

Implementation of Active Methodologies in International Relations Through Cinema: Experience From Project-Based Learning in Graduate School

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The article describes the results of the educational innovation project “Implementation of active methodologies in the Master’s Degree in International Journalism through cinema”,¹ which aims to develop the transversal lines of the Master’s Degree in International Journalism based on the application of innovative tools in subjects of Module I and II, as well as to enhance sensitivity and awareness of Cultural Diversity and Human Rights. The methodology used is discussion through the Cinema-Forum format and pre- and post-forum questionnaires are used to evaluate the results. As a conclusion, it can be deduced that the film-forum is a tool that enables the development of transversal competencies based on the interaction process resulting from the activity as an effective complement to graduate courses in the discipline of International Relations.

Keywords: active methodologies, cinema-forum, post-graduate, international relations, cultural diversity, Project-Based Learning (PBL)

INTRODUCTION

The idea of taking advantage of the educational capabilities of audiovisuals is not new. It begins from its birth, because it should not be forgotten that the invention itself is almost an adaptation of Muybridge’s scientific chronophotography of motion analysis (along with previously known techniques used, for example, for the zoetrope).

During the early years of cinema, the General Film Company, one of the most important distributors in the United States, had an education division. Researcher Martin F. Norden relates the curious story of its director, executive Katherine F. Carter, who in 1914 left her secure position at the head of that conglomerate to establish her own service, the Educational and Motion Picture Service Bureau in New York (Norden, 1995). It was a company that rented projection equipment to schools, churches, clubs and hotels, and even programmed the films for them. In other words, although in that early period moralists did not hesitate to criticize the mass attendance of the public to a not very edifying spectacle, or to want to censor the most liberal stories, progress was making its way even in such unsuspecting environments as churches. The unavoidable conclusion of the existence of this incipient educational market, parallel to the entertainment market, is that the pedagogical capacity of cinema was evident from the very beginning, especially at a time when illiteracy was still abundant, which made audiovisual material particularly effective.

From that time on, cinema, and later television, has been used with an educational objective, taking advantage of its capacity for direct communication and its virtues as a means of spectacle and entertainment, to transmit complex concepts without too much effort on the part of the spectators. A learning model is pursued in which knowledge is acquired almost without being aware that one is participating in training, or at least without the work involved in traditional study. This makes it ideal as a complement to other more conventional techniques such as master classes or theoretical exercises.

Specifically in the area of international relations, certain titles have been proposed as the perfect formula for disseminating other cultures. Geographical data or raw statistics about a country cannot explain the essence of popular life, of the feelings of its inhabitants. In the absence of a physical journey to the land that is intended to be known, films can play the role of virtual transports to other spaces and other times. In addition, there is something intangible that is even more difficult to convey through textbooks, which is empathy for humanity as a whole. Stereotypes about foreigners are often simplifications caused by fear of the different. However, when watching fiction stories with exotic characters, one ends up coming to the conclusion that, apart from the most obvious differences, people are not so different, and that they basically share the same yearnings, joys or worries.

Some of the programs currently in place in universities give priority to this objective, i.e., when choosing cinematographic examples, they do not focus so much on the specific information they transmit from other countries, but rather on their ability to make students think outside their preconceived schemes. Engert makes the film *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino, 1994) the focus of his article *Teaching and Learning about International Politics through Film*. Indeed, this iconic feature film apparently does not include any theme related to international relations, apart from the fact that one of the secondary characters is Portuguese (played by Maria de Medeiros), but with hardly any weight in the story. The real reasons that make them prefer this title are more related to the fact that it shows the different perspectives of a story, that is, it makes them more receptive to the idea that, in the face of a conflict, international or not, each actor/actress makes his/her own reconstruction of the facts, regardless of whether he/she also intends to make propaganda to impose his/her vision on the rest.

On the other hand, Valeriano (2013) proposes to start with the famous Marx Brothers film, *Duck Soup* (McCarey, 1933) to illustrate about the irrationality of war. However, he advises avoiding other examples such as *Avatar* (Cameron, 2009) or *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977), not because they are mere fiction, but because they follow the trajectory of the mythology of the epic hero, i.e. they give much more importance to individual figures than to communities, which are the ones that usually count in international relations courses.

