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Interpretation of the «Student Engagement» paradigm in Spain (a bibliometric review)

Summary

1. Introduction
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Abstract:

In this paper, we aim to evaluate the impact and the interpretation that has been made of the concept of «Student Engagement» in the Spanish university system. For this purpose, we have reviewed the contributions made in the last five years to the main international congresses on university teaching innovation held in Spain and the national-level publications on this topic that are registered in the Scopus and Web of Science databases. Through this review, we can determine not only the impact of Student Engagement among national and international teachers that participate in these forums, but also the interpretation they make of the concept.

The review of the documents, and our own position as teachers, makes us reflect on a proposal that could guide future lines of research on the issue. In this regard, we consider that the management of the university, especially in the Spanish system, still does not take a holistic perspective of the university student's experience into account. In order to fully develop the three dimensions of action to improve Student Engagement, we need a multidisciplinary approach that would take into consideration the purest contributions from management, from university experiential marketing, and from the educational sciences with their knowledge of teaching methodologies.

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Interpretación del paradigma «Student Engagement» en España (una revisión bibliométrica)

Extracto:

En este trabajo pretendemos valorar el impacto y la interpretación que se ha hecho del concepto «*Student Engagement*» en el sistema universitario español. Para ello, hemos creído oportuno revisar las aportaciones realizadas en los últimos cinco años en los principales congresos internacionales en innovación docente universitaria celebrados en España y las publicaciones de ámbito nacional que sobre este tema aparecen registradas en las bases de datos de Scopus y Web of Science. Con ello, delimitaremos no solo el impacto del *Student Engagement* entre los docentes nacionales e internacionales que participan en estos foros, sino también la interpretación que hacen de dicho concepto.

La revisión de documentos y nuestra propia posición como docentes nos hace reflexionar sobre una propuesta que pueda guiar futuras líneas de investigación en el tema. En este sentido, consideramos que la gestión de la universidad, especialmente en el sistema español, aún no se realiza teniendo en cuenta una visión holística de la experiencia del estudiante universitario. Para desarrollar plenamente las tres dimensiones de actuación sobre el *Student Engagement* será necesario un enfoque multidisciplinar que considere tanto las aportaciones más puras del *management*, del *university experiential marketing*, como las de las *educational sciences* con sus conocimientos en metodologías docentes.

Palabras clave: compromiso del estudiante, sistema universitario español, revisión bibliométrica.



1. INTRODUCTION

At the international level and since the 1990s, a newfound interest has been taken in the study of university Student Engagement as part of efforts to boost and improve teaching in higher education. Thus, from an academic point of view, this concept has become a fundamental area of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), while in the institutional sphere it has begun to be used as an indicator of competitiveness by more and more countries to assess the quality of the educational resources on offer in a broad sense.

Although at the beginning the term Engagement was linked to job performance in organizations (Salanova and Schaufeli, 2009), today its use has been extended to different aspects of the university sector. In this regard, the main studies published have focused on the discussion and definition of the Student Engagement concept (Kahu, 2013), as well as on the analysis of the phenomenon's multidimensionality. Specifically, there are numerous studies focused on identifying the factors that contribute to fostering it both in its attitudinal and behavioural dimensions and on the results achieved through greater Student Engagement, both in terms of the student's learning and their personal development.

In this paper, we aim to evaluate the impact and the interpretation that has been made of the concept of Student Engagement in the Spanish university system. For this purpose, we have reviewed the contributions made in the last five years to the main international congresses on university teaching innovation held in Spain and the national-level publications on this topic that are registered in the Scopus and Web of Science databases. Through this review, we can determine not only the impact of Student Engagement among national and international teachers that participate in these forums, but also the interpretation they make of the concept.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SPANISH UNIVERSITY SYSTEM IN A NEW COMPETITIVE ENVIRONMENT

The creation of human capital is one of the main paths through which universities influence the development of a country and, therefore, governments establish the legislative framework for education, directly influencing the guidelines that govern the functioning of educational institutions in general and of the higher education system in particular³.

