

## Fundamental Research Paper

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# EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN CULTURAL HERITAGE: PEDAGOGICAL INSIGHTS FROM THE BLENDED INTENSIVE PROGRAM (BIP) “CASTELO BRANCO: A TIMELESS TAPESTRY OF MEMORY AND EMOTION”

*Aprendizagem Experiencial no Património Cultural: Perspetivas Pedagógicas do Programa Intensivo Misto (BIP) “Castelo Branco: Uma Tapeçaria Intemporal de Memória e Emoção”*

## ABSTRACT

The Blended Intensive Program (BIP) “Castelo Branco: A Timeless Tapestry of Memory and Emotion” was developed as a pilot pedagogical model, which integrated web-based preparatory, and intensive and practical training implemented in heritage environments. Targeted at the students who are studying cultural and visual studies, the project was to promote the direct and physical interaction with the tangible and intangible heritage of the city. Through the combination of quantitative and qualitative data, the current study examines the way in which artistic and conceptual understanding of cultural heritage developed among participants through the interdisciplinary cooperation, reflective practice, and immersion to the historical environment of Castelo Branco. Results indicate that the experiential approach significantly increased the representational and interpretative abilities of students, and the modality of blended delivery increased the accessibility and readiness. Furthermore, the incorporation of artistic inquiry in the heritage education promoted the participants to render historical stories in creative forms that would intersect between academic analysis and social participation. This research therefore indicates that experiential learning, which is based on interdisciplinary exchange, enhances critical thinking, development of cultural awareness and emotion attachment

## RESUMO

O Programa Intensivo Misto (BIP) “Castelo Branco: Uma Tapeçaria Intemporal de Memória e Emoção” foi desenvolvido como um modelo pedagógico piloto, que integrou uma fase preparatória online, bem como formação intensiva e prática realizada em contextos patrimoniais. Destinado a estudantes das áreas dos estudos culturais e visuais, o projeto procurou promover a interação direta e física com o património tangível e intangível da cidade. Combinando dados quantitativos e qualitativos, o presente estudo analisa de que forma a compreensão artística e conceptual do património cultural se desenvolveu entre os participantes através da cooperação interdisciplinar, da prática reflexiva e da imersão no ambiente histórico de Castelo Branco. Os resultados indicam que a abordagem experiencial aumentou significativamente as capacidades representacionais e interpretativas dos estudantes, e que a modalidade de ensino misto potenciou a acessibilidade e a preparação. Além disso, a incorporação da investigação artística na educação patrimonial incentivou os participantes a traduzirem narrativas históricas em formas criativas que cruzam a análise académica com a participação social. Assim, esta investigação sugere que a aprendizagem experiencial, assente na troca interdisciplinar, favorece o pensamento crítico, o desenvolvimento da consciência cultural e o vínculo emocional com o lugar.

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to place. The findings suggest that BIP-type hybrid models can be useful prototypes of introducing art-based and heritage-centred pedagogy in higher education, thus, becoming part of sustainable practice in cultural education and preservation.

As conclusões apontam para o facto de que modelos híbridos do tipo BIP podem constituir protótipos úteis para a introdução de pedagogias baseadas nas artes e centradas no património no ensino superior, tornando-se parte integrante de uma prática sustentável na educação e preservação cultural.

## KEYWORDS

Blended Intensive Program (BIP), Experiential learning, Cultural heritage, Visual studies, Interdisciplinary pedagogy.

## PALAVRAS-CHAVES

Programa Intensivo Misto (BIP), Aprendizagem experiencial, Património cultural, Estudos visuais, Pedagogia interdisciplinar.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Background and Context of the Study

Cultural heritage education is a key factor in maintenance of narrative traditions and continuation of artistic expression. With the development of online and experiential pedagogy, there is an increasing tendency among teachers to consider hybrid-oriented forms of education that involve online and face-to-face learning in order to enhance more engaging, participatory learning forms (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). In this context, the Blended Intensive Program (BIP) Castelo Branco: an Interwoven Tapestry of Memoir and Feelings was designed as an experimental learning program that combines theoretical training with immersive learning based on site-based exploration. It was created specifically to address the needs of students of cultural and visual studies that intend to relate conceptual reflection to a practical artistic experience.

The intermingling of the BIP based on the combination of online lectures, virtual discussions and field based learning allowed the students to flow freely between the digital and material aspects of heritage study (Means et al., 2010). This two-fold mode of thinking would stimulate the learner to think and feel simultaneously, converting the intellectual into the embodied knowledge. In this regard, the BIP offered a lively educational experience where students were directly engaged with the Castelo Branco monuments, museums and craftsmen and as such placed creative practice into the historical context of the city.

### 1.2. Significance of Studying the Cultural and Historical Heritage of Castelo Branco

Castelo Branco provides an ideal location of experiential learning in heritage education. Visiting the city, one can observe many strata of Portuguese cultural identity, including the Baroque-inspired Episcopal Palace and its gardens, Museu Cargaleiro, and the Centro de Interpretação do Bordado (Antunes et al., 2020; Pereira, 2019). The centuries old embroidery tradition, especially, is an example of a cultural practice that is alive and combining craft work, local memory and symbolic representation. The interaction with such spaces allowed students not only to record the heritage using artistic medium but also to comprehend the relations among the material culture and community identity.

The pedagogical and social significance of learning the heritage of Castelo Branco is based on the study of its heritage. It fosters a consciousness of conservation management, encourages responsible cultural tourism and creates a sensitive approach to the socio economic reality that informs heritage management. The local immersion in a

globalizing era also serves to intercultural competence of students, which supports the idea that cultural heritage works as a mirror of the collective memory and interpersonal intercommunication at a communal level. Including artistic practice into this historical context, the program placed learners as active interpreters of culture as opposed to passive observers of culture.

