Student Participation in Business Education: a Backwards Agency

Participação Estudantil na Formação em Administração de Empresas: Uma Agência Reversa

Carla Campana

ABSTRACT

Research in business education demonstrates that there is an incentive to increase student participation, but the theoretical definitions are imprecise and the operational limits have not been fully explored. This paper aims to understand how student agency happens in business education by analyzing and comparing the discourse and the practice of educational experiences based on the active participation of students in Brazilian business courses. The constructivist analysis of 23 reports of innovative experiences and the transcript of four semi-structured interviews led to the establishment of categories demonstrating that there are: a mismatch between the discourse and the actions of educational institutions; misconceptions about the meaning of student agency; and lack of theoretical rigor in projects that aim to promote active student participation. Given the encouragement of active student participation in business courses, an in-depth analysis of projects with this aim is essential. The findings provide two key theoretical insights: the study uncovers issues, like "backwards agency," not widely addressed in business education literature, highlighting the benefits of embracing the students' agency concept. On the practical side, it informs practitioners of critical aspects, fostering reflection and project quality improvement.

Keywords: student agency; student participation; higher education; business education.

RESUMO

Pesquisas demonstram que há incentivo para aumentar a participação dos estudantes na formação em administração, mas as definições teóricas são imprecisas e os limites operacionais não foram totalmente explorados. Este artigo tem como objetivo compreender como se dá a agência estudantil, analisando e comparando o discurso e a prática de experiências educativas baseadas na participação ativa de estudantes em cursos de administração brasileiros. A análise construtivista de 23 relatos de experiências inovadoras e das transcrições de quatro entrevistas semiestruturadas conduziu à construção de

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RESUMO

categorias demonstrando que há: um desencontro entre o discurso e as ações das instituições de ensino; equívocos sobre o significado da agência estudantil; e falta de rigor teórico em projetos que visam promover a participação ativa dos alunos. Dado o incentivo à participação ativa dos alunos nos cursos de administração, é essencial uma análise mais aprofundada de projetos com este objetivo. As descobertas contribuem com dois insights teóricos importantes: o estudo revela questões que não são amplamente abordadas na literatura de educação empresarial, como a "agência reversa", destacando os benefícios de adotar o conceito de agência estudantil. Do lado prático, informa profissionais sobre aspectos críticos, promovendo a reflexão e melhoria da qualidade dos projetos.

Palavras-chave: agência estudantil; participação estudantil; ensino superior; formação em administração de empresas.

Introduction

It is widely explored the fact that, with the expansion of the internet, the world has experienced a sharp transformation in the ways information is produced, accessed, and stored (Bernheim; Chaui, 2003; Fichman; Dos Santos; Zheng, 2014). The ease and speed with which it's possible to acquire information about any event, anywhere in the world – and its social, political and economic consequences – have created challenges and aggravated the multidimensional crisis in educational institutions, among which those at university level (Bernheim; Chaui, 2003; Evans, 2015; Mintz, 2021; Targ, 2020), questioning the position of the professor as the sole holder and imparter of knowledge, highlighting the erosion of purely transmissive pedagogical practices, and centering other theories and practices that, although not new, are frequently called innovative and used to be on the margins of the educational system (Kolb *et al.*, 2014; Santos; Figueiredo; Vieira, 2019; Zhu *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, a set of practices suggests reconfiguring the roles usually played by professors and students, offering the latter the opportunity to have more agency and take more responsibility for their own learning process.

Even though transmissive pedagogical models are still predominant in higher education, the idea of giving students more agency is on the rise (Pan; An, 2020). The system is under pressure and the gaps created by it are being filled by other ways of teaching and learning. Institutions are responding to social change and be-

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ing encouraged by the STEM initiative to foster the learning of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (Lombardi *et al.*, 2021), by accreditation institutions, and by collective agreements, such as the Bologna Declaration (Klemenčič, 2017).

Pan and An (2020) demonstrated that, starting in 2008, studies about the active participation of students in higher education became mainstream. Issues such as student involvement in the education process, educational innovation focused on active student participation, student engagement in the classroom, and hierarchy in academia were being broadly discussed in the high-impact journals selected by the authors.