One of the main characteristics of the idiosyncrasy of the Spanish university system is the decentralization of competences in matters of education so that both funding and other basic aspects of university operation are the responsibility of the regional governments⁴. Specifically, they are responsible for 90% of the funds received by universities and in the public universities these funds are almost the only ones the centres receive, since families barely defray 10% of the average cost of higher education.

As a consequence of this decentralization, each regional government has financed its own university system based primarily on a network of public centres, although the private sector has a growing presence⁵. Moreover, with a full regional offer of qualifications, the mobility of Spanish university students has been

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very low since the different elements that complement the training offer are meagre due to the austerity of the investments in infrastructure, facilities, and in general all of those aspects that can improve the quality of the student's experience. While Anglophone university systems (US, Australia, or Great Britain) include Student Engagement as one of the determining factors in competitiveness, especially in private universities (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2014), in Spain the main factor in choosing the qualification and the centre has been proximity to the place of residence (García-Estévez and Duch-Brown, 2014).

Although the reality of the Spanish university system is still not at the level of competitiveness of the systems in Anglophone countries, we cannot ignore the fact that the market in which both the institutions and the students move is more and more open. The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has resulted in a new concept of university education, both because of the mobility possibilities for students and because of the immersion of students and teachers in a new work environment. That is, in this context of integration, while the prevailing teaching approaches in the north of Europe, both in content and in methodologies, were traditionally already closer to the system of theoretical and practical credits

³ In Spain, with the end of the dictatorship in the second half of the 1970s and in order to overcome the existing gaps in its under-evolved educational system (in comparison with other already democratic European countries), the first modernization efforts emerged. From then on, the true transformation of the university system began with the LRU [Organic Law 11/83 of 25 August, on University Reform (Official State Gazette No. 209 1 September 1983)] and continued with the LOU [Organic Law 6/2001, of 21 December, on Universities], which introduced the guidelines for new academic and training demands. Meanwhile, the Sorbonne Declaration of 1998, which planned the establishment of the European Higher Education Area, forced the Spanish government to initiate the process of adaptation of its higher education system to the requirements of the European Union in order to unify the university systems and thus achieve the free movement of students, the future recognition of their qualifications, and the desired single labour market.

⁴ The LRU promoted the process of decentralization of the universities, allowing the regional governments to expand their network of universities and gain control over budgets for higher education.

⁵ In the Spanish university system in the academic year 2014-2015 there were a total of 83 universities (81 actively teaching), the traditional ones being distributed across 243 campuses and the distance education or special ones across 113 centres. Of the 83 universities, 50 are public and 33 are private. The number of private universities has been proliferating in recent years, with on average one university being created annually (Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, 2015).

imposed by the Bologna Declaration⁶ (1999), in Spain, and in the other Mediterranean countries, there has been a greater theoretical tradition (Romero, Pascual and Fernández, 2015). Spanish universities have been, and still are, institutional structures that are resistant to change or have very slow processes of transformation in their forms of operating⁷, and this is precisely one of the main obstacles to their adaptation of the teaching-learning model to the competency-based curriculum, as established in the integration into the EHEA (Aparicio, Ruiz-Roqueñi and Catalán, 2014a and 2014b).

Spanish university teachers have found themselves at a crossroads where they have to adapt their teaching methodologies to the new demands, without the necessary experience or training. The scarcity of resources and the institutional support, focused on the recognition of research work to the detriment of teaching efforts, have further impeded the process of change. Therefore, the paradox that has been generated in the Spanish university system is that while being in a process of evolution, slowed down by the complex inner workings of institutional adaptation, there is a tendency towards openness and recognition of the need to adopt more evolved models of work in institutional management and in the teaching process.