### 1.3. Objectives of the Blended Intensive Program (BIP)

The Castelo Branco BIP was designed by a number of interconnected purposes that interdependent artistic production, cultural perception and interdisciplinary cooperation. It was mainly aimed at giving students the ability to approach the artistic and heritage traditions of the city and hence increasing their ability to decode and render historical accounts using the media of creation. The participants were advised to render their observations in the form of art pieces that demonstrated both technical and conceptual mastery and made artistic practice a cultural investigative instrument.

It was also critical that the program focused on the interdisciplinary cooperation. The BIP tried to provide a platform of dialogue where different perspectives would meet through creative synthesis by drawing participants representing different academic disciplines from institutions of education from around Europe, such as architecture, visual arts, cultural studies, and design. The aim of this process was to develop critical thinking, problem solving, and reflection in groups. The program ended with a group exhibition, which offered the participants an opportunity to present their results, thus making learning an action of reflection and sharing public.

By means of these purposes, the BIP was trying to fill the gap between learning the heritage and creative activity. It placed cultural heritage not in the areas of preservation as an object but as something that could be imaginatively redefined using interdisciplinary practice.

### 1.4. Research Questions or Hypotheses

The research questions used in the study to evaluate the pedagogical and interpretative effectiveness of the BIP were as follows: 1. What was the impact of direct experience in cultural heritage sites upon artistic interpretation of students? 2. How effectively can interdisciplinary cooperation promote the knowledge of the participants with regard to cultural heritage? 3. How did the final exhibition affect the synthesis and presentation of historical narratives using artistic media by students?

Based on these questions, three hypotheses were formulated: the first one is that direct interaction with heritage sites would result in a better conceptual understanding of historical narratives in works of art, the second is that interdisciplinary collaboration would lead to a rich diversity of interpretation and critical understanding, and the third is that the culminating exhibition would serve as a reflective space, consolidating the learning process through the public expression of historical events. All these hypotheses were used in analyzing the outcomes of the program and their approach to methodology.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Preservation of Cultural Heritage and the Role of Art

Cultural heritage over the past few decades has had an immense development trajectory, moving out of the major concern of those aspects that can be physically handled and with a comprehensive approach to it, embracing social practice, lived experiences and the symbolisms attached to them. The Portuguese legal heritage preservation — i.e. Law No. 107/2001 (Lei n.º 107/2001, 2001) codified the principle that the heritage preservation should cover both the material and the immaterial. Ferreira (2011) notes that this

paradigm recognizes that cultural heritage is a dynamic aspect that is constantly created through the two-way communication between communities and their surroundings.

Historians are making it clear that heritage conservation is not just about physical conservation. As Munaier (2013) argues, the protection of cultural assets implies a similar effort to preserve their social and educational activities. Based on this, art is not only a mere artefact but something that is to be preserved but is also an interpretive medium that reactivates memory and identity. In this regard, art would act as a channel connecting the past with the present hence allowing communities to pass accounts in a manner that would be both emotionally gripping and thought provoking.

Empirical findings of Viana and Cura (2019) also indicate that the effectiveness of preservation is optimized in the case of multidisciplinary cooperation by policy, education, and arts. This integrative process does not only lead to technical conservation, but also to preservation of continuity of culture. It can be said that artistic expressions, be it painting, sculpture, photography, or the digital media, are used as educational tools that create bridges among various publics and any historical meaning (Souza, n.d.). The mutual connection of both creative practice and heritage consciousness also reflect some tangible socio-economic consequences; heritage projects with an arts focus often revitalize local economies, draw tourism, and support sustainable development goals (Harvey & Jones, 2018).

In this context, the BIP model puts an art based inquiry into the forefront making artistic expression as a research modality on its own. Leavy (2015) observes that arts-based research systems can open up the knowledge-building and knowledge-sharing processes and allow the learners to explore cultural phenomena in terms of sensory and emotional facets that might be overlooked by the traditional academic approaches. The introduction of creative practice into heritage education, therefore, does not only maintain historical content but reconstructs it into an active process of participation and interpretation that appeals to the modern viewer.

## 2.2. Hybrid and Blended Teaching Methodologies in Heritage Education

Frameworks of hybrid and blended learning have become increasingly more popular in the higher education sector, which provides scalable, high-enrolment models capable of combining digital learning with face-to-face interaction and experience. This has become a beneficial pedagogical shift in the context of heritage studies. Blended formats enable both online modules to enable the learner to explore theoretical underpinnings before gaining a fuller understanding in the field through site visits or workshops. Empirical studies have also supported the fact that this type of multimodal strategies improve retention, engagement, and self-inquiry (Bonk & Graham, 2012; Means et al., 2010).

The projects of the University of Coimbra in blended heritage education can be taken as good examples of such possibilities. This was demonstrated by their programs that hybrid learning both enhances individual reflections and collaborative knowledge building, which helps the students to approach cultural topics through various disciplinary lenses (Ensino Híbrido, 2025). Similarly, it was found by projects carried out by the Universities of La Laguna and Barcelona that virtual preparatory elements enhance the pedagogical effectiveness of physical heritage itineraries to facilitate student autonomy and enhance analytical involvement (Frontiers, 2025).

In addition to logistical flexibility, blended learning does allow what Schön (1983) called reflection-in-action: thinking critically and in a responsive way, whilst actually doing. The principle is closely similar to such pedagogical principles as experiential and design-based learning, where students are able to alternately move between observation, creation and critical reflection. These reflective processes are expanded into the digital space with the implementation of digital tools including virtual reality and interactive archives thus creating a learning space in which heritage is understood as a dynamic, interpretable object as opposed to a fixed object.

