ACTIVE TEACHING TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF UNIVERSITY DIDACTICS

INSEGNAMENTO ATTIVO PER MIGLIORARE LA QUALITÀ DELLA DIDATTICA UNIVERSITARIA

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ABSTRACT
This paper presents a teaching experiment in the course of Special Pedagogy for Integrated Sport, aimed at increasing students' interest through active and cooperative methodologies. Grounded in experiential learning, the approach fostered participation, critical reflection, and awareness, highlighting the value of renewing university teaching models to better meet students' needs.

Il contributo descrive una sperimentazione didattica attuata nel corso di Pedagogia speciale dello sport integrato, finalizzata a incrementare l'interesse degli studenti attraverso metodologie attive e cooperative. L'esperienza, fondata sul modello di apprendimento esperienziale, ha promosso partecipazione, riflessione critica e consapevolezza, suggerendo l'utilità di rinnovare i modelli formativi universitari.

KEYWORDS
Educational Innovation, Experiential Learning, Inclusive Pedagogy, Inclusive Sports
Innovazione didattica, Apprendimento esperienziale, Pedagogia Inclusiva, Sport integrato.

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1. Introduction and theoretical framework

This study emerged from an analysis of the student satisfaction indices for the Master's Degree in Sport Sciences and Techniques (academic year 2023–2024) at the University of Rome "Foro Italico". The lowest—though still relatively high—score concerned students' interest in the subject, which stood at 76%. The subject in question is the course *Special Pedagogy of Integrated Sport*. In previous years, the first part of the course was delivered through theoretical content, using a participatory lecture format, and focused on key theoretical areas: the scope of special pedagogy and its core concepts, such as diversity, inclusion, and accessibility.

To increase student engagement with the course topics, the 2024–2025 edition began with an open inquiry into students' expectations. The responses revealed a clear demand for more active and participatory classroom methodologies. As a result, the instructional team—composed of special pedagogy professors, a PhD student and a special pedagogy lab technician—developed an introductory module using an active, participatory, and experiential methodology based on the principles of cooperative learning. This approach aimed to innovate course delivery and foster learning processes more closely aligned with students' interests.

This paper outlines the implementation of this pedagogical innovation, concluding with a final focus group in which students shared their feedback and reflections on the pilot experience. The findings highlight the need for university teaching to adopt new models and paradigms that respond effectively to the diverse needs of all learners.

The topic of innovation in higher education has been widely discussed in the literature (Felisatti, 2011; Scancassani et al., 2019; Perla & Vinci, 2022), and numerous pilot studies have been conducted to explore alternative teaching methods (Felisatti & Serbati, 2014; Sommaggio & Tamanini, 2020; Luppi et al., 2020). Educational research has demonstrated that traditional lectures can be enhanced through collaborative learning strategies that involve structured group work and dialogic, active participation, including approaches such as the flipped classroom (Bevilacqua, 2017; Coco et al., 2021; La Marca, 2017).

The theoretical framework underpinning this experimental approach is Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model, illustrated in the following diagram.

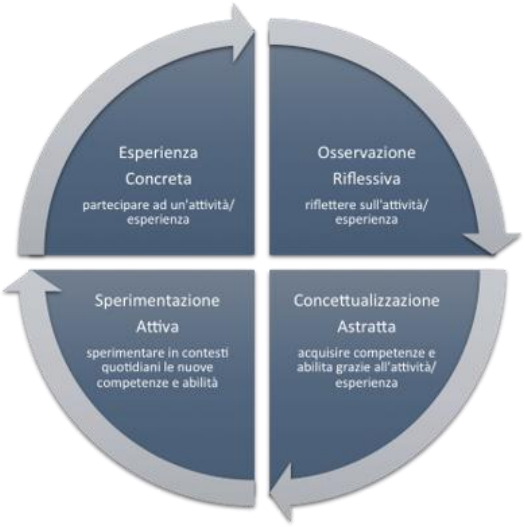

Figure 1: Kolb's experiential learning

Experiential learning is conceived as an educational approach that seeks to integrate the theoretical and practical dimensions of learning within a holistic view of the student. It emphasizes the value of direct experience as essential for effective learning (Kohonen, 2007). As stated by Kolb (1984, 2015), personal experience brings depth, and subjective meaning to abstract concepts, while also providing a concrete and shared basis to explore the implications and validity of the ideas generated during the learning process.