OBJECTIVES

The teaching project presents the objectives set by the teaching innovation project, that is, to develop the transversal lines of the Master's Degree in International Journalism based on the application of innovative tools in subjects of Module I and II, as well as to enhance sensitivity and awareness towards Cultural Diversity and Human Rights.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in the project is both qualitative and quantitative, based on the projection of films with a film forum and their respective evaluation through questionnaires, which provides us with quantitative data on the teaching-learning process carried out in the project implemented in three subjects of Module I and II of International Relations: Cultural and Civilizational Diversity; International Relations and Communication; and Media and Foreign Policy. It is a methodology that has already been successfully applied to the study of International Relations in several foreign universities, such as the University of Sussex, where Professor Cynthia Weber has published several studies on the subject (see for example, *International Relations Theory. A critical Introduction*, Routledge, 2016) as well as at the URJC in the degree in International Relations.

Projection and Cinema-Forum

The viewing format may vary among the different initiatives (Engert, 2009). In some cases, it is preferred to play only selected excerpts, rather than the entire feature film. Or have it viewed externally by each student to be completed outside of class time. Although it is true that by offering only the most significant cuts, the focus is placed on what the teacher considers most important, when the intention is for the student to draw his or her own conclusions, it is advisable to reproduce it in its entirety.

In addition, in our case, we have decided that the viewing will be in the classroom, to be carried out jointly by the whole group, and presented by a special guest, who can introduce the context, both of filmmaking and international relations, or journalism. Finally, student participation will be encouraged, in a subsequent debate, so that the different opinions, which will surely appear confrontational, will enrich each other.

As previously mentioned, the possibilities of choice are almost endless. In this first stage of the cinema-forum, we will start with three examples, which can be expanded later. In order to apply a diversity criterion, we have chosen to select stories that address problems from different continents. In particular Europe, Asia and Latin America. The following set of films and guests were proposed in order to achieve the project's objectives:

- *One, two, three*. Billy Wilder · 1961 · 104 minutes
Funny comedy filmed on the edge of the Iron Curtain. It will show what were the Cold War relations between communist Russia and capitalism, as well as the particular scenario of post-Nazi Germany. Angelo Valastro, professor at Comillas Pontifical University, was invited to speak about this scenario, as well as to lead the subsequent debate.
- TV series *Inés del Alma Mía*. 2020. Possible chapters: 2. 63 minutes
Adaptation of Isabel Allende's novel, about the Spanish colonization of the Americas and its unique relationship with the indigenous populations, superimposed on the internal power struggles among the conquistadors. It has the curiosity of telling the story of a woman holding a certain power among so many adventurers with excessive testosterone. The guest to illustrate this historical episode, as well as to lead the subsequent debate would be Francisco Mateo, the own scriptwriter of the series.
- *The Year of Living Dangerously*. Peter Weir. 1982. 115 minutes
Wonderful romantic drama between an Australian journalist and an English diplomat in Indonesia, coinciding with the communist movements in the country to overthrow the president. The guest to introduce the story, as well as to lead the subsequent debate would be Ana Martín Morán, professor at the King Juan Carlos University.

Pre- and Post-Viewing Questionnaires

In order to obtain an assessment of the perception and evaluation of the viewing activity, a five-point Likert scale was designed (see Table 1) and a battery of affirmative questions on potential development capabilities grouped into two items. On the one hand, those that refer to the contribution of the teaching innovation project and those that refer to the students' perception of the cinema-forum experience within the framework of the Master as a complementary activity.

TABLE 1

Strongly disagree
In disagreement
Neither in agreement nor in disagreement
In agreement
Strongly in agreement

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Pre-Forum Results

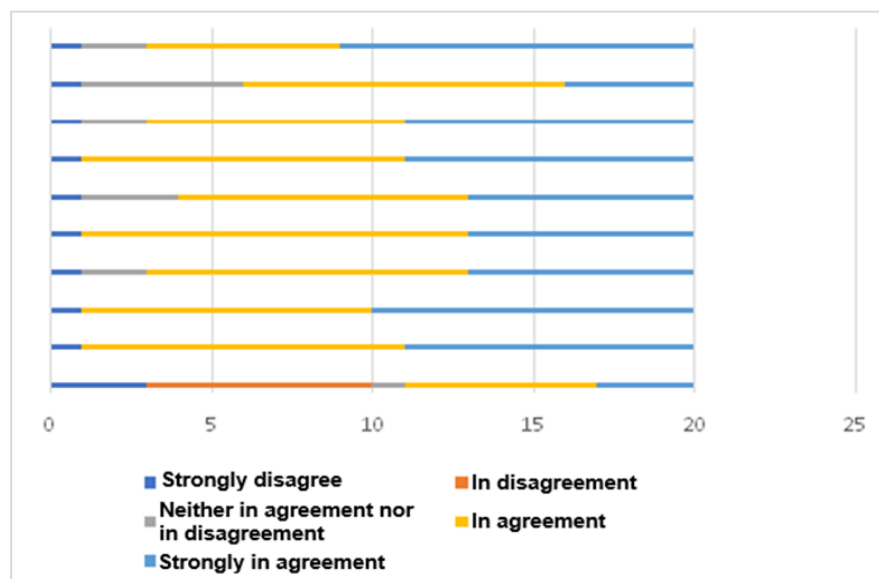
The results of the pretest questionnaire, which was completed by the students before the cinema-forum sessions began, can be grouped into two topics. On the one hand, those referring to the experience of student participation in project-based learning (PBL), where five questions were included. Each is related to a learning component (see Figure 1):