This hybridization in heritage education too carries a democratic aspect. Blended frameworks make cultural materials more inclusive by reducing geographic and temporal differences. The students with the range of cultural and educational backgrounds can cooperate online, thus, creating the common projects that can reflect a combination of the views on heritage. Garrison and Vaughan (2008) bear out that the effectiveness of blended learning is not only based on the technological support but on its ability to maintain community and dialogue which are imperative aspects to cultural preservation and transformative education (Mezirow, 1991).

### 2.3. Comparative Programs and International Practices

The Erasmus + Blended Intensive Program (BIP) is a model that builds on a wider European trend of inclusiveness, which is in favour of experiential and intercultural education. As an example, the Polytechnic Institute of Cavado and Ave (IPCA) has instated BIPs that focus on the areas of digital reading design, sustainable production, and virtual environments in which students work on the real-world challenges through cross-border collaboration (IPCA, 2025). Similarly, the BIPs of the University of Coimbra include at least three international institutions of higher learning, which promotes a common pedagogical spirit of hybrid learning and creative interchange (Universidade de Coimbra, 2025).

Beyond Portugal, the Hermitage Museum Volunteer Initiative in St. Petersburg represents an example of how experiential learning can be employed to promote cultural stewardship. Participants obtain direct experience in organizing exhibitions and facilitating community events, thereby actively engaging in museum practices. Through such involvement, volunteers develop a sense of responsibility toward cultural sustainability and continuity, contributing to the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage (Gorlova, 2024).

These examples are close to the mission of Interpret Europe that since 2010 has promoted heritage interpretation as a participatory process that involves the citizens in their cultural milieus on an intellectual and emotional level (Interpret Europe, 2025).

Such intercontinental projects confirm the relevance of BIP model to the modern discourses of heritage pedagogy. They indicate that experiential and blended system fosters both the cognitive and affective aspects of learning and thus improves the capacity of the students to find culture as a dynamic process. This teaching model reflects the definition of experiential learning proposed by Kolb (2015) as cyclical, in which the knowledge is actualized through the synthesis of the action, reflection, and conceptualization.

However, there are also such issues as the need to ensure richness of reflection and fairness of involvement that demonstrate themselves in these models. As much as the benefits of hybrid structures have been known, Mezirow (1991) underlines that transformative learning requires critical self-reflection as opposed to exposure to new situations. Reflectively, transformatively, therefore, it is necessary to add insightful and structured elements such as guided discourse, peer critique or artistic inquiry to avoid superficial work. The BIP “Castelo Branco” in this respect adds to an increasing pedagogical trend which fuses cognitive, emotional, and creative learning to the cultural education.

## 3. OBJECTIVES & DESCRIPTION OF THE BIP

### 3.1. Overview of the Program

The Blended Intensive Program (BIP) named Castelo Branco: A Timeless Tapestry of Memory and Emotion was an interdisciplinary and experiential approach to learning, which was introduced in the framework of Erasmus+. Its key assumption was the combination of online preparatory tasks with short, physical mobile learning, hence, the facilitation of the intercultural conversation, critical thinking, and creative investigation. This teaching structure is compatible with modern claims that experiential learning helps to bridge the

gap between theoretical abstraction and lived experience and allow students to work with cultural heritage as a dynamic, but not a static phenomenon (Kolb, 2015; Dewey, 1938). Organized in collaboration with a network of European institutions of higher learning, the BIP combined rhetorical investigation and practical experience, which allowed their participants to enter the artistic and historical environment of Castelo Branco. The architectural background, the crafts and narratives of the city provided an ideal background on which the students could devise creative outputs that would combine empirical research with sensory experience (Silva & Martins, 2020). This interaction led to the students reimagining heritage in terms of interpretative praxis that is, where identity, place and memory can be interrogated and rearticulated through artistic practice.

The instructional structure of the program was split. The first online pre-training course provided the background familiarity with the cultural setting of Castelo Branco through the professional lectures, online discussions, and interactive digital communications. This part served as an introduction to the historical relevance of the site as well as a tool of intercultural rapport among the participants (Bonk & Graham, 2012). The following on-site immersion experience turned this knowledge preparation into direct experience. Participants engaged in led exploration of heritage locations, museum tours and artisanal workshops that helped to convert theoretical knowledge into a piece of art. The sequential design was based on the experiential learning cycle developed by Kolb (2015) in which learning is a dynamic process that takes place in the context of interactive interaction between concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation.

### 3.2. Educational and Cultural Objectives

The BIP educational goals were defined in the framework of the interaction-based learning paradigm that included the disciplinary convergence, the teamwork of the people, and the combination of the digital and the physical forms of engagement. In essence the programme was an attempt to empower the students to question the heritage of Castelo Branco critically and creatively through artistic expression. Students were encouraged to explore how the visual, architectural, and performative media can act as channels of historical interpretation and telling of cultural memories. This action of interpretive praxis is also in line with the Dewey (1938) claim that learning occurs as a consequence of active reconstruction of experience.

One of the key aims was the cultivation of cultural knowledge by direct interaction with the heritage custodians, local artisans and historical monuments. The resulting impacts of such encounters were technical understanding and a sense of place affection that led to empathy and intercultural sensitivity, which were considered crucial to the larger venture of European heritage education (Knight, 2008; Deardorff, 2022). Development of critical thinking and reflective practice, which were enabled by guided conversations, group critique, and presentations were equally important. This reflective aspect relates to the theory of reflection-in-action described by Schön (1983) where trainees meaningfully extract experience out of lived activities in a recurrent cycle of practice and evaluation.

