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Market research applied as educational innovation: an interdisciplinary academic consulting project

La investigación de mercados aplicada como innovación educativa: un proyecto interdisciplinar de consultoría académica

Nuria Alabau-Tejada
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7409-0190
Universidad Europea de Valencia (Spain)

Verónica Tejero-Martos*
https://orcid.org/0009-0002-9828-4779
Universidad Europea de Valencia (Spain)

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*Corresponding author: veronica.tejero@universidadeuropea.es
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ABSTRACT

Teaching market research requires active methodologies that link theory and practice. This study focuses on a classroom simulation applied to the Market Research I course, aimed at

strengthening understanding of qualitative research, specifically in-depth interviews, through an analysis of tourist behavior in Valencia. The objective was for students to explore the factors that determine the choice of tourist booking channels (physical agencies vs. OTAs) and apply field methodologies in a realistic context. The literature review highlights the transformation of the tourism sector and the importance of experiential methodologies and the development of cross-cutting skills in higher education. The methodology consisted of five phases: design of the simulated scenario, instruction on qualitative techniques, fieldwork, data analysis with specialized software, and presentation of results. The results showed improvements in the understanding of qualitative research, motivation, critical thinking, communication, and professional ethics. The discussion highlights that classroom simulation allows for the consolidation of practical skills and the transfer of theoretical knowledge to real contexts, promoting deep and applied learning in university students.

Keywords. market research, educational innovations, empirical research, consumer behaviour

RESUMEN

La enseñanza de la investigación de mercados requiere metodologías activas que vinculen teoría y práctica. Este estudio se centra en una simulación en el aula aplicada a la asignatura Investigación de Mercados I, orientada a fortalecer la comprensión de la investigación cualitativa, específicamente la entrevista en profundidad, mediante un análisis del comportamiento turístico en Valencia. El objetivo fue que los estudiantes exploraran los factores que determinan la elección de canales de reserva turística (agencias físicas vs OTAs) y aplicaran metodologías de campo en un contexto realista. La revisión de la literatura destaca la transformación del sector turístico y la importancia de las metodologías experienciales y el desarrollo de competencias transversales en educación superior. La metodología consistió en cinco fases: diseño del escenario simulado, instrucción sobre técnicas cualitativas, trabajo de campo, análisis de datos con software especializado y presentación de resultados. Los resultados evidenciaron mejoras en la comprensión de la investigación cualitativa, la motivación, el pensamiento crítico, la comunicación y la ética profesional. La discusión resalta que la simulación en el aula permite consolidar competencias prácticas y transferir conocimientos teóricos a contextos reales, promoviendo un aprendizaje profundo y aplicado en estudiantes universitarios.

Palabras clave. *estudio de mercado, innovación educativa, investigación empírica, comportamiento del consumidor*

INTRODUCTION

This study delves into the implementation of a pedagogical methodology that integrates active learning with interdisciplinary participation, within the framework of the Market Research I course, from the perspective of analyzing the tourism sector in Valencia.

Placing the student in the context of the research, it should be noted that in recent decades tourism has established itself as a constantly expanding sector (Serrano-Amado et al., 2018; Chura and Vargas, 2022; Romero et al., 2023). This exponential growth is largely driven by the increase in international trade, the transformation of consumer behavior, and the profitability of intermediaries in the industry, such as physical and digital travel agencies (Ivanov, 2020; Zhou et al., 2024; Inversini, 2025; Turnšek and Radivojević, 2025). Not surprisingly, the rapid decline of physical travel agencies and the rise of online platforms and OTAs have transformed tourism behavior patterns (Garín-Muñoz and Pérez-Amaral, 2011; Ivanov, 2020; Kalıpçı, et al., 2024,

Inversini, 2025). In this context, it is a priority to define and identify the key factors that determine consumers' choice of tourism booking channel, whether through a physical agency or a digital platform, thus raising the following research question: to analyze what factors influence the choice of booking channel (physical agency vs. online/OTA) among tourists visiting the city of Valencia, and how their current travel purchasing behaviors manifest themselves.

In the scenario described, student participation takes on a central role, as the research is approached as a methodological application in a real qualitative research context. In this sense, the students took on an active role in all phases of the research process, which allowed for an immersive experience of an exploratory analysis process. Through this approach, following Hertel and Milis (2002) and McClellan and Hyle (2012), the classroom was configured as a space for experiential and reflective learning, in which theory and methodological practice converged, and students actively participated in the generation of knowledge, developing analytical, critical, and communicative skills specific to social research.