In the last five years, no studies based on the concept of student agency (Jääskelä *et al.*, 2017, 2020, 2021) were identified in business education field. However, studies about practices based on active participation of students, in the same period, are numerous and their results: highlight the positive potential of these practices (Bendickson; Madden; Matherne, 2020; Biehl, 2021; Calma; Davies, 2020; Dal Magro; Pozzebon; Schutel, 2020; Desai; Dearmond, 2021; Matzembacher; Gonzales; Do Nascimento, 2019; Michels *et al.*, 2020; Sierra; Rodríguez-Conde, 2021; Silva *et al.*, 2018; Wu; Chen, 2021); investigate their effectiveness, concluding that they are completely or partially positive (Alstete; Meyer; Beutell, 2020; Downing *et al.*, 2018; Leal-Rodríguez; Albort-Morant, 2019; Maheshwari; Seth, 2019; Seow; Pan; Koh, 2019; Sharma *et al.*, 2018; Vanschenkhof *et al.*, 2018); compare teaching/learning strategies (Perusso; Baaken, 2020; Walsh; O'Brien; Costin, 2021); highlight the way these approaches may contribute to the development of business administrators in emerging areas (Bandera; Collins; Passerini, 2018; Earle; Leyva-De La Hiz, 2021; Gomes da Costa *et al.*, 2021; Hinz; Stephens; Van Oosten, 2021; Killian *et al.*, 2019; Tan; Vicente, 2019; Thomsen; Muurlink; Best, 2021); and raise points that deserve attention (Dean; Wright; Forray, 2020; Matzembacher; Gonzales; Do Nascimento, 2019; Silva *et al.*, 2018; Wright; Forray; Lund Dean, 2019).

The analysis of this dataset indicates that there are incentives to active student participation in business courses, but theoretical definitions are imprecise, and operational limits are underexplored (Arnold; Clarke, 2014; Harju; Åkerblom, 2017; Jääskelä *et al.*, 2021). In order to help close this gap, this paper aims to understand how student agency happens in business education by analyzing and comparing the discourse and the practice of educational experiences based on active participation of students in business courses.

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Conceptual Framework

EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES BASED ON ACTIVE PARTICIPATION OF STUDENTS

Studies about the degree of student participation in higher education suggest that there is no precision in the terminology used to name educational practices that encourage student agency. The expressions most frequently used are Active, Experiential, and Student-Centered Learning (Jääskelä *et al.*, 2020; Klemenčič, 2017; Lombardi *et al.*, 2021; Starkey, 2017), each one anchored in slightly different theories and practices, but having in common the concept of students as agents of their learning and the positive assessment of that agency.

Determined by multiple factors, student agency in the educational process can go from making a low-impact academic choice to participating in the governance of the institution. Historically, basic education institutions have been the ones to hold the more advanced position in relation to student agency. Examples include students defining their own study agendas, classes being optional, and common life events being decided in assemblies in which every member of the community holds the same voting power (see reports in Lees; Noddings, 2016).

In higher education, recent reports of practices that aim to increase student participation have different focuses. Shephard *et al.* (2017), for instance, investigated events led by students within the university setting, concluding that these adopted a democratic approach to decision-making. Molinari e Gasparini (2019), on the other hand, validated the thesis that design thinking and the humanities share an epistemological center that can play an important role in promoting student confidence in their governing abilities when facing the challenges currently presented by higher education.

Although recent literature about higher education is enthusiastic about active participation of students, studies suggest points that require attention and offer some criticism, such as the supposition that knowledge of the curriculum is established and transferable to different teaching methods, as well as the dismissal of differences between disciplines (O'Connor, 2020); the fact that student perception of teaching methods can be better when they are mixed, centered on the professor and on the student (Murphy; Eduljee; Croteau, 2021); and the supposition that educational projects that claim to be centered on the student always promote a sense of involvement (Harju; Åkerblom, 2017).

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Educational practices based on active participation of students in Business Education

Business administration courses are also being pressured to adopt practices based on active participation of students. These practices play the additional role of quell criticism about business education: its technical and utilitarian nature (Nicolini, 2003; Thomas; Lorange; Sheth, 2013), its lack of reflection and participation from diverse players in planning the curricula (Evans, 2015).

In business education, recent studies have shown the potential of practices based on active participation of students in different ways, such as to promote critical thinking (Calma; Davies, 2020; Dal Magro; Pozzebon; Schutel, 2020); to re-think and re-contextualize management education (Michels *et al.*, 2020); to promote learning, content integration, engagement, practice and reduce boredom through Problem-Based Learning (Matzembacher; Gonzales; Do Nascimento, 2019; Silva *et al.*, 2018); to develop cross-cultural skills and achieve learning outcomes through films and series (Biehl, 2021; Desai *et al.*, 2018); to improve learning through mentoring with more advanced students (Bendickson; Madden; Matherne, 2020); to design innovative curricula (Wu; Chen, 2021); and to foster key cognitive, skill-based and affective learning outcomes through online role-play simulation (Sierra; Rodríguez-Conde, 2021).