Interdisciplinary collaboration as one of the fundamental pedagogical principles was also pre-empted by the programme. The initiative, through bringing together different students with different levels of academic and cultural backgrounds, generated innovative projects that integrated architectural analysis, visual arts and cultural investigation. This kind of collaboration showed the pedagogical significance of group creativeness in addressing multifaceted inquiries of culture (García & Fernández, 2021). The fulfillment of these aims was in the form of a final exhibition which was both a judgmental node and a performative continuation of the learning process. The student-centered curation and presentation of their works in front of a live audience made the exhibition turn the process of reflection into action and frame their learn-

ing outcomes in a wider socio-cultural framework. In this process, subjects simulated a change of mindset that is in line with the notion of transformative learning that Mezirow (1991) described it through critical reflection on the already existing assumptions and behaviors.

### 3.3. Structure, Process, and Pedagogical Design

The Castelo Branco BIP was designed in such a way that the preparation, immersion, and synthesis stages would be balanced. The online element provided theoretical background and put the ethos of collaboration in the programme into practice. The students were engaged in online classes that outlined key principles in cultural heritage, sustainability and artistic interpretation. Historical background and methodological advice were given by a series of guest lectures, such as: Heritage Perceptions Professor Sara Cura and Design and Heritage in Crafts Professor Eugenia Chiara, and discussions and collaborative digital working environments enabled the exchange of ideas and collaborative project development even before the actual meetings.

The next face-to-face stage was five hectic days in Castelo Branco. The activities involved guided tours of representative heritage sites, such as Centro de Interpretação do Bordado, Museu Cargaleiro and Jardim do Paço Episcopal, in which interactions were not strictly observational. Those who took part were actively involved with curators, artisans, and educators that resulted in mutual learning processes. The participants noted down their impressions through sketching, photography and reflective writing which was later translated into creative works in the studio classes.

The workshops in artistic methods (ranging between printmaking and mixed media and digital visualization) were organized in such a way that they would promote experimentation and collaborative practice. The participants worked within interdisciplinary teams sharing methodologies and ideas to create works of art that combined historical research and individual interpretive orientations. Critique sessions and reflective processes were moderated by the faculty and allowed students to justify the ways in which the choices of their artistic practices were examples of larger cultural stories.

The programme was culminated by a group exhibition at the Polytechnic Institute of Castelo Branco whereby the participants were required to showcase their creative deliverables to the local stakeholders and an academic audience. This resolution served both of the purposes: not only did it allow students to share their research and artistic knowledge, but it also made the audience a part of the discussion about the importance of the heritage preservation and interpretation of the same matter in an innovative way. The exhibition therefore served as an experiential learning laboratory of life, which blurred the boundary between education and culture dissemination.

### 3.4. Significance of Inter-University Collaboration and Cultural Exchange

One of the keystones of conceptual and empirical effectiveness of the BIP was the inter-university cooperation. Faculty and participants of Finland, Poland and Bulgaria met up with their Portuguese colleagues to jointly investigate the issue of cultural heritage. This variety enhanced the learning environment by adding various levels of epistemology and artistic cultures. Empirical studies and literature always point to the fact that intercultural collaboration promotes creativity, critical awareness and adaptability due to exposing learners to other conceptual frameworks (Smith & Jones, 2020). This type of collaboration also supported the academic internationalisation, which is one of the key pillars of Erasmus+ goals, through enabling the joint pedagogical projects and cross-border mobility. Internationalisation at the national level can make national intercultural learning more profound as stated by Beelen and Jones (2015) even when people are not able to travel widely, which in turn makes global education more democratic. This intercultural interaction in the BIP developed

both a sense of vocabulary of heritage interpretation and at the same time a sense of respect towards local specificity and difference.

Such exchange has a pedagogical worth that is absolute of the immediate programme. Students created professional and academic networks that may help in future research cooperation and creative projects. The BIP created long-term collaboration possibilities and collaborative research projects in the areas of cultural heritage, art education, and digital pedagogy to the host institutions. Such results are consistent with the recent literature that emphasizes the role of sustainable academic networks in the process of fostering innovation and professional development (Brown et al., 2019).

Finally, the Castelo Branco BIP was able to show that a carefully designed interdisciplinary programme can help mediate academic, cultural, and creative practices. Blending both the experiential learning and the intercultural collaboration, it offered a good model that could be implemented in other institutions of higher learning that wish to involve students in active interpretation and preservation of cultural heritage.

## 4. METHODOLOGY

### 4.1. Methodological Framework and Blended Learning Design

The Blended Intensive Program (BIP) Castelo Branco: A Timeless Tapestry of Memory and Emotion was planned as the methodological design to explore the possibilities of transformational learning through experiential learning in cultural heritage education. The mixed-methodology was employed to represent both quantitative and interpretive aspects of the student learning process and combine quantitative responses of the engagement and satisfaction with the qualitative responses of the reflection analysis, collaboration, and creative production (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The programme design was that of a blended learning model with virtual preparation and on-site immersion. The online phase of preparation formed a common intellectual and intercultural base, and the physical mobility phase made embodied experience, artistic experimentation and dialogic learning possible. This mixed format indicates what Bonk and Graham (2012) envision blended learning as a spectrum of integration between digital and physical files to bring about long-term engagement and contemplation.

The design was philosophically based on the argument by Dewey (1938), learning is reconstructing an experience and the argument presented by Kolb (2015), which sees learning as a cyclical process of doing, observing, thinking, and applying. Making these principles a part of a systematic pedagogical process, the BIP placed the cultural experience not on the margins of the learning process but on the center of the stage.