- a) the motivation
- b) the knowledge
- c) critical capacity
- d) collaboration and cooperation capacities
- e) multidisciplinary learning

On the other hand, those referring to the cinema-forum, where four issues were included. Each related to a component of cinema as an active methodology tool (see Figure 1):

- a) Learning-teaching
- b) Group reflection
- c) Complex knowledge
- d) Complementary tool for the classroom.

FIGURE 1
PRE-TEST RESULT

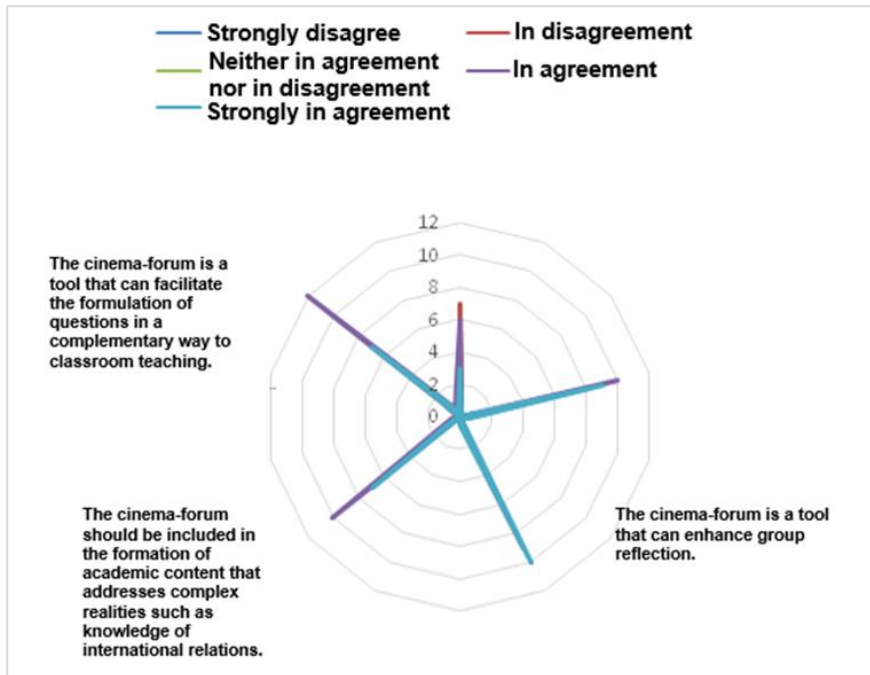


Source: prepared by the author

The Cinema-Forum as a Complementary Tool for the Reflection of Complex Issues.

Among the results obtained in the pretest questionnaire, 95% of the students agreed that the cinema-forum is a tool that facilitates learning-teaching, that enhances group reflection and that can facilitate the raising of questions in a complementary way in the classroom. While 85% agreed that the cinema-forum should be included in the formation of academic content that addresses complex realities such as knowledge of international relations and that it can develop the capacity for collaboration and cooperation while respecting the points of view of peers.