Based on the defined research problem, this study has two objectives. On the one hand, using simulation in the classroom, to promote in-depth knowledge of qualitative market research using the technique of in-depth interviews and their subsequent analysis and interpretation; that is, the practical application of the theoretical knowledge presented in the classroom. Secondly, as a secondary objective and because of the previous one, to explore the current travel purchasing behaviors of tourists visiting Valencia, analyzing in depth whether the customer journey is carried out through traditional travel agencies or online travel agencies (OTAs).

Although there is extensive literature analyzing tourism and tourist behavior (Serrano-Amado et al., 2018; Ivanov, 2020; Chura and Vargas, 2022; Romero et al., 2023, Zhou et al., 2024), little specific empirical evidence has been found that analyzes tourist preferences applied to local environments such as the city of Valencia, with even more limited literature addressing the application of this topic as a methodological resource in the field of education. Consequently, combining the analysis of the motivations, perceptions, and purchasing patterns of tourists in Valencia provides useful empirical evidence (Garín-Muñoz and Pérez-Amaral, 2011), while immersing students in a real-life shopping experience and consumer analysis in a current context, allowing them to develop research skills through applied learning (McClellan and Hyle, 2012).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The tourism industry: Evolution and transformation

The tourism industry has established itself as one of the fastest-growing sectors worldwide in recent decades, characterized by a highly profitable and competitive environment.

Firstly, globalization and the liberalization of tourist flows have allowed destinations to open to new segments of travelers, stimulating demand (Zequiri, 2024). Secondly, consumer tourism has evolved: thanks to the widespread use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), consumers have greater access to information, price comparisons, and customer reviews based on previous experiences (Ivanov, 2020).

In the scenario described above, traditional travel agencies are experiencing a sharp decline, attributed to the exponential growth of OTAs: digital platforms that allow consumers to compare, book, and manage travel services entirely online (such as Booking.com and Airbnb) (Garín-Muñoz and Pérez-Amaral, 2011). OTAs offer convenience, competitive prices, and user-generated reviews, which has changed consumer expectations and drastically reduced the market share of traditional agencies (Silva, Mendes, and Marqués, 2019; Portelli, 2024). This phenomenon is reflected in the proliferation of online platforms and the growing importance of user-generated feedback in influencing purchasing decisions (Boluda and López, 2024).

Soft Skills in higher education

This real and urgent transformation of the sector responds to the evolution of the educational paradigm in higher education. Various authors, including Akpomi and Amadi (2010) and Mohammed et al. (2025), point out that the development of soft skills in the context of business education is particularly important. These mainly include interpersonal relationships, peaceful coexistence, teamwork, dedication to duty, respect for superiors and co-workers, punctuality, and hard work. The authors emphasize these seven skills because, throughout the study of business organizations, it has become clear that they are the ones that have the most direct impact, from the perspective of cognitive pedagogy, on the connection between the business world and the development of an educational career.

These soft skills are developed below (Robles, 2012; Coronado-Maldonado and Benítez-Márquez, 2023):

a) Interpersonal relationships: Necessary for developing the ability to communicate effectively and empathetically with classmates and future coworkers, as well as with teachers and/or future managers. Fostering these relationships creates professional bonds based on respect and collaboration.
b) Peaceful coexistence: Essential as a skill for maintaining a harmonious atmosphere in the classroom and/or future work environment, resolving conflicts through dialogue and constructive means. Promotes good group dynamics.
c) Teamwork: Essential as a skill for promoting collaboration with other students and/or future coworkers on projects and activities through sharing responsibilities, contributing ideas, and supporting the group to achieve common goals.
d) Dedication to duty: Essential for committing to academic and/or work tasks, completing activities, readings, and assigned projects with a certain degree of responsibility and discipline.
e) Respect for superiors and colleagues: Essential for developing an attitude of recognition towards authority (teachers and/or managers), as well as for validating the opinions and rights of colleagues and/or professionals from an ethical perspective.
f) Punctuality: Vital when it comes to meeting deadlines, demonstrating responsibility and personal organization.
g) Hard work: Key to the improvement and constant effort expected of you as a student and/or professional. Perseverance in the face of difficulties and dedication of the time necessary to achieve goals in both learning and professional environments are highlighted.