### 4.2. Participants and Collaborative Context

The programme gathered 23 participants (students and six academic staff representing four partner institutions), that is, South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences (Finland), Wyższa Szkoła Ekonomiczno-Humanistyczna (Poland), St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Turnova (Bulgaria), and the University of Architecture, Construction, and Geodesy (Bulgaria). Such heterogeneity was a manifestation of the interdisciplinary nature of the project whereby the project encompassed knowledge in the fields of architecture, design, visual arts, and cultural studies. The gender ratio (around 91% female and 9% male) reflected the overall population of the creative education programmes in Europe (Jones & Reynolds, 2019).

The selection of participants was focused on academic diversity, intercultural balance, and interest in research based on heritage. The faculty mentors were chosen based on their experience in visual arts and cultural mediation so that both the conceptual

and the practical parts of the learning cycle were properly scaffolded. The Erasmus+ framework offered not only logistic assistance but also the ethical background of intercultural cooperation, which is in line with the goals of the European Commission (2021) of inclusive and experiential learning.

### 4.3. Learning Phases, Activities, and Timeline

The program was implemented over three connected stages, i.e., pre-mobility (online preparation), mobility (physical immersion), and the post-mobility (reflection and dissemination). All stages were methodologically synchronized with one certain element of the experiential learning cycle and were meant to produce different types of data to interpret.

#### Online Preparation

The virtual stage was utilized to determine the conceptual background and intercultural intercourse. Through collaborative tools, the participants took lectures that included: Heritage Perceptions (Professor Sara Cura) and Design and Heritage in Crafts (Professor Eugenia Chiara). These workshops presented theoretical background on heritage conservation, design ethics and sustainability. These ideas were discussed online and in breakout groups, and participants were encouraged to relate them to their own cultural context, to generate preliminary reflections that were subsequently analysed thematically. Students were assigned to create brief multimedia portfolios, or a conglomeration of text, sketches and photos, which conveyed their preliminary impressions of the concept of memory and emotion in place. These submissions were used as diagnostic instruments and also baseline data to make future comparisons. Observational logs indicated the level of engagement and the dynamics of the discussion, faculties as mentors captured this information, and thus, they were able to see how students were transforming their perception of things, even before they began to move physically.

#### In-Person Immersion in Castelo Branco

The face-to-face stage constituted the pedagogical fundamental of the program. There was a mix of structured fieldwork, guided reflection and studio based creation each day, with a distinct methodological purpose.

**Day 1** was devoted to the geographical orientation and history with visiting the Museu Francisco Tavares Proença Junior and Jardim do Paço Episcopal. Such visits were made through the prism of learning laboratories, during which the participants were encouraged to see physical remnants of the past and identify them with shared memory. The notes and drawings of this day were valuable qualitative data that helped to understand how concrete experience can be used to form the idea.

**Day 2** focused on material culture and handicraft by taking part in a workshop at Centro de Interpretação do Bordado de Castelo Branco. Students also worked with local craftsmen and could note the methods of embroidery, which combine symbolic and manual skills. This experience prefigured the form of learning Schön (1983) termed reflection-in-action learning that is developed in the process of making. Memoirs and snapshots of this session were later used as the main pieces of evidence in the thematic analysis of embodied learning.

**Day 3** was devoted to the creative work in the studios of the Polytechnic Institute, during which participants represented their experiences through artistic works. Group critiques were enabled by faculty mentors who wanted participants to explain the connection between form, meaning and cultural interpretation. These recorded and transcribed dialogues constituted a corpus in the discourse analysis and theme determination.

**Day 4** was the introduction of inter-disciplinary cooperation, where students in other fields and institutions work together to come up with collaborative projects. This design was specifically modelling to experience professional co-creation processes typical of heritage and design practice (Klein, 2020). The data collected during this period through observations revealed the effectiveness of negotiation and dialogue in understanding each other and gaining innovation through synthesis.

**Day 5** ended with a mass exhibition known as A Tapestry of Memory which took place at the Polytechnic Institute of Castelo Branco. The participants showed their artistic interpretations, which included installation, photography and digital media. The exhibition was both a final evaluation and a performative research exercise, where the community and local stakeholders were invited to come and interact with the student treatment of cultural identity. The video-taped presentations of the participants were coded subsequently, and were assessed using expression of self-awareness, cultural empathy and aesthetic reasoning-major indicators of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991).

### **Post-Mobility Reflection and Dissemination**

The final stage underlined the integration and reflection. The post-program surveys that assessed the learning outcomes were completed by participants, and the faculty members held focus-group discussions using videoconference. Entering reflective essays, which related their creative processes to theoretical insights introduced earlier, were also submitted by students.

Such reflection writings formed the most valuable sources of qualitative information. Recurrent themes also emerged as a result of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) covering self-discovery, cultural reinterpretation and shared development. Some of the respondents have indicated that their original concept of heritage has evolved in terms of being more dynamic instead of being static, a result that well substantiates the hypotheses of the study on experiential transformation.

### **4.4. Data Analysis and Validity Procedures**

Survey data was collected quantitatively and analysed through descriptive statistics where engagement and perceived learning outcomes were evaluated. Thematic coding in Braun and Clarke (2006) 6-phase model was used to analyse qualitative data, which consisted of reflective essays, transcripts, and observational notes. To code data, two researchers were used to promote intercoder reliability (Saldaña, 2021). Such codes like intercultural awareness, creative synthesis, and embodied interpretation were determined and placed into larger categories of analysis.

Triangulation through comparison of patterns was used: e.g., consistency of questionnaire patterns (students with increased confidence in intercultural collaboration) and qualitative commentary (students about changes in perception with group critique). This triangulation enhanced internal validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **4.5. Ethical and Pedagogical Considerations**

The informed consent was given to all the participants in compliance with the Erasmus+ and institutional ethical requirements. Data were anonymised and placed in a safe place. Since the research was artistic and collaborative, the principles of collective authorship were used to credit the works that were co-created (Leavy, 2015). The program had a pedagogical ethics that focused on cultural respect and reciprocity. The engagement of the local artisans was done through heritage professionals to have proper depictions of the traditional practices. The exhibition aspect was also community

inclusive and thus met the social aspect of the experiential learning.