Looking again at American and European universities with recognized prestige that, driven by the competitive impetus, are the most highly evolved, we have observed that there is an overriding interest in understanding and working towards greater Student Engagement. In these universities, competitiveness based on offering better physical infrastructures and better and more complementary training services has become fundamental in the search for student satisfaction in all its dimensions; i.e. academic and in terms of life experience (Aparicio *et al.*, 2015).

⁶ Although the Sorbonne Declaration of 1998 promoted the EHEA, this project actually became a reality with the Bologna Declaration (1999) backing the commitment to create degrees with easily understandable and comparable curricula across all the European universities; introducing the Diploma Supplement; adopting a system based on two main cycles (undergraduate and postgraduate) in all European university systems; and establishing an equal credit system for all of Europe, called European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), to promote student mobility.

⁷ Parallel to the decentralization of the Spanish university system across Autonomous Communities, the regulation of the higher education system in Spain has guaranteed the autonomy of universities in matters of the creation of their own statutes and representative bodies; the definition of their own structures; the development of their own teaching programmes; the planning and management of their budgets; and the administration of their assets.

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3. SCOPE AND CONTENT OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Researchers have proposed different ways of defining Student Engagement and the problems derived from its opposite (the Burnout phenomenon) in higher education institutions. With the development of this research, it has become commonly accepted that it is a multidimensional phenomenon, resulting from the interaction of factors related to the individual, that is, to the student in both their academic and personal dimensions, as well as to the context in which learning takes place (campus facilities, social environment, ancillary services, etc.). Therefore, we can confirm that it derives from the experience of the university student from a holistic perspective.

Analysing the existing literature on Student Engagement we can also argue that there is a shared vision of the importance of working on and actively managing all the dimensions that shape this «meta-construct», encompassing many factors and aspiring to bring together different lines of research that contribute to explaining student success (Fredricks *et al.*, 2005). Specifically, due to the multidimensional nature of this concept, lines of research both from the psychological perspective and the socio-cultural perspective merge (Kahu, 2013). Moreover, there is also a vast field of publications that, without being labelled by their authors under the rubric or keyword of Student Engagement, also refer to issues directly related to it, such as «Student Feedback, Student Representation, Student Approaches to Learning, Institutional Organiza-

tion, Learning Spaces, Architectural design and Learning Development», most of them produced in United Kingdom (Trowler and Trowler, 2010).

Trowler and Trowler (2010) carried out an in-depth literature review of the issue (supported by the Higher Education Academy), revealing that since the mid-1990s, studies labelled under the term Student Engagement have been published extensively. However, it was Astin's 1984 study that seminally marked the origin of the field.

Student Engagement manifests itself both in the student's attitude and in their behaviour. Therefore, three dimensions of action for improving Student Engagement have been identified and used as measuring scales in empirical studies showing their valid and reliable (Jonhson and Dean, 2001):

- **Social/Behavioural/Participatory engagement.** Students who are behaviorally engaged would typically comply with behavioral norms, such as attendance and involvement, and would demonstrate the absence of disruptive or negative behaviour.
- **Emotional engagement.** Students who engaged emotionally would experience affective reactions such as interest, enjoyment, or sense of belonging.
- **Cognitive/Intelectual/Academic engagement.** Cognitively engaged students would be interested in their learning, would seek to go beyond the requirements, and would relish challenge.

In each of these dimensions there is a positive and a negative extreme (positive engagement versus negative engagement), as well as a level of indifference, which would be non-engagement. Since each student can be positioned on a different level of these dimensions, different areas of work emerge in the relationship with each type or group of students.

In short, researching the factors that influence Engagement and Burnout provides the necessary insights to understand student conduct, their progress in the training process, as well as the attitude and attachment they feel towards the institution. This is what in business and marketing terms we would call the loyalty of the student towards their university.