On the other hand, Ohaka (2020) and Joshi and Chugh (2019) have observed that students can benefit from organizational learning, which can be applied after graduation and even in their daily lives. In addition, students may perceive these soft skills as cognitive pedagogical obstacles due to a lack of practice and familiarity. This is when teachers must intervene to help them overcome these barriers and strike a balance with current educational methodologies.

Simulation-based methodologies

The implementation of soft skills in the higher education learning model is a critical starting point for simulation-based teaching innovation, as described in this study. In this context, simulation-based learning (SBL) methodologies emerge as a solid pedagogical tool, facilitating active, experiential, and interdisciplinary learning. This approach not only responds to the demand for higher education that transcends theoretical knowledge to encourage the direct application of concepts in practical and challenging situations (Torres-Taborda et al., 2024), but also aligns with evidence showing significant improvements in academic performance and teaching evaluation in market research courses when projects based on real or simulated clients are integrated (Tofighi, 2022). Several authors have pointed out that simulation-based methodology is establishing itself

as a robust pedagogical strategy for promoting the acquisition of transferable skills and critical thinking in complex and dynamic environments (Zhou et al., 2024). Not surprisingly, studies by Hsu (2017) and Zeqiri (2024) have shown how, through the simulation of authentic scenarios, students developed a deep understanding of the complexities of the digital tourism market and emerging business strategies (Hsu, 2017; Zeqiri, 2024).

The origins of this methodology date back to the 1970s, with the implementation of business simulations that sought to replicate managerial decision-making in controlled environments (Mandalia, 2023). The evaluation has focused on integrating advanced technological tools to more accurately simulate the dynamics of complex markets and the interaction between multiple economic and consumer behavior variables (Starks and Carroll, 2018). Currently, these simulations have become more sophisticated to include psychosocial and cultural factors that influence purchasing decisions, allowing students to explore the implications of various digital marketing strategies and online reputation management (Azanza et al., 2022; Price-Howard and Lewis, 2023).

Considering the facts described, as Vélez and Alonso (2025) coined, the integration of simulation environments has proven effective for developing decision-making skills in dynamic business contexts, preparing students for real-world challenges. In short, applied to the context of the present study, real interaction with various channels and the accessibility that SBL provides to other consumers' online experiences amplify the need for students to develop a deep understanding of current tourist consumer behavior.

METHODOLOGY

This study used simulated classroom environments as its main methodology, as it forms part of the educational innovation project in which it is framed. According to Hertel and Milis (2002), a simulated educational environment is a classroom event based on sequential decision-making, in which students take on a specific role to manage specific tasks within a discipline. This event is modeled on reality and, in turn, managed by the instructions of the instructor (teacher).

Teacher profile

As noted above, the innovation was managed and taught by the two teachers responsible for teaching the subject, both theory and practice. The characteristics of the profile of teachers of the Market Research subject, which is the subject of this Teaching Innovation, are described below:

Table 1. Definition of participating teachers

Teacher	Course experience	Participating degree	Teacher
Teacher1	4 years	Business Administration	43
Teacher2	2 years	Marketing	27

Source: Own elaboration

Student profile

With the aim of implementing this teaching innovation among all students enrolled in the course described, all groups studying the course in the same language were selected. The characteristics of the student sample are described below.

As shown in table 2, participation was higher for the Business Administration degree given the nature of the composition of the degrees. Similarly, given that the students were in their first year of the degree, as shown in Table 2, no specific mechanisms were established to control the level of prior experience of the participants. Although this aspect was evaluated in an exploratory manner by formulating statements and questions directed at the students themselves, which made it

possible to verify the absence of prior knowledge in the field of market research, the students nevertheless expressed a high degree of interest and a positive and enthusiastic attitude towards the possibility of participating in a real immersion in a social research process.