Other studies aimed to investigate the efficacy of certain practices, such as: Flipped Classroom (Maheshwari; Seth, 2019); innovative experiential learning practice (Leal-Rodríguez; Albort-Morant, 2019); experience of working with real-time financial market information (Sharma *et al*., 2018); use of differentiated instruction in experiential learning in management education (Alstete; Meyer; Beutell, 2020); experiential learning approach to prepare students for the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous work environment (Seow; Pan; Koh, 2019); peer evaluations within experiential pedagogy (Vanschenkhof *et al*., 2018); the authenticity of cases, internships and problem-based learning as managerial learning experiences (Perusso; Baaken, 2020); engagement with intentional content (Walsh; O'Brien; Costin, 2021); for profit and non-profit consulting experiences (Desai; Dearmond, 2021); and collaborative course development between faculty and students (Downing *et al*., 2018). All results have been entirely or partially favorable.

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Some studies highlight how experiential learning approaches can contribute to the education of administrators in emerging areas, such as entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship education (Bandera; Collins; Passerini, 2018; Thomsen; Muurlink; Best, 2021); sustainability (Earle; Leyva-De La Hiz, 2021; Killian *et al*., 2019) and development of values and soft skills in students (Gomes da Costa *et al*., 2021; Hinz; Stephens; Van Oosten, 2021; Tan; Vicente, 2019).

To sum up, there are several studies discussing active participation of students in business education. Although most support, totally or partially, the use of strategies based on that assumption, some points that require attention are raised by a few studies, such as ethical issues associated with the lack of shared understanding about these practices, their rules, the expected pedagogical outcomes and how to deal with the emotional mobilization that can be provoked in students (Christensen *et al*., 2007; Wright; Forray; Lund Dean, 2019).

STUDENT AGENCY: A DIMENSION OF STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING

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STUDENT AGENCY: A DIMENSION OF STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING

A sharper concept used to mark the student active participation in the learning process is student agency, considered a key dimension of Student-Centered Learning (Starkey, 2017; Stenalt; Lassesen, 2021). However, there is no consensus in educational research about its conceptual definitions (Stenalt; Lassesen, 2021).

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According to Arnold and Clarke (2014), there are many different theoretical definitions and few operational parameters.

These perceptions are reinforced by the fact that, in higher education, although specific studies about student agency generally make some reference to the most used expressions to characterize the active participation of students in education, such as Active, Experiential, and Student-Centered Learning (Luo *et al*., 2019; Molinari; Gasparini, 2019; Starkey, 2017; Stenalt; Lassesen, 2021), studies based on these last terms tend not to use the concept of agency.

Jääskelä *et al*. (2020, p. 2) define:

> [...] student agency in higher education as a student's experience of having access to or being empowered to act through personal, relational, and participatory resources, which allow him/her to engage in purposeful, intentional, and meaningful action and learning in study contexts.

To Jääskelä and collaborators (2021, p. 645), it is through agency that students are able to have influence over their educational journeys, becoming aware of their own learning and engaging in significant activities in cooperation with others. The authors highlight the role of agency in "[...] providing a holistic perspective to understand the constituents of intentional, purposeful, and meaningful learning."

In general, recent studies about student agency in higher education have had three main focuses: rethinking the role of students, placing them as agents of their own educational process, capable of playing impactful roles in the educational system (Bovill *et al*., 2016; Felten *et al*., 2019; Klemenčič, 2017); investigating the relation between agency and other variables (Ahmadi, 2021; Jääskelä *et al*., 2020; Luo *et al*., 2019; Stenalt; Lassesen, 2021); and creating and validating ways of measuring student agency (Jääskelä *et al*., 2017, 2021).

ACTIONS PERFORMED BY OR EXPECTED FROM STUDENTS

According to Lombardi and collaborators (2021, p. 17), "in the context of undergraduate instruction, active learning represents classroom contexts in which students may" employ agency. Therefore, it would be important to know specifically which are the actions performed by or expected from students in higher education and in business education.

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It has become evident that even the studies that don't use the concept of student agency presuppose some kind of action from the students, be it from experiences, discussions, reflections, simulations, community service, volunteer work etc.

In the literature about student agency in higher education (except business education), the actions performed by or expected from students involve opportunities of participation that go beyond the limits of a single discipline and can alter the course program, such as influencing in general (Jääskelä *et al*., 2017, 2021), in means of evaluation (Ahmadi, 2021; Stenalt; Lassesen, 2021), in educational governing and politics (Molinari; Gasparini, 2019); making choices and decisions (Jääskelä *et al*., 2017; Stenalt; Lassesen, 2021), including about their own learning and the course program (Bovill *et al*., 2016; Jääskelä *et al*., 2020; Klemenčič, 2017); participating in reflections and discussions (Stenalt; Lassesen, 2021); and playing impactful roles (Bovill *et al*., 2016; Felten *et al*., 2019; Stenalt; Lassesen, 2021).