Whereas traditional academic teaching tends to prioritize reflective observation and abstract conceptualization at the expense of practical action and concrete experience (Kohonen, 2007), in Kolb's theoretical framework of experiential learning, the dimension of prehension encompasses both abstract conceptualization and concrete experience, which are conceptualized as dialectically opposed modes of knowing. According to Kolb, the process of navigating and integrating the inherent tension between these opposing orientations is fundamental to achieving effective and transformative learning.

In his experiential learning model, Kolb highlights four foundational components of the learning cycle, drawing on the theoretical contributions of Dewey, Piaget, and Lewin (Nardiello, 2023):

1. Concrete Experience. The learner is actively engaged in a task or situation. The individual becomes personally involved and is influenced by their own perceptions and reactions to the experience.

2. Reflective Observation. The experience generates feelings and behaviors upon which the learner reflects, examining the situation from multiple perspectives and developing awareness of what was experienced.
3. Abstract Conceptualization. Through reflective observation, individuals interpret and make sense of events, leading to the development of theoretical constructs and the identification of functional relationships. This cognitive process enables the integration of experiences into broader conceptual frameworks or reference theories.
4. Active Experimentation. Intentionality and self-awareness constitute essential components of the active experimentation phase, wherein theories and conceptual understandings are applied and tested through deliberate action. This phase, by translating abstract knowledge into practice, initiates new experiential cycles, as the outcomes of such experimentation can lead to the development of innovative approaches to thinking and behavior.

Concrete Experience	Skills, abilities, and knowledge are explored through activities, games, and simulations.
Reflective Observation	Sensations and behaviors that emerged during the experience are observed, reflected upon, and interpreted through discussion and brainstorming.
Abstract Conceptualization	Concepts and skills are developed and organized, extending their application to external situations.
Active Experimentation	New concrete experiences are generated. The acquired skills and knowledge lead to new ways of doing and thinking, to be tested in everyday life, thus allowing the cycle to begin again.

Table 1. Foundational components of the learning cycle

In this model, the student plays an active role, and knowledge is constructed through the processes of grasping and transforming experience (Kolb, 1984, 2015). According to Capperucci, this model leads individuals to continuously deconstruct and reconstruct their internal representations of reality (Capperucci, 2007, p. 18).

This dynamic will be evident in the analysis of students' work, where such an approach prompted them to question one of the core concepts of Special Pedagogy: the meaning of disability and its social representation. Through this methodology, disciplinary content is approached in a concrete manner that may be described as *embodied* (Ceciliani, 2018), allowing knowledge to become lived and situated, thereby bringing the discipline closer to the students.

2. The Teaching Model: Toward Experimential Learning

The proposed module aimed to deepen students' understanding and knowledge of the phenomenon of ableism. This choice is grounded in the relevance of the topic within the field of Special Pedagogy, with a particular focus on the sports context. Sport is characterized by a strong emphasis on the selection and standardization of the ideal, high-performing, and compliant body, leaving little room for bodily diversity. Within this framework, two opposing approaches toward people with disabilities emerge: on the one hand, their exclusion from sports practice—except for rehabilitative programs—justified by an assumed inability to meet strict physical and performance standards; on the other hand, the proliferation of the “super-crip” stereotype, which glorifies individuals with disabilities as exceptional figures capable of overcoming seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

This training pathway involved first-year students from the master’s degree program in Sport Sciences and Techniques (LM-68) at the University of Rome "Foro Italico." The class consisted of 62 students, of whom 56 actively participated in the entire module.

The module was structured over five sessions, each lasting approximately two hours, during which active and innovative methodologies were implemented, including cooperative activities, group work, flipped classroom strategies, practical experiences, and dialogical teaching, all within the framework of Kolb’s experiential learning cycle. Most lessons involved the creation of group outputs, which were then discussed and reflected upon in plenary sessions.