Table 2. Definition of participating students

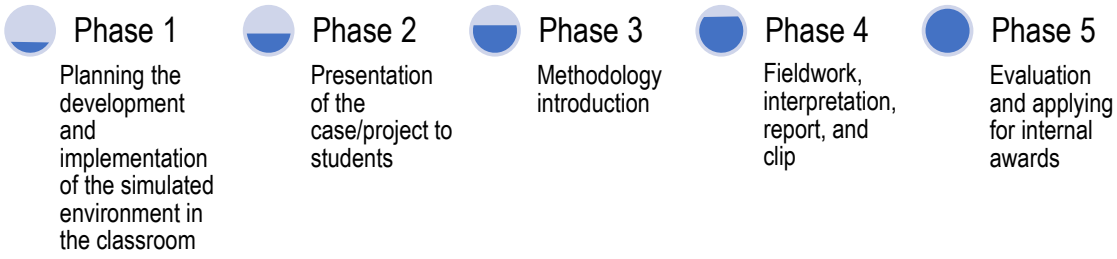
Group	Year	Degree	N	%
Spanish	1st	Business Administration	43	61%
Spanish	2nd	Marketing	27	39%

Source: Own elaboration

Methodology phases

To carry out the simulated environment, five main phases are determined, which are described below (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Phases of the simulation methodology in the classroom



Source: Own elaboration

In phase 1, the two university lecturers involved in the project agree on the implementation and development of the simulated environment in their classrooms. As part of this planning, it is specified that this simulation will be applied to the two groups of the Market Research I course, in two business degrees, with a total of n=70 participating university students. At the same time, a schedule is agreed upon for the delivery and presentation of results, covering a period of around four months.

In phase 2, the students are presented with the fictitious case they are going to study and the methodology they are going to follow in the coming weeks, which will in turn become a final assessable project. Specifically, the case presented to the students placed them in the role of market research consultants, with a fictional travel agency as their client, which wanted to know the reasons why tourists search for, plan, and purchase their trips to the city of Valencia (Spain) via OTAs (online travel agencies) or traditional agencies. This case also has a dual purpose. Not only does it aim to transfer market research learning to students through practice, but also to highlight how the reality of the technological environment is affecting the decline of traditional travel agencies, the rise of self-consumption, and changes in consumer behavior.

As for the simulated environment of this study, it had the following structure, following the recommendations of Hertel and Milis (2002):

1) Define learning objectives
2) Design the simulated scenario
3) Manage the simulation
4) Reflect after the simulation or debriefing
5) Evaluate the impact of the simulation

In phase 3, both teachers begin explaining the qualitative methodology in the classroom to the two groups, separately but in a coordinated manner. They present the qualitative tools currently used in market research, emphasizing in-depth interviews in all their variants, as this is the technique being practiced.

After that, the groups of students begin to work on the research inside and outside the classroom, mentored by their teachers. They study everything from the context of tourism and travel agencies in Valencia to the busiest areas of the city to plan field study.

In this way, in groups, a script for the structured in-depth interview is drawn up based on four blocks: a) warm-up, b) introduction, c) development or body, and d) closing and post-interview. The script was also translated into English, as the tourists to be interviewed could speak Spanish.

In phase 4, students begin their fieldwork. Prior to this, teachers emphasized the need to conduct a pre-test in the classroom to ensure that the structured in-depth interview is well understood and that the resources studied in the classroom are used so that the interview flows smoothly and the results are as close as possible to what is expected.

After this, within the specified days, the students moved in groups to the most popular tourist spots in Valencia that they have already studied. Before the interviews, the students inform the interviewees that the interview will be recorded (audio), that it is anonymous, and that it is for academic purposes. Virtual interviews are also conducted with tourists who visited Valencia in the last year, but who were not in the city at the time of fieldwork.

At this stage, the teachers remind the students that, after the fieldwork, it is time to analyze the primary data collected. Each group then transcribes the interviews (audio) using TurboScribe. Next, students are taught how to use the CATMA qualitative data processing software. The following sessions are devoted to data processing, on the one hand, using software (word clouds, scatter plots, KWIC, and doubletrees) and, on the other hand, analyzing verbatim transcripts to observe patterns.

In phase 5, students create a report with the results to be presented hypothetically to the client, maintaining an academic format, and using the scientific method as a basis. In addition, these reports are presented in another format, a three-minute clip.

Furthermore, the main conclusions are shared in a discussion format to compare what was explained in the classroom with what was learned through the classroom simulation. Afterwards, the teachers select the group that has developed the report and clip with the most innovative results and most aligned with the project. At the same time, this group presents its proposed solution to a project to other grades and faculties for internal awards at the university where they are studying, winning the award for the most innovative project in the faculty.