**FIGURE 2
CINEMA FORUM**



Source: prepared by the author

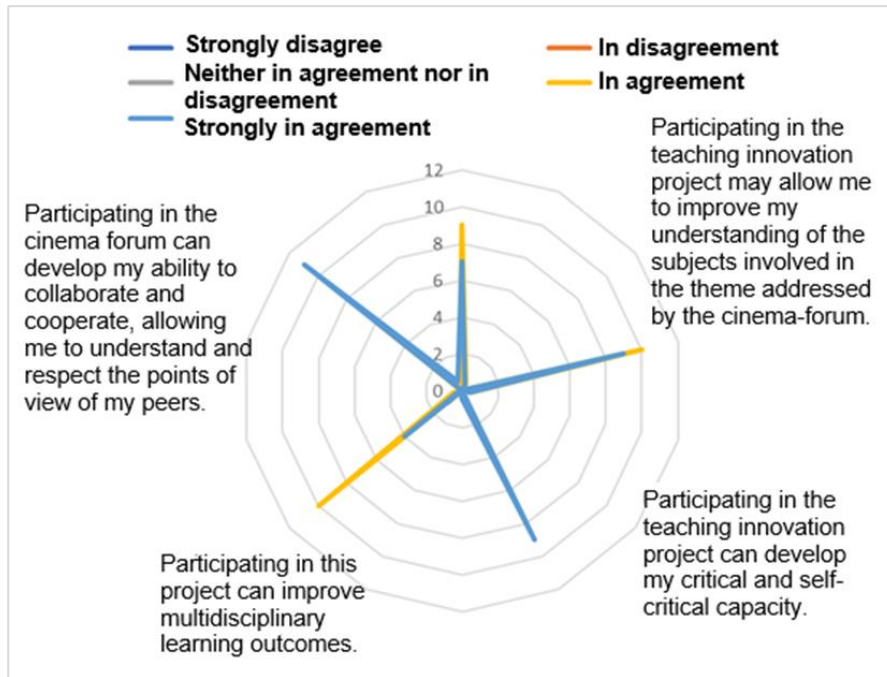
Participation in the Teaching Innovation Project to Improve Subject Understanding

Regarding the results obtained in relation to the questions that addressed the topic of the teaching innovation project, 95% of the students agreed that participating in a teaching innovation project allows them to improve their understanding of the subjects involved with the topic.

Secondly, 85% of the students agree that participating in a teaching innovation project allows them to develop critical and self-critical capacities. Thirdly, 80% were in favor of the opinion that their participation in the project would increase their motivation to learn.

Finally, 70% of the post-graduate students were in favor that their participation in the project can improve multidisciplinary learning results.