The first session introduced the module, outlining its objectives, operational methods, and assessment criteria. Students were then asked to form work groups of 5–6 members and were assigned the task of choosing a group name and motto, explaining their choices. The groups presented themselves to the class, after which

they were instructed to independently research definitions of ableism, relevant theoretical frameworks, and key scholars addressing the issue.

In the second lesson, students shared their research findings, collaborating on presentations about ableism with a focus on the definition of the concept and emerging theories. The ten presentations explored different facets of the phenomenon, reconstructing its historical development and describing manifestations of ableism in school, work, and sports contexts, including an analysis of ableist language. Strategies for countering the phenomenon were also proposed, such as the use of inclusive language, the promotion of accessible environments according to the Universal Design model, the importance of education and awareness in academic settings, and the implementation of inclusive and equitable policies. At the end of the session, some groups presented their work to the class, prompting a debate—facilitated by the professor—on the content of the presentations and on ableism more broadly.

The third session of the module focused on collaborative reflection on personal experiences. Students were asked to identify instances and/or manifestations of ableism they had observed in university and sports settings. To support a deeper understanding of the everyday expressions of ableism experienced by people with disabilities, the professor provided educational materials, including the comic book *Che brava che sei! 8 storie di abilismo quotidiano* created by Maria Chiara and Elena Paolini—two disability activists known as Witty Wheels. With wit and irony, the comic explores various aspects of ableism in everyday life, inspired by the authors' personal experiences.

The volume addresses both disabled and non-disabled readers. As the authors state in the introduction:

“Se sei disabile è fondamentale capire che tantissime delle cose che succedono nella vita di tutti i giorni, che ti fanno arrabbiare o che non riesci a spiegarti non capitano solo a te, ma anche a moltissime altre persone disabili. E se non lo sei, conoscere questo tipo di discriminazione è il primo passo per smascherarla e combatterla” (Paolini & Paolini, 2023, pg.8).

The eight stories in the comic address stereotypes and ableist prejudices in romantic and friendly relationships, in school and work environments, during leisure time, and in everyday activities. Central themes include the extra effort required by people with disabilities to access places, excessive bureaucracy to obtain essential services, and the application of unequal rules compared to those for non-disabled persons. Other key issues include stereotypical media narratives,

relationships with personal assistants, insufficient public resources for care services, and persistent political misrepresentations of disability.

Following the reading, the professor facilitated a discussion, inviting students to write a short piece based on ableist experiences they had witnessed or lived. In the university context, groups identified physical and architectural inaccessibility of buildings and discriminatory attitudes, such as inappropriate remarks or laughter directed at students with disabilities. In sports settings, students reported both individual acts of ableism—such as exclusion, rejection, and verbal discrimination by sports staff, coaches, or teammates—and structural ableism, such as inaccessible facilities, a lack of inclusive sports programming, and stark inequalities between the Olympic and Paralympic Games. Only one group reported a personal experience of resistance to ableism, involving a wheelchair-using basketball coach who responded to his team's biased expectations with humor.

One group also highlighted the presence of ableism in school environments, often considered inherently inclusive and equitable. Students recalled episodes of discrimination and exclusion, particularly during physical education classes, where teachers often failed to intervene appropriately. The group concluded by emphasizing the importance of competent educators capable of fostering inclusive and equitable environments—an issue widely documented in the literature.

In the fourth session, the focus shifted to ableism and the concept of the super-crip in the sports context. Students were given interviews with ten Paralympic athletes, including Oney Tapia, Ambra Sabatini, Assunta Legnante, Federico Morlacchi, Luca Mazzone, Monica Contrafatto, Francesca Porcellato, Alex Zanardi, Beatrice Vio, Oscar Pistorius, and Martina Cairone. The objective was to analyze the interviews for elements of ableism and super-crip narratives, encouraging critical reflection on these issues.

