognition of the experience gained from their participation in the CCE.

The excerpts drawn from these two corpora were selected following an approach inspired by a lexical measure perspective, based on the observation of recurring occurrences characterizing the comparative variables of the content derived both from the responses to the aforementioned questions and from the consensuses reached by the students. The most significant verbatim excerpts were selected on the basis of a confirmed repetition of the relationships between freedom of expression and the shared representation of ideas, expressed through the articulation of experience. These elements characterize a process essential to emancipation made possible by learning the principles of participatory democracy, and all excerpts were anonymised. These relationships refer to comparative variables such as the expression of one's own ideas, the deepening of knowledge, the confrontation with alternative ways of understanding the conditions of debate and decision-making, ways of thinking and working among students for the benefit of the common good, and the apprehension of the world. Together, these factors helped identify triggers for the capacity to speak out and to emancipate oneself from prevailing norms.

5. Results

5.1 A Duality Shaped by the Difficulties and the Successes of the Dispositif

Ultimately, the most significant responses regarding the synthetic description that students could provide of their experience with idea debates, deliberation, and restitution—within the framework of their participation in the activities of the CCE—pointed to a certain duality:

“My experience in the activities of the CCE provided me with the opportunity to participate actively in debates and to reflect on ideas related to the issues raised within the group. These discussions enabled the group to create a space for attentive listening and acceptance of ideas, as well as an arena for the exchange of experiences and information. During the deliberation process, I came to understand the importance of consensus within the group, so that progress could be made in an organized manner and ideas could be assessed while establishing solutions according to their feasibility. Throughout this experience, I was able to develop skills in clear communication, the articulation of ideas, and collaborative reflection.” (Student 2, Educational Sciences, EIPI, first-year Master’s student)

“I felt that my presence was not particularly relevant, given that I arrived on the last day and did not appropriate the ideas discussed, especially those concerning the campus of which I was not a part. However, I was surprised to observe that no concrete measures were proposed to address racial discrimination within a theme explicitly focused on discrimination and inclusion.” (Student 21, Educational Sciences, EIPI, second-year Master’s student)

This duality reflected, for example, the challenge of integrating students into the process of participatory democracy despite their interest, which highlighted the limits of a political will driven by the central services of an academic institution to promote the affirmation of an engaged university, as well as the difficulty of aligning faculty organizations with academic freedoms in the same direction. Furthermore, a demand for recognition of the skills acquired by students within the framework of the Student Citizens’ Convention (CCE), beyond purely institutional commitments, emerged as a way to support their involvement and ensured the sustainability of the meaning of their participation. According to our surveyed population, the difficulties encountered fall into several categories:

“This was not without difficulty, insofar as other students from different departments already had their own projects supported by a more advanced stage of reflection. Consequently, any new proposal or adjustment was poorly received. New projects introduced by students could not be discussed because they were deemed too far removed from the orientations that had been adopted, which generated frustration, an imbalance in terms of the ability to be heard, and tensions, as the prevailing sentiment led to perceiving these students as unwilling to accept any openness that did not align with their own perspective.” (Student 14, Educational Sciences, EIPI, first-year Master’s student)

This malfunction generated a distinction between two groups, the first being unable to make themselves heard, feeling a sense of exclusion, leading them to listen and reducing them to a passive role, merely allowing them to contribute to the creation of a presentation (PPT) because at the time of sharing the constituent elements, the students curiously did not have access to the link. Fortunately, at the group level (Sexism and Inclusion), the opportunity was given to present a project led by the students. It is worth noting that their project (which leads to recommendations, subject to subsequent deliberations, particularly at the end of the closing days) could be linked to the one initially conceived.

These two situations refer to the sometimes-fragile balance between constraints and opportunities arising from the democratic process that allows for decision-making. With a project in mind, developed among students of the same program, when they are in the minority, not only were they faced with the refusal to take it into account, but they were also compelled to subscribe to the project as it is conceived without their participation. This created an uncomfortable shift that contradicts the spirit and principles of the Student Citizens' Convention (CCE). Such situations call for mediation that can sustain group dynamics and embed them in a long-term collaborative perspective, even though discussions rarely take place on an equal footing. Participatory democracy processes are supposed to provide everyone with the same tools for deliberation. The rules must be identical for all. The discussion must include all the stakeholders concerned, who should be granted the same consideration. Information about the terms of the decision must be accessible to everyone. Yet, is this sufficient to ensure an egalitarian deliberation, overcoming the inequalities and power relations that pre-exist it? (Pourtois & Pitseys, 2017, p.34).