In business education research, the concept of student agency is not employed and the actions performed by or expected from the students are predominantly restricted to the realm of the discipline. A large portion of the studies is about the application of one or more pedagogical techniques (Biehl, 2021; Desai *et al*., 2018; Earle; Leyva-De La Hiz, 2021; Hinz; Stephens; Van Oosten, 2021; Maheshwari; Seth, 2019; Matzembacher; Gonzales; Do Nascimento, 2019; Perusso; Baaken, 2020; Sierra; Rodríguez-Conde, 2021; Thomsen; Muurlink; Best, 2021; Walsh; O'Brien; Costin, 2021); exploring experiences in the workplace (Bandera; Collins; Passerini, 2018; Desai; Dearmond, 2021; Leal-Rodríguez; Albort-Morant, 2019; Tan; Vicente, 2019); and interaction or with the community (Dal Magro; Pozzebon; Schutel, 2020; Killian *et al*., 2019).

Method

This research was qualitative and the information set was textual, composed by 23 reports written voluntarily by representatives of higher education institutions, produced with the intent of winning an award in teaching/learning innovation and the transcripts of four semi-structured interviews conducted with the coordinators of the three best-evaluated initiatives, and well as with the coordinator of the prize

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itself. Data analysis was constructivist. The research protocol was approved by a research ethics committee, all respondents provided written informed consent, and all information that could identify educational institutions, persons and interviewees has been omitted.

THE TEACHING/LEARNING INNOVATION AWARD

The business teaching/learning innovation award was promoted by a Brazilian civil association with national reach that encompasses institutions connected to undergraduate business teaching, with the goal of identifying and acknowledging courses that have fostered innovation in teaching/learning. In order to be considered innovative, the initiatives were evaluated by an impartial and qualified committee using predetermined criteria.

INFORMATION SET

Submission Forms

Submissions were made via a digital form that requested the following information: 1) title and abstract; 2) diagnosis and objectives; 3) description of the experience; 4) methodology; 5) description of people's involvement with the initiative; 6) main outcomes. The projects were numbered as 1 to 23, being referred to in the text by the letter P (as in Project) followed by the corresponding number.