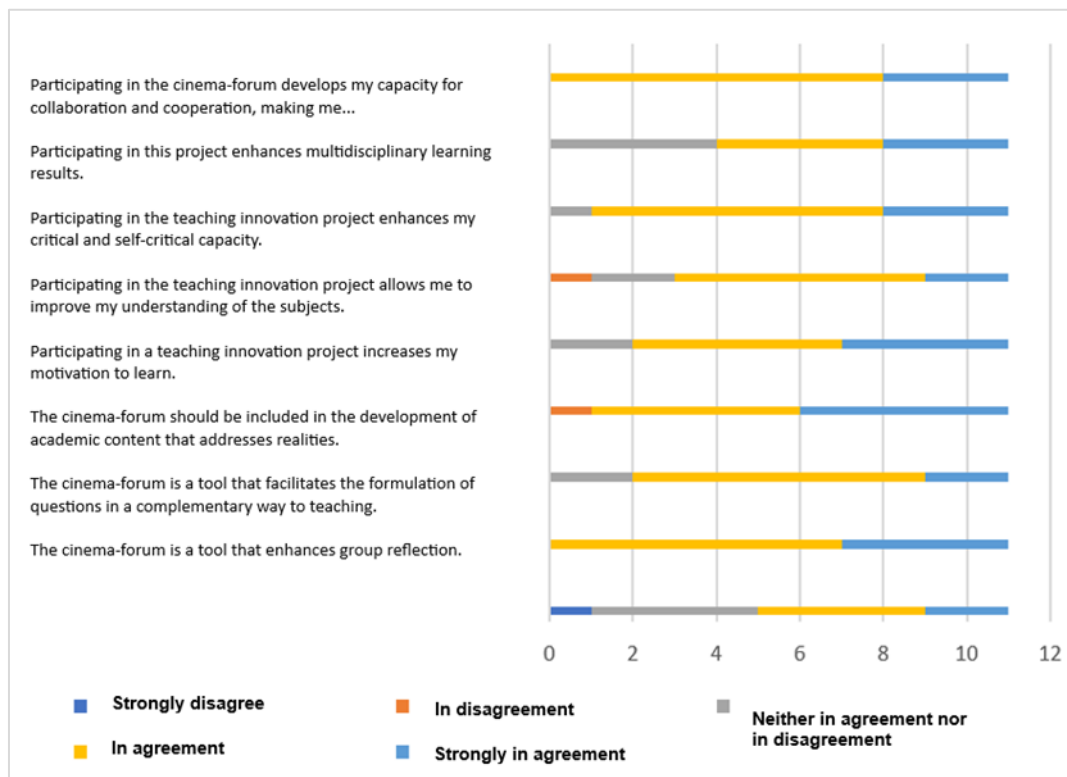
FIGURE 3
PARTICIPATION IN THE TEACHING INNOVATION PROJECT



Post-Forum Results

Regarding the questionnaire results that were completed by the students after participating in the three sessions of the cinema-forum, the questions asked in the pretest were included and one was added to directly address the students' preference about the three activities they attended.

FIGURE 4
POST-TEST RESULTS



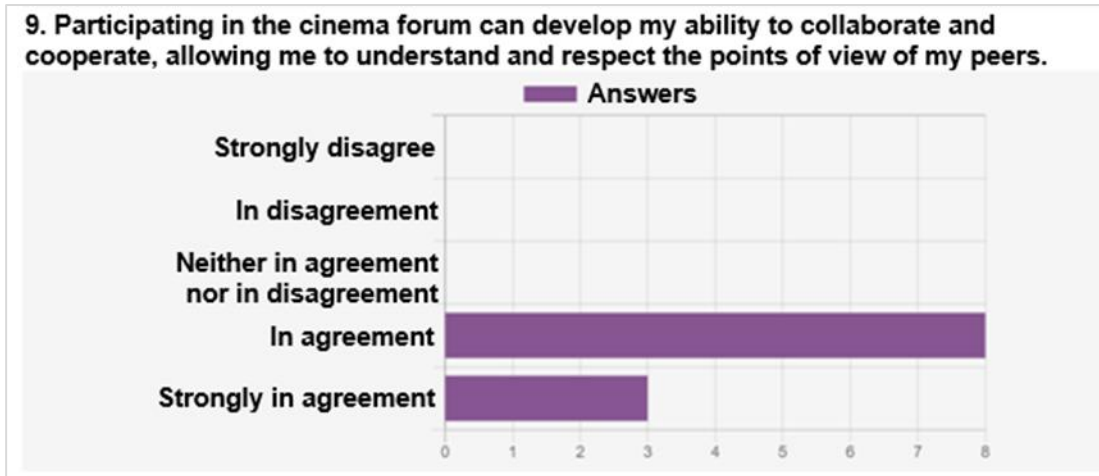
Source: prepared by the author

The Cinema-Forum as a Tool That Promotes Group Reflection and Develops the Capacity for Collaboration and Cooperation

According to the results obtained in the questionnaire completed by the students after participating and interacting in the cinema-forum sessions, 100% agreed that the cinema-forum enhances group reflection and can develop the ability to collaborate and cooperate by making oneself understood and respecting the points of view of others.

Secondly, 90.9% of the participants considered that the cinema-forum should be included in the formation of academic content that deals with complex realities such as knowledge of international relations. Thirdly, 81.8% of the students agreed that the cinema-forum is a tool that facilitates the raising of issues in a complementary way to the classroom. Finally, half of the students (54.5%) agreed that the cinema-forum facilitates learning-teaching.

FIGURE 5

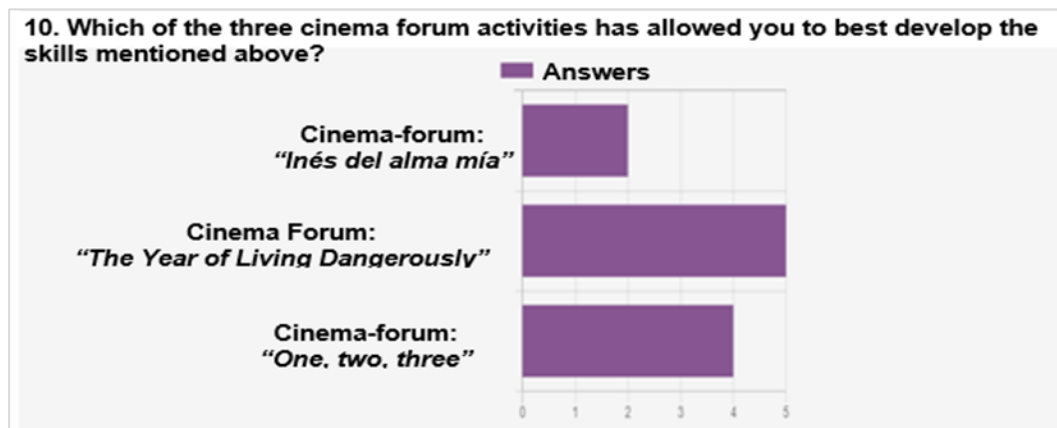


Source: prepared by the author

Participation in the Teaching Innovation Project to Develop Critical and Self-Critical Skills