#### 4.6. Methodological Reflections and Limitations

The strengths of the study are that in terms of methodology, the research and design of the study are consistent with the objectives of the research. The study was able to capture learning in action as it occurred because it incorporated a data gathering process as part of the natural flow of the program, not in retrospective abstraction. The mix of the creative outputs, reflective writing, and observation were both in depth and in breadth of understanding.

However, we were not able to conduct a longitudinal analysis due to the short duration of the program. Although the short term effect was visible, the implementation in the future can involve follow-up interviews that will be conducted several months later to look at the continuation of transformative effects. Moreover, even though intercultural diversity contributed to a deeper analysis, language obstacles were present and sometimes constrained the subtlety of reflective articulation.

Nevertheless, the BIP showed a well-integrated fusion of artistic inquiry, experiential learning and methodological rigor. The program design also provided a model that can be replicated to combine creative pedagogy and empirical research in heritage education- a model that gains more popularity in the context of higher education nowadays.

### 5. RESULTS

The given research illustrates how the experiential engagement, intercultural collaboration and art praxis come together to promote transformative and reflective learning. The triangulation of pre- and post-program questionnaires, reflective journals, observations of the faculty, and artistic products produced during the final exhibition provide a detailed description of the pedagogical and creative implications of the program.

#### 5.1. Learning Outcomes and Cultural Awareness

Quantitative studies showed that there was a significant improvement in self-reported knowledge and activities. First, 62 percent of the participants rated their knowledge of the Castelo Branco cultural heritage as middle. After participating in the program, 91% of them had a high or very high level of the historical and artistic value of the program. Immediacy of creative experimentation and joint problem solving increased by a pre-program mean of 3.4 to 4.6 on a five-point Likert scale.

Quantitative results were supported by qualitative thoughts. A large number of the participants expressed a stronger emotional attachment to the city and its traditions. According to one student, I came to realize the strata of history within each tile, in each shadow on the facade. Such an emotional involvement is consistent with the claim that Dewey (1938) makes that education is created when experience is developed into active reflection, and with the argument made by Kolb (2015) that learning is created when experience is transformed into meaning.

#### 5.2. Collaboration, Reflection, and Intercultural Exchange

Cooperation in the BIP played the role of an intercultural experiment and a pedagogical approach. The teams of Finland, Poland, Bulgaria and Portugal negotiated on linguistic, disciplinary and conceptual differences and thus represented the reflection-in-action of Schön (1983). People talked about learning by dialogue and misunderstanding, in which a negotiation itself was a creative tool.

Faculty observations were able to validate the fact that intercultural collaboration was able to trigger adaptive thinking and broaden artistic interpretation. Respondents often

admitted that when dealing with another cultural view of the world, it changed their perception of the way they create work. Work was not only about Castelo Branco as one of the participants noted, it was about the way we all see and feel things differently. These findings support the hypothesis of the program that the collaborative and cross-cultural interaction creates a better reflective and supportive learning

### 5.3. Artistic Outcomes and Thematic Contributions

The final exhibition, A Tapestry of Memory, presented a range of interdisciplinary projects which understood Castelo Branco cultural heritage through the prism of visual, digital and experiential media. These pieces of art served as the products of the research themselves, incarnated considerations of how students received and recreated the heritage via artistic practice (Leavy, 2015).



**Fig. 1** - House of Windows.  
Source: Salla Koivunen; South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences – Finland

This installation explored the architectural tropes of the historic facades of Castelo Branco, through the conversion of the rhythm of windows and balconies into layers of photographic transparencies. The light that was projected through overlapping frames created changing patterns which reflected the process of looking inside and outside. Symbolically, the work also represented the connection between observation and interpretation, and this was reminiscent of Mezirow (1991) notion of perspective transformation. It was referred to as a portrait of perception by students with each viewer re-creating their own visual story.



**Fig. 2** - Castelo Branco Postcards. Source: Anastasia Neikova; St. Cyril and St Methodius University of Veliko Turnovo – Bulgaria

It was a collaborative project that revisited the traditional tourist postcard by using mixed media by combining the cyanotype prints, sketches and pieces of local text to create hybrid visual messages that disrupted the image of the city as a static image. The feel of the work encouraged the consideration of the memory, travels, and representation and reminded me of the perspective of Dewey (1938) regarding art as an experience. The purpose mentioned by the group, which is captured in the reflections, was to send memories back to the city itself hence making the documentation turn towards dialogue.



**Fig. 3** - Azulejos of Castelo Branco. Source: Raphael Maloir, Ana Ilieva; St. Cyril and St Methodius University of Veliko Turnovo – Bulgaria

This project was inspired by the art of ceramic tiles in Portugal that adds hand-painted tiles with augmented-reality overlays. As considered through mobile devices, each tile moved in short stories that described movements of artisans when they were in the workshops. This collaboration of craft and technology showed how digital media can project heritage conservation into the modern forms (Means et al., 2010). The project demonstrated the potential of embodied practice of craft to result in what Kolb (2015) refers to as active experimentation, the creative use of learning through doing.



**Fig. 4** - A Week in Castelo Branco. Source: Evgeni Yovchev, Georgi Bumbarov, Boryana Genkova; St. Cyril and St Methodius University of Veliko Turnovo – Bulgaria

This project was structured in a multimedia form of a diary with combined photography, sound recording and handwritten notes that were made during the five days program. The installation that was obtained reflected the pace of discovery - the moments of sadness, excitement and thinking. Its fragmentary nature reflected the rhythm of experience of learning itself and thus turned time into an aesthetic form. It also doubled as documentation, and as noticed by its mentors, as a kind of introspection, and it was a material expression of reflective practice as defined by Schön (1983).