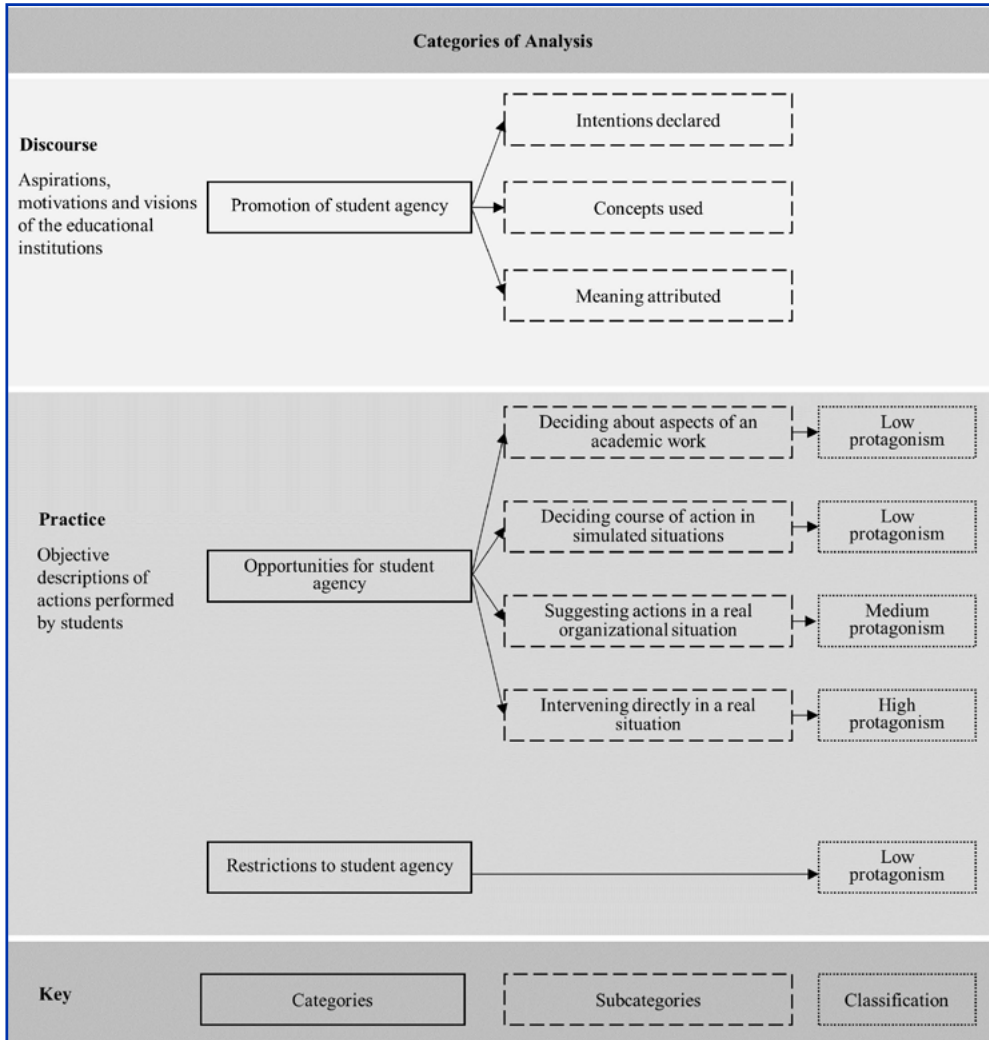### *Semi-structured interviews*

In order to compose a more diversified dataset and go deeper into subjects highlighted in the reports, some players that were in the best position to aid in the understanding of the investigated phenomenon were interviewed: the prize organizer, who had contact with the proponents of all projects; and those responsible for the top three projects. The interviews were conducted in person, and the audio was recorded and transcribed in full. The interviewees are referred in the text as I (as in Interviewee) followed by the numbers 1 to 4.

ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

The information was analyzed with help from the software Atlas.ti and based on constructivist version of grounded theory (Charmaz; Thornberg; Keane, 2018).

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Firstly, all the material was read in full and marked with initial comments. Then, the text was examined in search of empirical excerpts that would contribute to the achievement of the research objective. This process resulted in the definition of categories and subcategories, and in the classification of some of them, as showed in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Categories of analysis.

Categories of Analysis

Discourse
Aspirations, motivations and visions of the educational institutions
- Promotion of student agency
  - Intentions declared
  - Concepts used
  - Meaning attributed

Practice
Objective descriptions of actions performed by students
- Opportunities for student agency
  - Deciding about aspects of an academic work → Low protagonism
  - Deciding course of action in simulated situations → Low protagonism
  - Suggesting actions in a real organizational situation → Medium protagonism
  - Intervening directly in a real situation → High protagonism
- Restrictions to student agency → Low protagonism

Key
Categories | Subcategories | Classification

Source: Created by the author.

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Initially, two broader categories had been created, delimitating discourses and practices. Excerpts describing aspirations, motivations, and visions of educational institutions regarding student agency were classified as discourse. Objective descriptions of actions performed by students during projects were classified as practice.

From the excerpts classified as discourse, those who promoted active student participation were highlighted. Then, the following were identified: declared intentions for the promotion of active student participation; concepts that the reports' authors used to frame it, and meanings attributed to the idea of student agency.

The practice category was subdivided into: opportunities for student agency, characterized by objective evidence of situations in which students could make decisions; and restrictions to student agency, characterized by objective evidence of situations in which decisions that could be shared were made without student participation.

The opportunities were then classified according to the type of decision and, finally, the types of decision and the restrictions to student agency were classified according to the degree of protagonism.

Results and Discussion

MISMATCH BETWEEN DISCOURSE AND PRACTICE

The discourse contains direct references to active methodologies, student protagonism and named methods that indicate active student participation. The proponents of Project 12, for instance, had broad intentions that involved "offering an education where the student was the protagonist, focused on the group […] and integrated" (P12). Team from Project 14 focused their efforts on the implementation of active methodologies – such as Problem-Based Learning and Case Method – as a way of "conducting a process of radical change in the course's pedagogical project" (P14).

The positive valuation of student participation is highlighted in the discourse. Proponents of Project 3 points out changing roles: "There is a noticeable change in the behavior of professors and students. Both have left their comfort zones. Students are now protagonists and professors are facilitators" (P3). In Project 10, the emphasis was on actions that can be performed by students: "developing projects,

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solving problems […] and making decisions" (P10). The discourse of the proponents of Project 14 empowers the student, who is seen as "protagonist of the [learning] process that can, therefore, alter the education process" (P14).