4. BIBLIOMETRIC REVIEW OF THE MAIN CONTRIBUTIONS

The goal of our bibliometric review is to analyse the existing body of literature using quantitative methods to reach conclusions on the main topics studied, the relationships between topics, deficiencies or gaps in the research, etc. In the current study we have analysed the publications indexed in the Scopus and Web of Science databases attributed to Spanish researchers, as well as contributions from the last five years in international congresses dedicated to teaching innovation in which Student Engagement is discussed⁸. The search and selection criterion was that this concept appear in the title, the abstracts, or the keywords. After this step, we proceeded to group the papers according to chronological, geographical, and thematic or sub-thematic criteria to be able to have an overall view and extract conclusions on the evolution of the topic in the context described (Table 1).

⁸ Among which we find Foro Internacional sobre la Evaluación de la Calidad de la Investigación y de la Educación Superior (FECIES), Red Estatal de Docencia Universitaria (RED-U), and the three international events organized by International Academy of Technology, Education and Development (IATED): International Conference on Education, Research and Innovation (ICERI), International Conference on Education and New Learning Technologies (EDULEARN), and International Technology, Education and Development Conference (INTED).

Table 1. Geographic distribution of studies Student Engagement

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	Total	
TOTAL COMMUNICATIONS	3.061	3.041	3.042	3.166	3.549	17.021	–
Student Engagement	41	42	73	58	79	296	1.74 %
EE. UU.	13	17	22	7	15	74	25.00 %
United Kingdom	6	7	6	11	14	45	15.20 %
Australia/New Zeland	5	5	10	6	4	30	10.14 %
Spain	8	8	16	17	25	76	25.68 %
Europe	1	4	5	9	5	24	8.11 %
Africa	1	–	1	1	5	8	2.70 %
Latin America	–	–	1	–	–	3	1.01 %
Canada	3	1	4	–	1	9	3.04 %
Asia	4	–	7	1	2	14	4.73 %
Middle East	–	–	1	6	6	13	4.39 %

Source: Own study. INTED, ICERI and EDULEARN Proceedings; Scopus & Wos data.

As expected, the universities in the Anglophone world dominate scientific production on this topic, although, since 2014, a reduction in the percentage weight of studies by North American professors is noticed, with an increase in production by Europeans, Australians, and countries in the Middle East with a high degree of economic and university development. Whatever the educational context in which the professional activity is developed, all of the studies respond to a similar issue derived from the generational characteristics of the students that fill the classrooms on the five continents: lack of motivation, poor performance, passivity, poor relationship of Academia with the world of work, or the lecturers' capacity to adapt to the new teaching culture.

Today, university classrooms all over the world are shared by two generations whose members have grown up in the so-called «digital village»: the Y generation or Millennials, born between 1980 and 1994, who had to learn to use information and communication technologies (ICTs); and the Z generation, formed by digital natives born between 1995 and 2009. The generation gap with regard to their teachers has never been so

wide, and not just because of the use of ICTs, but also because their conception of knowledge, their learning mechanisms, their system of interpersonal relations, and their scale of values are inserted into a context of the globalization of knowledge. In contrast, the majority of the teachers belong to the Baby Boomers generation (or the generation that came immediately afterwards) to which the prevailing educational model of the 1980s and 1990s was applied, focused on the curriculum and on the lecturer as the protagonist of a passive teaching-learning process where the student listens, assimilates, and reproduces the content transmitted.

Since the 2000s, and especially since the appearance of the Smartphone, classrooms have experienced a profound transformation in which the generation gap has become more evident. In the words of David Garza from the Monterrey Institute of Technology and Higher Education, «we have students from the 21st century with professors from the 20th century, with educational models and spaces that were created in the 16th century» (Vallés Acosta 2014). It is difficult for the standard student to pay attention for ten minutes straight; they are

Table 2. Effective Engagement. Baby Boomers versus Millennials

Effective Engagement		
Boomers		Generations Y & Z
Verbal	>	Visual
Sit and Listen	>	Try and see
Teacher	>	Facilitator
Content (what)	>	Process (how)
Curriculum centred	>	Learner-centric
Closed book exams	>	Open book world