**Fig. 5 -** Conservation of Architectural and Cultural Heritage using Virtual Reality. Source: Gabriela Gancheva Atanasova, Gergana Gancheva Atanasova, Borislava Blagoeva Manolova, Sonya Parvanova-Yoncheva, Julieta Manchev, Ivana Stefanovska-Cvetkovska; University of Architecture, Construction, and Geodesy – Bulgaria

The architectural heritage of Castelo Branco was recreated in this digital project by 3D scanning and use of the virtual-reality modelling. The subjects were recreated as deteriorating facades so that the audience could navigate and experience the space in three dimensions. The piece put the conventional conservation into the involvement in digital experience, thus demonstrating that technology could be used in an educational and preservationist purpose. It was significant in terms of its methodology, as it was a way of connecting immersion in sensory experiences with the re-creation of elements that can be analyzed and organized analytically- an embodied implementation of the theory of experiential learning (Kolb, 2015).

All these artworks show that the creative process is not simply a form of aesthetic expression but a form of epistemic investigation. By providing, students challenged the nexus between material culture, emotion and historical context, therefore creating new knowledge of cultural heritage that is interpretive, embodied and dialogic.

Reflections after the exhibitions remarked faculty members on the growing theoretical fineness of the articulations of conceptual intent by students, and often mentioned references to space, memory, and identity. The exhibition, therefore, was not just an evaluative experience, but a social performance of scholarship, a creative production that was turned into an academic discourse.

#### 5.4. Integration and Interpretation of Findings

The cumulative outcome of the surveys, reflections, and artistic outputs when looking at them as a whole was three major findings:

- 1) experiential contact, which entails visiting the site, tactile experience and immersion with sensory experience, contributed to a deeper emotional and cognitive attachment to cultural heritage;
- 2) collaborative production that creates intercultural awareness and reflective communication, increasing artistic and communicative competence;

3) artistic production, in turn, as a research process, transforms experience into visual and conceptual insight.

These convergences coincide with a notion of triangulated credibility developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and support the hypotheses of the program in relation to transformative learning. Quantitative gains were measured in terms of impact and qualitative and visual data helped to shed light on how the meaning was created.

### **5.5. Challenges and Pedagogical Reflections**

As much as the outcomes were generally positive, a number of limitations were realized. The five days mobility did not allow the interactive optimization of the projects. It is also important to note that the participants expressed different levels of digital fluency levels in the online preparation stage and the importance of structured technical orientation (Means et al., 2010). Faculty mentors noted incidences of emotional exhaustion after making serious site visits and this might be considered on future interactions by adding guided reflection sessions so as to balance immersion and analysis.

In spite of these limitations, the issues themselves then turned into pedagogical lessons. The need to negotiate language disparities, creative tension management, and adjustment to the requirements of technology all supported the adaptability, which is one of the signs of experiential learning. The limitations, as noted by a number of participants, also acted as a way to focus our thinking in a different way, turning challenges into creative solutions to problems.

The outcomes prove that the Castelo Branco BIP was able to achieve its pedagogical goals. The quantitative data revealed a substantial improvement in the level of student engagement and intercultural competence, and the qualitative and artistic data revealed the process of transferring experience into knowledge. By developing and exposing artworks; House of Windows, Castelo Branco Postcards, Azulejos of Castelo Branco, A Week in Castelo Branco, and Conservation of Architectural and Cultural Heritage Using Virtual Reality students were not only describing heritage but being involved in its re-definition.

The results of these studies contribute to the thesis that experiential and arts-based learning do not just contribute to the better comprehension but also produce knowledge itself. The blended model of the BIP offered a framework by which cognition, emotion, and creativity intersected, and offered a model to be replicated in heritage education based on reflective and transformative practice.

## **6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

### **6.1. Reconsidering Learning through Experience and Art**

The results of the Blended Intensive Program (BIP) Castelo Branco: A Timeless Tapestry of Memory and Emotion prove that experiential and art-based pedagogies could be effective in providing meaningful and multidimensional learning outcomes. But even more than the expectation is met, the results begin to make one contemplate the process of learning, as it occurred, in the moments of uncertainty, negotiation, and creative synthesis.

The model of experiential learning by Kolb (2015) created a helpful framework to interpret this process: the experience of encountering heritage was followed by tangible experience, which was interpreted through reflective observation, tested in artistic output, and was conceptually understood in case of presentation and discussion. The program, however, as it turned out in practice, was less cyclical than recursive. Educational spiralling was in between emotional and analytic, shared and solitary

thinking, virtual and physical. This malleability indicates that the pedagogic usefulness of the rigid models of experiential learning cannot be fully reflected by the affective and interpretative complexity of the art-based inquiry.

The concept of experience as continuity and interaction that was developed by Dewey (1938) is rediscovered here. Pieces of art, such as *House of Windows* and *Azulejos* of Castelo Branco, were not simply the results of solitary imagination of students but experiences of place, craft, and community. Both of the projects transformed sensory impressions into enquiry, which disrupted the conventional distinction between artistic expression and academic analysis. In that regard, the BIP served as a location of what Leavy (2015) refers to as an arts-based research: a process where artistic activities create new ways of knowing.

## 6.2. Reflective and Transformative Dimensions

The intercultural format of the program promoted the perspective change which Mezirow (1991) describes. The feedback provided by students revealed that there were changes in cultural knowledge, but their vision of themselves as innovative students. The cross-linguistic and interdisciplinary workings tended to be rather uncomfortable, but that was fruitful. The idea of reflection-in-action as developed by Schön (1983) can be used to outline the ways of how learning took place as a result of uncertainty- how participants were able to construct meaning as they created it, and how they simultaneously interpreted and reconstructed meaning.