These excerpts indicate the encouragement of student agency and emphasize the intellectual challenges attached to it, such as changing roles, leaving comfort zones, problem solving, and autonomy to change the education process. These challenges are in sync with those outlined in the literature about student agency outside of the business field (Bovill *et al*., 2016; Felten *et al*., 2019; Molinari; Gasparini, 2019).

The interviews introduced more pragmatic and utilitarian elements, revealing more subtle layers than those present in the forms, such as the commercial reasons to value student agency. The positive valuation of student agency was also present, but the reasons attributed to it are mostly about the desire of the students themselves to overcome the role of listener, as well as the competition among private educational institutions. The ones who promote student agency as an innovation could be better positioned in the market. Interviewee 1 says that in the business course: "Nothing is more correct than the market itself, stating which kind of professional they need on the other side."

Looking at the practices, it can be noted that opportunities for student agency in general have been more modest than the discourse. There were four types of situations in which students had the opportunity to make decisions: about some aspect of an academic work; the course of action on simulated problematic situations; suggesting actions in real organizational situations; intervening directly in a real organizational situation.

In the two first types of situation, the level of protagonism of the students was considered low, and typically involved choosing a topic to discuss in an academic paper, making decisions in exercises with simulated scenarios or expressing opinions in a teaching case. In the third type of situation, there was a commitment with a real external enterprise, generally a company that offered itself as a case study. This increased the level of complexity of the decisions the students had to make. The goal, however, was just to offer suggestions, orally or in writing.

In situations where the degree of protagonism was considered high, students experienced the possibility of making decisions that would have a real-life impact

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as a direct result of their actions. Typically, this happened through the model of providing services or consulting to real companies in direct interactions, this type of situation was present in a third of the projects.

Broad opportunities for student agency were incipient in all projects. For example, no actions already outlined in the literature related to governing, collective decision-making involving different agents, co-creation of educational programs, discussions about educational policies, autonomy to set learning goals, educational path or playing of different roles (Bovill *et al*., 2016; Felten *et al*., 2019; Molinari; Gasparini, 2019) were identified. The practices described in the empirical material are far from the desired or performed actions outlined in studies about student agency and closer to the actions outlined in business education studies.

Evidence has also been found of decisions that affected students being made without their participation, as well as of prohibition and restrictions regarding basic choices. One observed characteristic was rigidity, induced by an excess of directions and guidelines, in which all aspects of educational activities are predetermined, such as the number of members per group, the type of paper to be written, the theme, the topics on field interviews, the form of the presentation, etc.

Presuppositions based on hierarchy and authority seem to remain at the center of business education (Dean; Wright; Forray, 2020; Wright; Forray; Lund Dean, 2019), to the point of keeping students from making simples choices. These decisions are still made by the professors.

Comparing discourse and practice, the mismatch is clear. Although Ahmadi (2021, p. 211) warns that "the distribution of voice among the members of education communities has been conceived as one of the significant indicators of democratic deliberation," the voice of the students is a resource that, albeit valuable, is not sufficiently appreciated in higher education (Bovill *et al*., 2016). This seems to be the case with the projects analyzed. Even when the discourse states that the students must be the protagonists of their own learning, in practice this means, at best, being engaged in initiatives designed by the professors and completing participatory learning tasks.

Fullan (2007, p. 172) corroborates the above by stating that one of the recurring mistakes made by educational institutions is not taking into consideration the opinions of students when implementing new projects, which, at times, lead to their

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failure. According to the author "[…] when adults do think of students, they think of them as potential beneficiaries of change. They think of achievement, results, skills, attitudes, and jobs. They rarely think of students as participants in a process of change and organizational life."

The pressure on business education courses to adopt pedagogical approaches that promote active student participation (Ardoin *et al*., 2014; Arnold; Clarke, 2014; Dean; Wright; Forray, 2020; Harju; Åkerblom, 2017; Lombardi *et al*., 2021) may lead them to implement actions without making intentional decisions aligned with the institution's educational vision, and without adequate preparation of the faculty and the student body. Promoting student agency is a complex task that requires from all involved not only emotional availability, but also the creation and maintenance of an educational space free of threats, and preparation to deal with unforeseen situations. Dean and collaborators (2020, p. 572) warn that "there are power, transparency, and trust issues in experiential teaching that require ethical consideration from business schools."

Moreover, promoting student agency requires recognizing the student as an integral subject, capable of learning continuously throughout life and of making self-oriented choices that allow him/her to solve problems (Rogers, 2003). The goal of an educational action based on this premise must be to offer students the opportunity to expand their knowledge, skills and attitudes about the world, and to integrate them – intellectually, affectionately and socially – with their preexisting knowledge, skills and attitudes.