Regarding the results obtained in relation to the questions that addressed the topic of the teaching innovation project, 90.9% of the students agreed that participating in a teaching innovation project develops their critical and self-critical capacity. Secondly, 81.8% increased their motivation to learn by participating in the project. Thirdly, 72.7% of the students answered that their participation in the educational innovation project allowed them to improve their understanding of the subjects involved in the topic. And finally, 63.6% of the participants responded that the project enabled them to improve multidisciplinary learning results.

FIGURE 6



Source: prepared by the author

The open-ended comments to support question 10 (Figure 6) are listed below. Regarding the film *The Year of Living Dangerously*, which was chosen as the film that best develops the capacities described in the questions of the questionnaire, in that it was voted by 45.45% of the students gave the following ideas:

- "Both the choice of this film and the previous introduction and subsequent discussion provided me with new knowledge and insights."
- "Most interesting debate".
- "Further final reflection on the role of the international reporter and journalism."

- “For being a more thoughtful approach to the work of journalism specifically.”
- “I thought it was a really good session.”

Regarding the film *One, two, three*, which was positioned in second place, being voted by 36.36% of the students as the film that best developed the capabilities and learning of both the innovation project and the cinema-forum format, the students answered the following reasons why they had based their vote:

- “I was more linked with in international journalism.”
- “I found this one to be the most program-related.”
- “It’s very educational.”
- “Apart from bringing us closer to classic cinema, watching “One, Two, Three” gave me an insight into what life was really like in Berlin under the wall that divided the city. Cinema helps to create mental images that often theory alone is not enough.”

Regarding the session that focused on the series *Inés del alma mía*, voted by 18.18% of the students as the activity that best allowed the development of the skills developed both from the point of view of the cinema-forum and the project itself, the following comments were made:

- “Having the presence of the scriptwriter and, in addition, the historical issue addressed seemed really interesting to me.”
- “For the capacity to discuss different points of view on production.”

CONCLUSIONS

The use of the cinema-forum has facilitated the teaching-learning process in a complementary way to the subjects of the Master’s graduate students in the field of International Relations. The difference between the implementation of this teaching innovation project and other experiences where cinema is used as a tool to improve the understanding of complex and abstract knowledge within the area of international relations, is that it is intended to be incorporated as a complementary activity to the formal teaching of the postgraduate training itinerary. It is important to remember the experience that the first studies from this field, started with the work of Cinthya Weber (2009) where through commercial films she tries to explain contents from the theories of international relations, and a decade later, subsequently, with other studies such as the collective work coordinated by Almendra Ortiz and Yoanna Shubich (2019) where she also includes how to express the different theories and internationalist debates through the seventh art.

In the experience described and as a fundamental value, it is clear from the opinions expressed in the questionnaires that the cinema-forum is a tool that enables the development of transversal competencies based on the interaction process resulting from the activity. We refer to the capacity of students to collaborate and cooperate, as well as their way of understanding and respecting different points of view (question 9). In this sense, a type of cooperative learning is developed, favored by the active methodology. This question is the one that shows the most improvement in the students’ opinion in the questionnaires (from 85% in the pre-test to 100% in the post-test).

There is also a positive change of opinion in the question that refers to the fact that the teaching innovation project allows them to develop their critical and self-critical capacity (the 85% evaluation of the students before interacting in the three cinema-forum activities, goes to 90.9% after participating in the cinema-forum sessions). There is also a slight increase in the number of students who say that participating in a project of this type increases their motivation to learn.

On the other hand, the learning that students acquire, based on this active methodology, is common project-based learning (PBL). The ability to relate the different topics addressed in the films screened in relation to the teaching organization of the master’s degree itself is a positive aspect to be considered in future editions.

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ENDNOTE

- ^{1.} Educational innovation project “Implementation of active methodologies for the Master’s Degree in International Journalism through cinema” subsidized by the Educational Innovation Program 2022-23 of the King Juan Carlos University is carried out by the PROMAPI Educational Innovation Group of the Master’s Degree in International Journalism.

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