This aspect was particularly apparent in the team-work projects like *Castelo Branco Postcards* and *A Week in Castelo Branco* in which different aesthetic sensibilities came to meet. These projects are dialogic, which contributes to the argument suggested by Deardorff (2022): intercultural competence is not formed when learning the knowledge but rather via empathetic co-creation. The students also acquired skills of negotiating meaning, listening visually and orally, a skill, which is central to both heritage interpretation and creative practice.

## 6.3. Expanding Theoretical Horizons: From Experience to Transformation

Although Kolb (2015) and Dewey (1938) would still be central, the findings suggest that a more comprehensive theoretical ecology of the experiential education is necessary. The aesthetic and emotional aspects that were witnessed in the BIP can be compared to transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991), arts-based inquiry (Leavy, 2015), and reflective practice (Schön, 1983), but also indicate similarities with modern debates in design-based education and practice-based research (Barrett & Bolt, 2019; Candy, 2020).

Making art in this program was epistemic and affective at the same time. The design of Conservation of Architectural and Cultural Heritage with the help of Virtual Reality helps understand how design mediators can result in the use of technology to balance between the immersion of senses and analytical reconstruction. These practices can be congruent with what Candy (2020) calls practice-based knowledge generation when the understanding is generated by doing, not by a detached observation.

Similarly, *House of Windows* showed the way of how conceptual insight could manifest themselves in aesthetic structure, of how the architectural motifs of the city could be transformed into the metaphor of stratified perception. These results imply that experiential learning in arts is not just a mere application of theory but a contribution to theory and it puts pressure on the educators to reevaluate the limits between making, knowing and teaching.

#### 6.4. Critical Reflection on Challenges and Limitations

Despite the evident achievements of the program, the results show that there are structural and methodological constraints. The five days face-to-face phase, though intensive, limited the possibilities of repeat experimentation. Future extensions would help in more profound theoretical assimilation and more lasting mentoring.

Online preparation was also not equal among participants, and it showed the imbalances of access and technical knowledge. Though these challenges were alleviated by using peer support, these challenges highlight the need to have scaffolded digital literacy training, a point that is supported in the literature on blended learning (Bonk & Graham, 2012; Means et al., 2010).

The other limitation is related to data extent. Although reflective journals and artistic outputs provided valuable qualitative information, the sample size can be considered limited due to its relatively small size. But, again, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), transferability rather than replicability makes the qualitative research credible. The richness of contextual knowledge gained in this situation is very valuable in models of adaptation to other cultural and pedagogical settings.

Another difficulty was balancing on emotional involvement and analytical distance. Faculty mentors noted that site visits could be overwhelming at times to the participants. Nevertheless, transformative insight is usually preceded by these instances of affective dissonance as Kolb (2015) and Mezirow (1991) would insist. It is not avoiding the uncomfortable but organizing the reflection in such a way that emotion can be used in cognition.

#### 6.5. Pedagogical Implications for Heritage Education

The Castelo Branco BIP highlights the fact that cultural heritage-based learning is enhanced by the use of embodied, creative, and intercultural aspects. Conventional lecture-based or information-driven methods can indeed pass knowledge of heritage, but they do not develop the interpretive and empathetic skills that one needs to maintain it.

The BIP made heritage more alive and active by blending artistic practice with experience and inquiry, turning the heritage into a process of making meaning. Examples of such projects are Azulejos of Castelo Branco and Castelo Branco Postcards because they illustrate the way students can be critically inclined to the local traditions and reinterpret them through modern media. This practice can be compared to the recent discussions in heritage pedagogy that support participatory and co-creative practices (Giaccardi, 2012; Smith, 2021).

To teachers, the implication is twofold: first, experiential heritage learning is supposed to pre-emulate the reflection as creation, as opposed to evaluation, and second, assessment must appreciate process, rather than product, as epistemical of artistic experimentation. The principles are not restricted to the fields of art and design, but provide knowledge about cultural studies, education, and digital humanities.

#### 6.6. Future Directions and Sustainability

The subsequent versions of the program might be developed in two ways. 1) Follow-up (longitudinal) to determine how the participants will incorporate the experiences into their current practice or research. 2) Greater interdisciplinarity, bringing on board other fields like digital heritage, environmental design and anthropology in order to enhance contextual insights.

The institutional acknowledgment of the pedagogical and research worth of art-based inquiry is also necessary to sustainability. Creating cross-institutional libraries of student work might become a changing memory of knowledge in common: making every BIP issue a component of an expanding transnational discourse on cultural education.

### 6.7. Conclusions

The Castelo Branco BIP offers strong grounds that experiential, reflective, and arts based pedagogies can be used to develop profound transformative learning in cultural heritage education. By means of the systematic immersion and intercultural collaboration as well as the artistic production, the participants were able to not only acquire cognitive and technical skills but also reconfigure their relationship to culture, community, and learning itself. The pieces of art, including House of Windows, Castelo Branco Postcards, Azulejos of Castelo Branco, A Week in Castelo Branco, and Conservation of Architectural and Cultural Heritage using Virtual Reality are physical evidences of learning through making. They are an example of a type of investigation that is intellectual as well as sensitive, personal as well as group, conservative and technological.

In the end, the BIP helps to realize that heritage is not the object of studying, preserving, but to experience, interpret, and reimagine. In the process of creativity in relation to culture, students become not only learners of culture, but also custodians, part of the continuing conversation that can be seen as memory and innovation that constitute the living fabric of cultural heritage.

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