MISTAKEN DEFINITIONS

Examining the meanings attributed to student agency, two frequent associations have been detected: practical application of business course concepts and student engagement.

According to the proponents of Project 7, both student experience and learning were hindered by an excess of theory, which "without practical opportunities, [the course] subjected the students to endless hours of classes that failed to convey the integration between disciplines and context" (P7). Similarly, the proponents of Project 8 also highlight the importance of practice when stating categorically: "We believe that practical professional experience is the best teaching/learning method" (P8).

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The material analyzed points to a pragmatic and utilitarian shortcoming associated to student agency in business education. By identifying student agency with practical activities, the projects soften a common criticism of business education: that it is a strictly content-based education (Bennis; O'Toole, 2005; Mintzberg, 2004); but do not escape another: its pragmatic and functional nature, focused on meeting the market's needs (Nicolini, 2003; Thomas; Lorange; Sheth, 2013).

Even as the projects aim to overcome the emphasis on content, the choices made by these institutions reveal a vision in which the educational experience is a rehearsal for real life, in an environment where choices are controlled and enveloped within the academic setting, such as in simulations, games, cases, or even projects that serve only as way to apply learned content. While they develop good bosses and employees, the projects lack opportunities for the development of student autonomy, promotion of critical reflection, as well as for the exercise of agency in the broadest sense.

Procedures used to engage students in the proposed course activities are also associated with the promotion of student agency. Project 17 was conceived as the answer to the question: "How to instill greater engagement, motivation and responsibility in students?" Proponents of Project 2 sought to develop "an activity to engage them [the students] with the course and with their own learning process."

Educational institutions also related student agency to fighting a, say, more concrete form of disengagement, marked by absences and evasion. The proponents of Project 18 hoped the project would combat the "high dropout rates and student dissatisfaction." In Project 6, one of the positive results was "the significant reduction in absences, when compared to the previous way of conducting classes."

Engagement is also employed in an askew way, in order to ensure compliance with rules or even control over student behavior. Project 6 offers an example in the excerpt below:

> […] the inclusion of readings along with hybrid teaching and active teaching/learning methodologies allowed professors to disengage from their traditional banking education role and put the student at the center of the whole process. Without previously reading the material, students are not able to participate in class and do the proposed exercises (P6).

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The excerpt praises the success of the initiative in modernizing the professorial role and turning the student into the protagonist. However, the tool used is one of control: the mandatory nature of the readings. In this case, control is presented as an opportunity to choose, but there are negative consequences planned in case the student's decision is not the one recommended by the professor. The allusion to banking education, a concept by Freire (2018), also seems poorly chosen. According to the premise of the project, only pre-class reading enables the student to participate in class, ignoring all previous baggage, learning from peers and experience in class, all central elements in the pedagogy proposed by the referenced author.

It is important to question the link between engagement and student agency, especially when engagement is intended to promote – or even coerce – student participation in activities not chosen by them. This is different from promoting concrete opportunities for agency, which actually promotes engagement.

Broadening the scope studied here, Klemenčič (2017) makes conceptual considerations about the link between student engagement and student-centered learning, being the former a conceptual basis for the latter. The author suggests the adoption of the concept of student agency as the main one, since engagement fails to address autonomy, self-regulation and choice (Klemenčič, 2017).

LACK OF CONCEPTUAL RIGOR

As stated in the literature (Arnold; Clarke, 2014; Lombardi *et al*., 2021; Starkey, 2017), the analyzed projects don't present precise definitions of the concepts employed. To refer to active student participation in the teaching/learning process, the representatives of the educational institutions, in general, don't use the concept of student agency. They borrow expressions from the dramatic arts, such as protagonist and actor, for which no conceptual definitions are presented. Associated to complementary information, these concepts seem similar to what's stated in the literature about student agency.

Discourse about student agency is present also through mentions of active methodologies, evaluated as intrinsically positive, without problems, difficulties or criticism attached. The discourse also highlights an active role for students in the teaching/learning process. These mentions, however, are not accompanied by pe-

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dagogical definitions and concepts, denoting a merely technical and instrumental appropriation. This is made clear when discourse and practice are compared.

This lack of theoretical depth renders the discourses, and consequently the practices, superficial and baseless, confirming criticisms already documented in the literature (Arnold; Clarke, 2014; Lombardi *et al*., 2021; Stenalt; Lassesen, 2021). As stated by Starkey (2017, p. 387), low theoretical cohesion can lead to low practical cohesion.