The groups presented their findings in written assignments, and some shared their analyses with peers and the professor. The results revealed that sport, mirroring societal dynamics, is a domain where ableism is particularly evident. The focus on physical fitness, performance, and achievement—core values of high-level sport—makes this setting especially prone to manifestations of ableism. Here, deviation from the norm is not merely excluded but often corrected or, when correction is not possible, discriminated against. Conversely, individuals who are perceived to return to or exceed the norm from a position of disadvantage are celebrated as exceptional—epitomizing the super-crip narrative.

Such representations perpetuate inherently biased and harmful messages, reinforcing the divide between "us" and "them," in contradiction with the values of inclusion, equity, and the recognition of individual uniqueness.

Students' reflections highlighted critical aspects of the super-crip narrative, as illustrated by the following excerpts: *"La narrazione del super-crip enfatizza spesso l'ottimismo e la resilienza come qualità necessarie per "sconfiggere" la disabilità, anziché riconoscere che la società stessa dovrebbe abbattere le barriere. Sebbene l'atteggiamento positivo sia fondamentale, il rischio è che si imponga alle persone con disabilità l'idea di dover essere sempre motivate e forti, senza riconoscere le difficoltà strutturali che esistono."; "L'idea che una persona debba passare da un letto d'ospedale alle Paralimpiadi per dimostrare la propria forza rischia di rientrare in questa retorica." e " la disabilità viene associata a una "rinascita" che deve necessariamente portare a un'impresa eccezionale (come diventare un'atleta paralimpica). Questo può generare aspettative irrealistiche sulle persone con disabilità, facendo sembrare che abbiano valore solo se riescono a raggiungere traguardi straordinari."*

Given the importance of storytelling as a tool for spreading values and ideals, the last activity proposed to the students aimed to analyze the language used by people with disabilities in social media in order to understand the messages conveyed in the light of the ableist perspective. Working in groups, students selected the social media account of a person with disability of their choice—such as Riccardo Aldighieri, Emanuel Cosmin Stoica, Donato Telesca, Giulia Lamarca, Silvia Calcavecchia, Marina Cuollo, Damiano, Margherita, or Philipp—and analyzed posts that addressed disability and personal experience. Based on categories derived from a study by Piccioli (2024), students conducted both quantitative (e.g., Table 2) and qualitative analyses of self-representation in the selected content, compiling their findings into final reports.

Categories	**n.**
Everyday life	45
Positive message	31
Disclosure-awareness raising	26
Ironic-funny	33
Affection-love	23
Medical disclosure	4
Response to criticism	9

Personal history	18
Education	19
Difficulty	16
Social denunciation	18
Research	4

Table 2. Summary of results of self-representation categories

From the students' reflections, it emerged that the use of self-irony and the dissemination of positive messages are particularly effective tools for communicating and raising awareness about the experiences of people with disabilities. Furthermore, students emphasized the use of simple and direct language, and highlighted how social media—especially TikTok and Instagram—serve as powerful platforms for promoting inclusive values and shedding light on topics that are often overlooked.

At the conclusion of the project, a focus group was held with the participation of ten students, selected as representatives from the various working groups.

3. Analysis of the Focus Group

Focus groups are a qualitative research method designed to gather opinions, experiences, and perspectives by leveraging the interaction among participants in a small group, guided by a moderator, to deepen the understanding of a specific topic. They typically consist of 4 to 10 participants who discuss themes selected by the researcher, under the guidance of a moderator who stimulates the conversation with targeted questions, facilitates interaction, and maintains the focus on the subject of interest. Participant interaction is central and enables the exploration not only of content but also of learning processes and meaning-making among participants. Focus groups allow for an in-depth examination of specific issues, collecting a variety of perspectives and fostering rich conversations. They offer a natural social context for meaning-making, reducing artificiality and encouraging active participation. They can be used as a standalone method or in combination with other qualitative and quantitative techniques to strengthen the validity of results.