It should be noted that all the activities within the phases outlined above were subject to assessable deliverables aligned with the learning outcomes and competencies of the grade and subject in question.

Table 3 below details the activities carried out within each phase of the project, as well as their timing.

Table 3. Schedule of activities carried out during the project

Phase	Schedule	Activity
P1: Planning the development and implementation of the simulated environment in the classroom	Week 1 (February 17-21, 2025)	Consolidation of the project proposal among the teachers involved and scheduling of milestones
P2: Presentation of the case/project to students	Week 2 (February 24-28, 2025)	Presentation of the project to students (jointly),

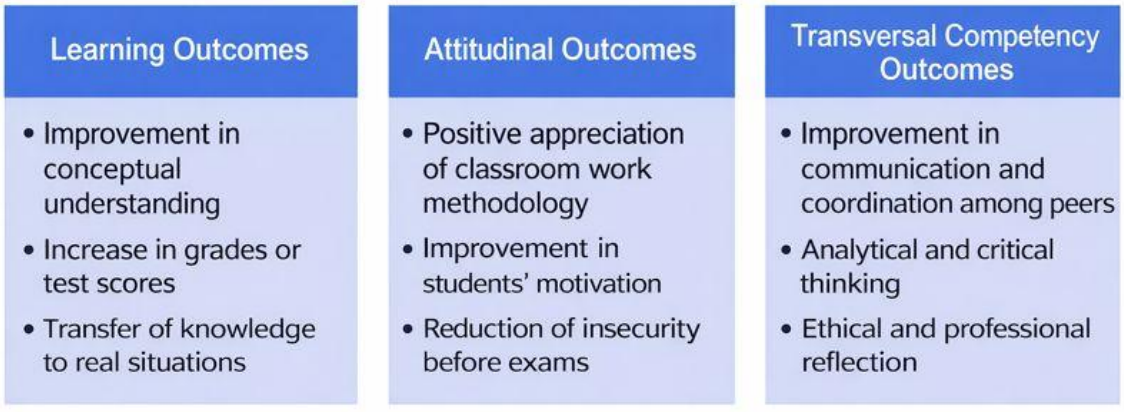
		contextualization of the state of the art
P3: Methodology introduction	Week 3 (March 10-14, 2025)	Explanation of the methodology to the students (jointly)
P4: Fieldwork, interpretation, report, and clip	Week 4 (March 31-April 4, 2025)	Development of the script for in-depth interviews in the classroom, conducting interviews in the city of Valencia, analysis and interpretation of data using CATMA software, creation of a final report, and production of a clip for awards.
P5: Evaluation and applying for internal awards	Week 5 (April 7-11, 2025) Week 6 (May 5-9, 2025)	Presentation of results (reports and clips) to teachers, presentation to internal university awards

Source: Own elaboration

RESULTS

In accordance with the above, Figure 2 shows the three main results of this communication.

Figure 2. Study results



Source: Own elaboration

On the one hand, there are the learning outcomes. In this regard, an improvement was observed in the understanding of concepts related to market research, specifically qualitative research. Theoretical instruction in the classroom is necessary to lay the foundations of knowledge, accompanied by real and concise examples. However, the simulation of this project allowed all the content of the subject to be put into practice. This led to an increase in grades and final exams in general, based on a comparison with previous courses. Of the total number of students on the course analyzed, it is estimated that, specifically in the project, 90% obtained grades between 8 and 9 out of 10, and the remaining 10% obtained 7 out of 10. Regarding final grades, in the previous year, the percentage of non-attendees and failures was 4%, with 25% passing, 36% receiving a B, and 36% receiving an A. In the academic year in question, the percentages improved, with no non-

attendees or failures, 10.3% passing, 48.3% receiving a B, and 41.4% receiving an A. Thus, although the transfer of knowledge to real-life situations is a complex alternative, it is viable if the aim is to consolidate long-term learning outcomes.

In terms of attitudinal results, students rated the use of this methodology in the classroom positively because, despite having to work harder during the semester to achieve the expected and appropriate results, they perceived it as innovative, pragmatic, and focused on professional environments. At the same time, there was a noticeable improvement in the motivation of the students involved, reflected in the high attendance rates at the project sessions (between 82% and 96%), as they took on the role of front-line market researchers/analysts and felt more committed to the work. This, at the same time, reduced their insecurity and anxiety about the assessment tests (activities and final exam). Having been working continuously, receiving feedback from teachers, and progressively increasing their knowledge, at key assessment moments, the students had already established their understanding of the subject in an organic, innovative, and fun way.