The perception of interviewees about their institutions' motivations to implement innovation have explanatory value, exemplified by the following emblematic statement from Interviewee 2: "there is a thing about image, 'we are modern, we are aligned with the 21st century' […]. If it were possible to just say it without having to do it, I think they would prefer it" (I2).

The proposal of projects aimed to present a specific image to the market translates into an empty practice when it comes to learning. Led by students only in appearance, nothing has essentially changed. On the other hand, it is also possible that the proponents know that it is necessary to make structural changes, but personal and institutional conditions are not conducive to it.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The mismatch between theory and practice, the mistaken definitions, and the lack of conceptual rigor can lead pedagogical initiatives to discredit, since closer examination may reveal the emergence of a backwards agency: in spite of claiming to encourage and promote active student participation, the actions undertaken by educational institutions were modest in relation to the possibilities of agency already outlined in studies about higher education outside of the business field.

To illustrate the importance of conceptual rigor, not only in academic research but in the implementation of practical initiatives, a strategy planned to engage students in an expository class and a general assembly to collective define the use of a common area within the institution can be considered examples of active learning, even though the level of student agency in them is different, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

To mitigate the effects mapped in this study, the incorporation and dissemination of the concept of student agency in business education could contribute to

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the qualification of projects that aim to increase effective student participation in the educational process, as well as help higher education institutions fulfill their role of welcoming and working with the students holistically. This would mean understanding education as process in which all players – professors and students mainly – are equally implicated in all of its dimensions. Such a change in approach cannot be made by adopting techniques that have been successful in other contexts. It is necessary to collectively, carefully and honestly reflect on the fundamentals that sustain current educational practices, with the goal of transforming them.

Conclusion

The goal of the present research was to understand how student agency in business education can happen, through analysis and comparison of the discourse and practices undertaken by educational institutions. The study yielded three primary findings, revealing that projects that aim to foster active student participation in business education are facing: a mismatch between discourse and practice; mistaken definitions of the concept of student agency; and a lack of conceptual rigor, this one corroborating existing studies.

These findings offer two theoretical contributions. As active student involvement in business courses is encouraged, a more thorough analysis of projects aiming to promote it becomes necessary. This study identifies issues not widely documented in the business education literature, notably "backwards' agency," characterized by the mismatch between discourse and practice. Additionally, it highlights the benefits that the field of business education can attain by embracing the concept of students' agency to better underpin projects promoting student participation and enhance its definitions and operational boundaries.

On the practical side, the study informs practitioners about critical aspects that reveal contradictions and challenges in implementing projects to promote student agency. This critique prompts reflection for overcoming such aspects, potentially leading to improved project quality.

The data shows that, although educational institutions value and wish to implement projects that promote active student participation, the most specific

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theoretical concept used as foundation for these actions – student agency – is not employed. Instead, the concepts such as Active, Experiential, and Student--Centered Learning are preferred, as well as the terms active methodologies and protagonism, often used interchangeably. The projects are also based on named methodologies, the most common being Problem-Based Learning, Flipped Classroom, and Case Method. In these cases, the application is mainly instrumental, since the methods – given their renown and ample dissemination – are no longer implemented according to their original theoretical foundations; a kind of step-by--step application is predominant.

The lack of conceptual rigor favors the occurrence of mistaken definitions of the concept of student agency, which can be, as outlined by this study, confused with practical application and student engagement. The data also shows that, although they intend to encourage and promote student agency, the actions undertaken by educational institutions do not live up to what was promised or to what has already been done in higher education, outside of the business field. Even the initiatives that aim to promote active participation are being put into practice under the weight of the most common criticism of business education: that it is utilitarian and functional, lacking depth and reflection. A sense of agency does not emerge automatically or merely by participating in practical or engaging educational activities (Harju; Åkerblom, 2017; Klemenčič, 2017; O'Connor, 2020). Instead, it must be the result of mutual dialogue between the players of the educational system, the revision of power structures, in the ways of working together as well as in relationships. True agency is not achieved unless the students have the opportunity to "make choices, to influence as well as foster structures for equal participation" (Jääskelä *et al*., 2017, p. 2064).

To researchers who wish to continue studying student agency in business education, a suggestion would be to try and overcome the methodological limitations of the present research, collecting data in loco in order to determine in which points the conclusions drawn from primary data match the findings of the present investigation, including the students' perspectives. It would also be beneficial to conduct further research with objectives similar to the current one, in order to increase the number of projects analyzed and create a critical mass that can deepen the understanding of student agency in business education to the extent of proposing a

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definition that makes sense for this field of study and better delimits its operational boundaries. Practical research could investigate how to support higher education institutions in the effective practice of student agency.

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