According to the students, the main difficulties related to the mobilization of stakeholders to address the need to embed the CCE within a long-term perspective, in order to assess the likelihood that the projects will be translated into changes in university practices and strategic frameworks. Moreover, since the ambition of the CCE was understood as a shift in practices, the challenge lied in evaluating these changes in terms of living and study conditions, which may disrupt prerogatives that extend beyond the scope of authority and competences of the University.

"The debate of ideas in the workshop on democracy and citizenship was truly rich and engaging. One idea that particularly struck me was that of the "University Citizen," with its motto: no need to be a French citizen to be a university citizen. This was explained through the three principles: Inform, Integrate, Involve. Such civic education would have enabled students to better appropriate their role in university governance, while also preparing them to become engaged actors in society. Another important point raised was the necessity of a participatory budget, whereby students could decide on the allocation of part of the university's funds to finance infrastructure, ecological, or social projects they themselves deemed most important to carry out. Others emphasized the creation of student citizens' councils within each faculty, in which elected representatives would regularly discuss initiatives to implement, the best strategies to integrate all students, and especially to welcome newcomers. This would have been a way to help them quickly find their place in student life, regardless of campus. This debate of ideas within the workshop

illustrated the richness of collective deliberation. It showed that, despite the diversity of opinions, it was possible to reach concrete proposals and consensuses that fostered a democratic and social transformation of the university". (Student 13, Educational Sciences, EIPI, second-year Master's student)

5.2 The Principle of Mediation and the Democratic Functioning of the Dispositif

When these critical observations were expressed, students wished to emphasize that the issue lied less with the organizers' (leaders') willingness than with their training in group facilitation and meeting management. Indeed, achieving mediation between the proposals—given that the nature of the projects was not always compatible, required mental flexibility and a necessary capacity for adaptation, verging on the imperative development of skills such as, for example, knowing how to listen and how to guide interactions within the framework of exchanges. It must be noted that the spatial division of exchanges across several rooms, as well as the group size (between 10 and 15 students), forced the mediators to manage a situation which, according to the students, seemed to overwhelm them. These difficulties can, at least in part, explain the feeling experienced by the students from the EIPI program of having disrupted matters that had otherwise been established among students.

In response to students' challenges arising from certain forms of misunderstanding generated by this opposition of principles, between the will to participate and freedom of expression, between the formulation and selection of the constitutive elements of projects, between participation and deliberation, mediators (who may be former students) developed defensive arguments, referring to the obligation of having to assume this role.

The overall dynamic was stimulating, and despite the difficulties mentioned, the strength of the CCE lied in its ability to rely on participation and student engagement since its creation, while acknowledging that this would not be possible without the involvement of IEP students. Testimonies from the first closing day were, in this respect, highly enlightening, as was the use of the digital tool *Decidim*, which enabled participants to position themselves by expressing their views on a platform and to strengthen digital democracy, intended to gather the opinions of all participating students.

6. Discussion

6.1 Innovation, Confrontation, and the Unfolding of Ideas

The CCE embodies a particular form of innovation, for instance in the field of *ecological transition*. This theme makes it possible to discover the university sites through exchanges. For the EIPI students, it required an effort to enter into the process of mediation, negotiation, and transaction, and to contribute to the building of a consensus. However, when change projects or discussions are already so advanced,

it is not easy to intervene substantively, as they point out, which reinforces the existence of a tacit norm established by the most active students.

Consequently, it is important to properly grasp the normative intuition underlying this “*deliberative imperative*” associated with participatory democracy. “For the authors who advocate a deliberative conception of democracy, democracy does not primarily consist in making collective decisions by majority rule or in negotiating agreements when there is disagreement. Indeed, the preferences and interests expressed when voting or negotiating are not necessarily reasoned preferences or interests aligned with the common good. Accepting them as such would amount to endorsing either a mere arithmetic balance of power in the case of majority rule, or the prevailing social imaginaries in the case of negotiation” (Pourtois & Pitseys, 2017, p.32).

In the group “*Building Community*”, unlike in the other groups, the surveyed EIPI students were in the majority, which enabled them to make their voices heard and to influence the debates, a situation that also attracted the mediator’s attention. While this balance of representation among the different components would be desirable in the constitution of the groups, it nonetheless conflicts with the principle of free participation according to the thematic choices offered to students. Nevertheless, “confrontation with the perspective of the other,” in what Emmanuel Kant referred to as a “*public use of reason*,” proves essential. The larger the number, the more intelligent the process becomes, provided that it diversifies viewpoints and confronts them through argumentation. This wager underpins certain democratic innovations, which aim to enhance the quality of public deliberation by making it more inclusive and grounded in practice. They do not, however, replace representative institutions, even if their modes of decision-making and deliberation ought to be rearticulated in light of the new context” (Pourtois & Pitseys, 2017, p. 33).