Source: McCrindle (2014).

incapable of separating themselves from their mobile phones, which they use indiscriminately to check their WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, or other social networks while the teacher tries to make them pay attention to the lecture. The reality, whether we like it or not, is that our students, who have grown up with a sense of immediacy and have access to knowledge just a click away, get bored, they do not see the usefulness of what we teach them, our language is foreign to them, and, their learning outcomes continue to be measured on a traditional scale of knowledge accumulation in which they obtain very poor results. However, we do not value other attitudes that could be very useful in the learning process and their professional future such as permanent connectivity, the reduction of geographical barriers, multitasking capabilities, very marked attraction towards challenges, or the predisposition towards collaboration.

All of these problems, as well as others relating to the singularity of each country, are at the origin of the educational innovation initiatives that appear in the studies analysed. The shared goal is no other than to find ways to be able to incentivise the students' participation and motivation in order to achieve significant improvements in academic performance and, thus, in the competitiveness of the future graduates in the world of work.

Table 3. Distribution of the themes included in the term «Student Engagement»

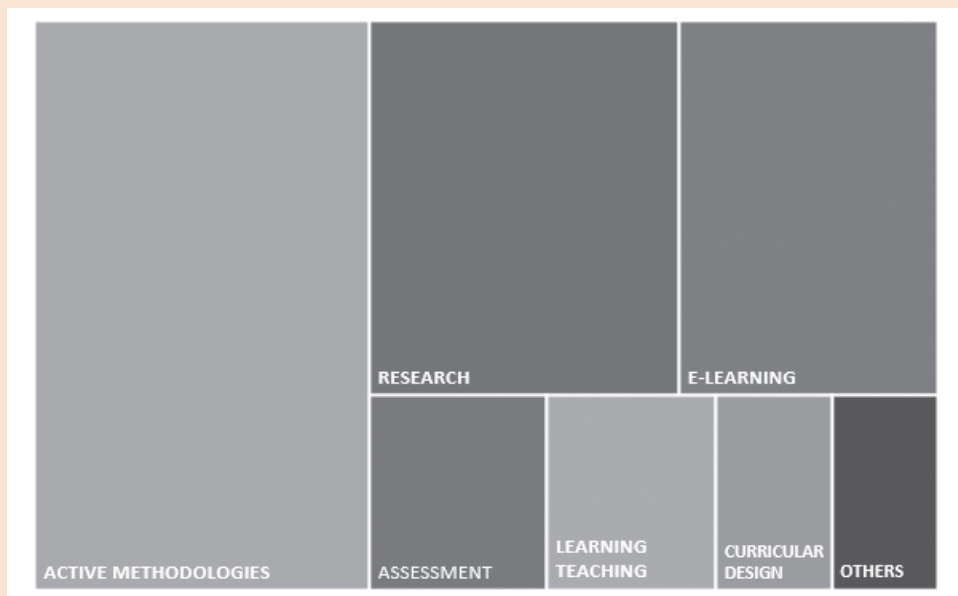
Themes	Articles	%
E-learning	56	18.92
Assessment	20	6.76
Learning Teaching	19	6.42
Research	67	22.64
Curricular Design	13	4.39
Active Methodologies ..	110	37.16
Others	11	3.72

Source: Own study. INTED, ICERI and EDULEARN Proceedings; Scopus & Wos data.

Table 3 and Figure 1 (see next page) show the main issues tackled by educational innovation studies and that their authors identify with the topic of Student Engagement. As we can observe, the concerns of the teachers are geared towards eminently practical issues: application of active methodologies to promote participation (37%), research on those aspects that allow for the improvement of Student Engagement (22.64%), the potential and problems of e-learning (19%), effective assessment (7%), teacher training (7%), and the complete renovation of the design of syllabi (4.4%). Only 14% of the studies also tackle Engagement in its institutional, social, or psychological dimensions. In order words, is the third dimension of Student Engagement the one is committed, enhancing the cognitive and intellectual aspect from an academic point of view because this aspect adapts better to the university tradition.