However, it is important to consider that discussions may be influenced by various social dynamics (e.g., status, gender, relationships), which can lead to problematic

silences or strategic interventions, thus limiting the understanding of individual opinions. Confidentiality issues are also more complex compared to individual interviews, especially due to the public nature of the discussion and the difficulty in controlling the disclosure of information. Furthermore, the ways in which focus groups are conducted and analyzed can vary considerably depending on the researchers involved (Bezzi, 2013; Trinchero, 2002; Lucisano & Salerni, 2002; Coggi & Ricchiardi, 2005).

In an attempt to address these critical aspects, a single focus group was conducted, involving one representative from each of the ten previously established groups. Instead of audio or video recording, a non-participant observer was present and took detailed handwritten notes of the participants' contributions.

The moderator introduced a set of prompting questions to guide the group discussion, allowing participants full freedom to intervene, while ensuring that there were no overlapping contributions or dyadic conversations forming between individual students. The moderator made it clear that the focus group was taking place at the conclusion of a module on ableism, which had been conducted using alternative teaching methods compared to traditional approaches. It was further clarified that the aim of the session was to gather direct feedback from participants regarding their opinions, perceived enjoyment, and engagement during the activities. The purpose was to assess whether the learning pathway had been useful and could be replicated in the future, and to identify any critical elements that might need to be addressed or modified for improvement.

As previously mentioned, the presence of a non-participant observer allowed for the complete documentation of the group discussion, which was subsequently analyzed. The analysis was conducted independently by both the moderator and the observer, followed by a joint identification of meaning clusters. The two researchers carried out an initial emergent thematic analysis, and then collaboratively grouped the identified themes into concise categories, indicating whether each was expressed as a positive element or a point of criticism (e.g., Table 3).

Category		**n.**
Positive elements	**Critical elements**	
Effectiveness		3
Participation and discussion		3
Acceptance of other people's ideas		3
Interest		2

Pleasantness		2
Reflectivity		2
Future		1
Reality		1
	Evaluation	1

Tab. 3 Positive and critical elements emerged from the focus group

To better appreciate the contributions from focus group participants, some excerpts from the discussion are provided. One student, aspiring to become an athletic trainer, remarked that the chosen methodological approach made *"il modulo è stato più leggero, la pedagogia speciale e la didattica sono risultate essere più piacevoli e maggiormente interessanti"*. Another student, aiming to become a secondary school physical education teacher, noted: *"i concetti rimangono più impressi, spiegandoli e lavorandoci sopra rimangono di più"*. Echoing this, a female student who dreams of opening her own artistic gymnastics center said: *"è stato più leggero, interattivo, si partecipa di più alla lezione"*. A student currently working as a youth track and field coach stated that the module was *"utile per creare gruppo e condividere pensieri e migliorare il confronto".* Another student added that *"gli incontri effettuati fino ad oggi sono stati molto utili a livello personale, in quanto mi hanno permesso di interagire con gli altri, di confrontarmi, permettendo una grande condivisione di idee e di pensieri differenti, ascoltandoli e accettandoli".* A student who works with people with disabilities and hopes to pursue a political career highlighted: *"Quando si fa lezione ti guardi dentro e ti rendi conto di cosa si parla… i temi dell'abilismo e accessibilità li trovi nella società, per esempio anche in una mia storia di vita personale vissuta in compagnia di una persona in carrozzina. L'abilismo si vede in tutte le cose. La lezione a gruppi fa capire la realtà di questa materia e in generale la consapevolezza della disabilità"*. In response, a female student said: *"queste lezioni mi hanno permesso di entrare dentro gli argomenti e di conoscere un mondo a me poco conosciuto, e quindi mi hanno permesso di chiedermi davvero se ciò che ho fino a ora pensato di voler fare fosse davvero ciò che desiderassi fare o, se invece, ci sono altre strade in cui mi riconosco di più e a cui mi sento più legata e vicina e che quindi vorrei approfondire di più. Perché orientare tutto in un'unica direzione quando esistono tante altre direzioni che io posso prendere o qualsiasi altra persona può intraprendere, approfondendo, ovviamente tali argomenti e acquisendo competenze?"*. Another student commented: *"il percorso è stato utile per il lavoro attuale e per il lavoro futuro".*

The main point of criticism raised was expressed as a question by a student who assumed the role of voicing general reflections: *"Sarebbe possibile però avere un feedback sui lavori di gruppo per comprendere cosa eventualmente abbiamo sbagliato, oltre che ai fini della valutazione?".*
This feedback revealed that the way students' work had been acknowledged and returned to them was not perceived as effective, highlighting a need for reflection and potentially clearer communication with students in the future.