6.2 A Pedagogical Practice Beyond a Dogmatic Conception

If one of the pedagogical aims of the training program was to make democracy a conviction, it must be noted that the students emphasized that they particularly appreciated the principle of consultation and the process of participatory democracy at the university. The possibility to act and to exercise recourse, as well as the practice of gathering in small groups to propose changes on the basis of shared reflections with a view to improving living and study conditions at the university, appeared stimulating. However, they were surprised by the collaborative format of the workshops, in which a random draw determined their placement within the CCE. Indeed, to envisage more in-depth work, they reported that it would have required more substantial time. This necessity reflected a characteristic of democracy as a particular resolution of problems with which students were confronted, regarding the functioning and organization of university governance. The requirements of a more inclusive functioning, as a source of engagement within the university, and “democracy understood in its scientific approach, could then be applied to the domain of ethics, granting a central place to convictions whose role would be to permit and structure the inquiry itself. Thus, convictions (or ethical values) could no longer be conceived either as abstract ideas or

as instinctive impulses, but rather as rational motivations arising from habits acquired through enriching experiences” (Point, 2017, p.77).

7. Conclusion

Thus, the pedagogical space can be conceived through work that addresses the interdependence between social norms and the rules established by the academic world, under the prism of renewing university democracy by establishing a continuum between internal and external engagement in higher education. This perspective gives substance to a reflexive and deliberative thought on the self-institutionalisation that the renewal of a student citizens’ convention may represent, independently of the risk of atrophy inherent in the limits of its development. Moreover, it is worth recalling that “the work of historians and political sociologists has shown that the introduction of universal suffrage at the turn of the twentieth century was a formidable vector not only of political power control, but also of the political socialisation of the masses, of civic education, leading an increasing number of citizens to take part in public life, to recognise one another mutually as citizens, and to acquire, by federating, real political power even when voting is not compulsory” (Pourtois & Pitseys, 2017, p.31). The functioning of each component of the University does not necessarily rely on the same model. As a result, this prevents students from being integrated into a logic of certification of skills development and stands in opposition to the recognition of the formative dimension of the Student Citizens’ Convention (CCE). This contradiction appears difficult to overcome due to academic freedoms, the organization of faculties, and curricula, which cannot easily promote an institutionalisation of the CCE.

The project and the collective reflection required a longer timeframe according to them. The first difficulty was therefore the lack of time to work seriously on the project. The time allocated for collaboration was far too short to develop a reflection that had to be presented at the end of the session. It would have been highly valuable for the students to be able to prepare well in advance by receiving preparatory documents sufficiently early to grasp their full significance. Furthermore, even when links or documents clarifying the orientation of the CCE were sent, the students maintained that they would have needed support in order to better understand the stakes of their participation.

It would be advisable to ensure the systematic dissemination of information stating that the CCE2024 aims to transform the university in favor of improving students’ living and study conditions, thereby fostering their well-being. Much like student unions that make themselves systematically known when their representatives present their organisations, it would also be desirable to consider some form of compensation that acknowledges and values student participation and engagement. Reflecting on mechanisms for recognising competencies would be a major asset to include in all forms of presentation within the different university departments, on the same level as fostering social cohesion among students who may not know each other but who all belong to the same university. In other words, cultivating a sense of belonging would be a driving force behind many initiatives supporting participatory democracy within universities, as well as across universities to influence public policies

in higher education. This should not ignore the fact that, as Schwartz (2004, p.17) points out, “if we reduce experience to what is spontaneously verbalised, in clear reasoning accessible to everyone, we leave aside a huge part of what constitutes knowledge and skills within experience.”

Despite the limitations inherent in the implementation of a CCE, its democratic mode of operation stands in opposition to the mandarin model, which, through a long-standing tradition, has established a figure of authority isolated in an ivory tower and regarded as the holder of complex knowledge. By contrast, the democratic competences enacted within the CCE rest on a desacralisation of knowledge, insofar as students reject the idea that knowledge should function as an instrument of domination. This immersive practice consists in coming together to discuss, deliberate, and prioritise projects aimed at transforming the institution to which they belong. As such, it points towards a strengthening of the principles of a pedagogy grounded in emancipation, autonomy (1996/2013) and liberation (1967/1971), in the sense understood by Paulo Freire.

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Notas

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