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Figure 1. Distribution of the themes included in the term «Student Engagement»



Source: Own study. INTED, ICERI and EDULEARN Proceedings; Scopus & Wos data.

Despite the heterogeneity of the problems dealt with in very different educational cultures and systems, what draws our attention is the unanimous response of professionals when it comes to proposing the use of ICTs in the educational context, with the most varied of ends (56% of a total of 295 papers analysed). Of the 166 proposals that recommend tools related to ICTs, a little less than half (46%) make proposals in which multimedia resources complement the lecture without the students intervening actively in their learning. In the best of the cases, their participation is limited to a model of immediate response to the teacher's lecture, whether via clickers, Smartphones, or tools available for this end in the institutions own virtual classrooms. This type of proposal is very frequent in scenarios with very large groups in the first years of the degree that discourage the application of any kind of active methodology. Moreover, they tend to coincide with countries with a long academic teaching tradition that are taking their first steps towards integration into a competitive context of university teaching, as is the case of Spain.

However, the most recent educational proposals try to take advantage of the digitalization of new generations to involve them in their own learning; that is, to strengthen Student Engagement. In this new scenario, the university teacher acts as facilitator, stimulating curiosity, designing new challenges, promoting collaborative learning, and adapting the teaching techniques that best fulfil the teaching objectives. For this, investment is needed in teacher training, an appropriate learning environment must be created, and teaching activity should be fostered as a fundamental part of professional performance. Without this institutional management approach, teaching innovation will be seriously compromised, given that lecturers will search for a comfort zone to develop their activity, applying some external innovation elements (such as the use of ICTs) without producing a real change in teaching culture.

From the Anglophone world, active methodologies that enable a radical change in approaches to the teaching-learning process are spreading. These types of ap-

Table 4. Topics of interest in the use of active methodologies in university teaching

Themes	Articles	%
Active and Cooperative Learning	56	30.43
Project/Problem Based Learning (PBL)	12	6.52
Flipped Class	9	4.89
Blended Learning	4	2.17
Community Learning	9	4.89
Gamification	21	11.41
Led Learning	12	6.52
E-Learning	53	28.80
Case Method	8	4.35

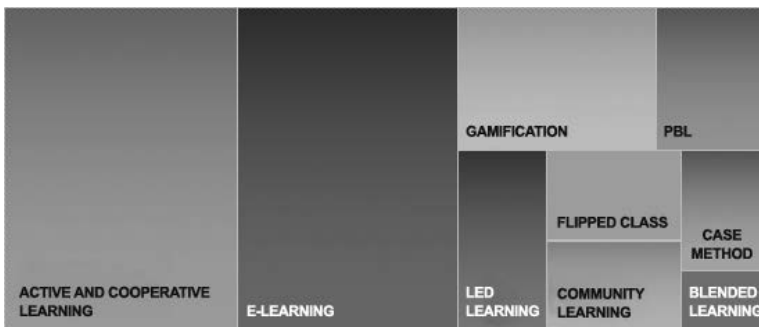
Source: Own study. INTED, ICERI and EDULEARN Proceedings; Scopus & Wos data.

proaches are entering the Spanish university system little by little through training courses offered by some universities and contributions to international educational innovation congresses. Table 4 and Figure 2 show the distribution of the proposals made in the studies that inform this paper and that are focused on active methodologies.