Conclusions

The described educational experiment has highlighted how the adoption of an experiential and cooperative approach in university education, particularly within special pedagogy courses in non-pedagogical study programs, represents an effective strategy to increase students' engagement, interest, and critical reflection. The module on the topic of ableism allowed students not only to acquire theoretical knowledge but also to develop awareness and critical skills through comparison, analysis of real narratives, and self-reflection.
The integration of Kolb's experiential learning model (1984; 2015) with active teaching practices – such as the flipped classroom (Bevilacqua, 2017; Coco et al., 2021) and cooperative learning (Johnson, Johnson & Holubec, 1996) – enabled students to tackle complex concepts, such as ableism, in a personal and embodied way, as also suggested by the embodied education perspective (Ceciliani, 2018). This approach has fostered a deeper and more authentic understanding of the social and cultural exclusion dynamics that people with disabilities experience daily.
In addition to these aspects, the educational proposal has a strong value in terms of promoting self-regulated learning (Zimmerman, 2002; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2008). Autonomous research activities, shared reflection, and group product construction have activated processes of planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's learning – key components of self-regulated learning (Pintrich, 2000). In particular, the collaborative and motivating context has favored the development of metacognitive awareness and the consolidation of effective learning management strategies (Boekaerts, 1999), supported by intrinsic engagement that finds space in engaging educational environments (Deci & Ryan, 1985).
An aspect that emerged clearly, also thanks to the focus group analysis, is the importance of feedback as a component not only evaluative but authentically formative. Feedback, understood as a continuous process of dialogue and

reflection between teacher and student, is fundamental for promoting awareness of one's cognitive processes, performance improvement, and self-efficacy (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). However, some students' perception of unclear feedback regarding their work highlights the need to make feedback moments more explicit and systematic, so they are perceived as real learning opportunities.

In line with what is indicated by Felisatti and Serbati (2014) and by Perla and Vinci (2021), this experience suggests that educational innovation should not be limited to the introduction of new technologies or methodologies but must be based on a profound rethinking of the role of the teacher and the student within the educational process. The teacher becomes a facilitator of learning and promoter of critical awareness, while the student is configured as an active and responsible subject in the construction of their knowledge (Capperucci, 2007; Kohonen, 2007).

It is also important to underline that this educational experience is expected to have a direct impact on improving the overall quality of teaching. By fostering deeper student engagement, promoting critical reflection, and enhancing metacognitive skills through experiential and cooperative methodologies, the approach contributes to a richer and more meaningful learning environment. It is therefore hoped that this will be reflected in the students' course evaluations, which should take into account not only the immediate delivery of content but also the pedagogical innovation, the inclusive and student-centered strategies adopted, and the broader educational value of such practices (Spooren, Brockx & Mortelmans, 2013; Perla & Vinci, 2021).

Finally, the analysis of social content and autobiographical narratives has highlighted how digital languages can constitute a powerful tool to counter stereotypes, favoring processes of authentic and inclusive self-representation. In this sense, the educational dimension extends beyond the classroom, contributing to the construction of a culture of inclusion based on the recognition of diversity and equity (Nardiello, 2023).

In light of what has emerged, it is hoped that experiences of this kind can not only be replicated but systematized in university teaching, promoting a cultural and methodological change that places the person, the value of experience, and the active role of feedback at the center, in a perspective of continuous, reflective, self-regulated, and transformative learning.

Author contributions

This paper is the result of the common work of the authors. Particularly, Angela Magnanini is author of Introduction, Chiara Pannone is author of Paragraph n.2, Marianna Piccioli is author of Paragraph n.3 and Marta Sánchez Utgé is author of Conclusions.

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