Finally, it was observed that results in terms of cross-cutting skills improved. This was evident in the satisfaction surveys, where the methodology used was rated 4.2 out of 5 in terms of the skills acquired on the course. Specifically, there was a perceived improvement in intragroup and intergroup communication and coordination, which is not usually easy to achieve. In addition, they developed analytical and critical thinking skills that, from the outset, were not perceived as an advanced aspect (e.g., processing and synthesizing primary information, identifying patterns and consumption trends, proposing evidence-based conclusions, etc.). Added to this was the ethical and professional reflection they made on the importance of data protection (privacy/confidentiality), respect for the interviewee, and the need to generate quality data, which ultimately strengthened their ethical sense as potential future researchers.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that the implementation of active methodologies based on simulation applied to qualitative market research promotes deep learning and comprehensive student development. The improvement observed in conceptual understanding suggests that the combination of theoretical exposure and simulated practice allows for a more effective transfer of knowledge to real-world contexts. This relationship between theory and practice is in line with Kolb's (2015) postulates on experiential learning, who, as noted above, coined the idea that knowledge is constructed through the transformation of experience. In this sense, the increase in grades and academic performance, compared to previous courses, can be interpreted as a direct consequence of the active and meaningful learning promoted by simulation.

In terms of attitudinal outcomes, a positive impact has been observed on students' motivation and perception of the subject. Taking on the role of researchers or market analysts led to greater involvement, reduced anxiety about assessments, and strengthened self-confidence.

On the other hand, cross-cutting skills (such as communication, coordination, critical thinking, and ethical reflection) also showed significant progress. These results reinforce the idea that collaborative and contextualized learning experiences promote the development of socio-emotional and analytical reasoning skills, which are essential for the comprehensive training of university students. In addition, ethical reflection on the responsible use of data and the protection of privacy demonstrates the consolidation of professional and ethical thinking that transcends the technical scope of the subject.

In turn, the results shown have relevant implications for curriculum design and teaching practice in higher education.

First, they highlight the need to integrate active and experiential methodologies that allow students to apply theoretical knowledge in simulated or real contexts.

Second, it is worth noting the importance of continuous and formative feedback from the teacher, as this guidance promotes self-regulation of learning and contributes to reducing anxiety about assessments.

Finally, it is recommended to promote spaces for ethical and critical reflection within the subjects, to strengthen the civic and professional training of students, responding to the social demands of a higher education committed to responsibility and sustainability.

Limitations and future research

This study is not without limitations that suggest future lines of research.

Regarding the sample, it should be noted that its size and specificity are limited to a specific group of students in a single subject, which restricted the generalization of the results to other educational contexts or disciplines. Likewise, the data on attitudinal perceptions were based on self-reports, which may imply social desirability biases. In light of the above, and in order to verify the replicability of the results in different contexts in future research, it is recommended that the sample be expanded, taking into account both the academic level and the number of universities involved, and that longitudinal studies be implemented to analyze the permanence of learning and skills acquired over time.

On the other hand, it is considered relevant that future research takes into account, within the controlled experimental design, the establishment of direct causal relationships, as this would allow the methodology applied and the results to be richer in terms of the influence of contextual factors such as initial motivation or teacher characteristics.

Another line of research that may be of interest would be to incorporate mixed methodologies. That is, methodologies that integrate quantitative variables (such as academic performance, frequency of participation, punctuality rate, time spent using technological resources, interactions with the tools provided, contributions per group member, peer evaluations, average time spent on tasks) and qualitative variables (such as group and individual opinions expressed by students, teacher observation of work interactions and type of leadership or collaboration observed, teacher observation of signs of commitment and demotivation, creativity in final projects), in order to obtain a more complete understanding of the educational impact of simulation.

Finally, we propose exploring the mediating role of variables such as self-efficacy (how they measure their own autonomy) and metacognition (how they explain their own learning process), intrinsic motivation, and emotional regulation, which could provide a more in-depth explanation of the cognitive and affective processes involved in active and experiential learning.

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