(...) we consider that the management of the university, especially in the Spanish system, still does not take a holistic perspective of the university student's experience into account

The proposals are not mutually exclusive, since many appear in combination. In this regard, active and collaborative learning are put forward in most of the methodologies cited, in the same way as e-learning is put forward for some specific points in the learning process. Despite this, we have tried to label the proposals made by the authors on the basis of their essence. Thus, under the label of e-learning we have categorized those methodological approaches that are developed fully on-line and that present very specific problems: high abandonment rates, low student motivation, difficulty in carrying out effective assessment or being able to use teaching materials of a similar quality to those of on-site teaching. Some of these problems are tempered in Blended Learning, where the student combines on-site work and on-line work to achieve effective learning. This way, the quality of the materials is controlled and contact and relationships between peers are promoted as well as between the former and the lecturer, but at the same time the student can decide on the place, time, and space of work.

Figure 2. Topics of interest in the use of active methodologies in university teaching



Source: Own study. INTED, ICERI and EDULEARN Proceedings; Scopus & Wos data.

The mentality of the Millennials clashes with that of their teachers because, although greater use of ICTs achieves greater closeness between both, their merely instrumental use diminishes the potential for improving the different aspects of Student Engagement

Among the on-site proposals, the one that has the greatest weight in the overall sample (30.5%) is active and cooperative learning, which proposes a great variety of active learning activities with well-defined functions for each student and a task to be carried out in a group, making it especially appropriate for its application among large groups (Keyser, 2000). In this section, we can also include the Case Method or Problem and/or Project-Based Learning, which are developed in open and flexible learning environments (led-learning) using one or several cooperative learning techniques. The effectiveness of all of these methods has been widely demonstrated since they have been used for years in universities as prestigious as Harvard or Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). In recent years, active class dynamics are integrating games and humour as learning tools (Gamification), since they allow for the strengthening of positive values common to all games: motivation, concentration, effort, or loyalty.

All of these methods demand a restructuring of the tasks the student should undertake. Given the fact that the effectiveness of instruction lies in the autonomy of the process, the flipped class (which combines characteristics from all of the proposals analysed so far) is spreading to university classrooms in many parts of the world. «Flipping the class» consists of moving part or the majority of direct instruction outside of the classroom (using digital tools) to take advantage of the time in class by maximizing one-on-one interactions between the teacher and the student. For this, we need flexible environments where students choose when and where to learn; a student-focused learning culture; the development of intentional content that would be more apt for being taught in the classroom; and, lastly, professional teachers capable of maximizing face-to-face time, providing feedback, and assessing the students' work (Vallés Acosta, 2014).

Although so far they are not present in the university context, several authors propose learning models that connect directly with the individual's reality. Perhaps the most integrating approach would be the community learning proposals that support educational equality in the framework of the information society, where autonomous teachers are sought that are willing to innovate, experiment, and learn in the classrooms and where families and the general community actively participate in their children's comprehensive education (Flecha and Puigvert, 2002).

5. CONCLUSIONS

Through our review of contributions on the topic of Student Engagement in the main international congresses, as well as the databases considered, we have identified the feelings and concerns shown in these forums by the average teacher.

We can thus conclude that in higher education, and increasingly in Spain, there is a lot of awareness around the issues generated by achieving greater Student Engagement. However, the educational innovation approach developed in this context still does not reflect the true spirit of the transformation that needs to be undertaken. The mentality of the Millennials clashes with that of their teachers because, although greater use of ICTs achieves greater closeness between both, their merely instrumental use diminishes the potential for improving the different aspects of Student Engagement. Is for this reason that the incorporation of active methodologies in the classroom, despite being the appropriate tool, has not allowed Student Engagement to work in all its facets.

The review of the documents, and our own position as teachers, makes us reflect on a proposal that could guide future lines of research on the issue. In this regard, we consider that the management of the university, especially in the Spanish system, still does not take a holistic perspective of the university student's experience into account. In order to fully develop the three dimensions of action to improve Student Engagement, we need a multidisciplinary approach that would take into consideration the purest contributions from Management, from University Experiential Marketing, and from the Educational Sciences with their knowledge of teaching methodologies.

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