Best Practices for Teaching Key Competencies through Medieval Culture—"The Book of Good Love" as a Case Study

Soraya Garcia Esteban

Department of Modern Philology, University of Alcala, Madrid, Spain
soraya.garciae@uah.es

Abstract: This communication details the final phase of an innovative educational project (INEDCOM-HITAR) carried out at the University of Alcalá, aimed at developing a comprehensive model of best practices for fostering essential competencies in teacher training using medieval literature. The project proposes Juan Ruiz ́s *Libro de buen amor* (The Book of Good Love) as a key case study and incorporates methodologies such as service learning and gamification to enhance United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). This framework promotes experiential, interdisciplinary and place-based learning approaches designed to enhance linguistic communication, cultural awareness and expression, citizenship, and digital competencies. Additionally, it seeks to support heritage preservation and advance the internationalization of education. By integrating these elements, the project offers a holistic strategy to prepare future educators with diverse skills necessary for modern teaching contexts.

1. Introduction

The shift toward competency-based education in European higher education reflects the growing demand for student-centered and skills-oriented pedagogical models. Within this paradigm, literary heritage—particularly medieval texts and culture—offers significant yet underutilized potential [1]. The present study emerges from a three-phase innovation initiative at the University of Alcalá's Faculties of Education and Philosophy and Arts, aimed at demonstrating the pedagogical utility of medieval literature in contemporary teacher training.

At the core of this project is *The Book of Good Love* by Juan Ruiz, the Archpriest of Hita—an iconic and intricate 14th-century Spanish work. Considered as one of the most important literary texts and as a compulsory text in formal education across all levels in Spain and Latin America, it captures the rich cultural, ethical, and linguistic diversity that transcends time. By embedding this text within interdisciplinary, creative, and community-oriented pedagogies, the initiative leverages cultural heritage as a platform for key competency development [7],[12].

2. Justification: Why the Middle Ages? Why *The Book of Good Love*?

The Middle Ages constitute a formative period in European history, marked by rich intercultural

exchanges, linguistic developments, and evolving notions of identity, ethics, and society. However, contemporary educational models often overlook medieval literature's capacity to promote critical reflection on modern challenges, from gender and diversity to cultural identity and sustainability.

Composed in a linguistically diverse register and regarded as a precursor to modern Spanish, Juan Ruiz's *Book of Good Love*, a satirical, eclectic narrative poem, is uniquely positioned as a pedagogical tool. It reflects the complexities of medieval Spanish society—love, morality, humor, theology, and folklore—while offering a lens through which to interrogate current societal values. However, although widely taught in primary and secondary contexts, Ruiz´s work presence in higher education remains scarce, especially in terms of innovative, practice-oriented methodologies.

Juan Ruiz is believed to have been among the earliest students at the *Studium Generale* of Alcalá de Henares University *[4]* before holding the ecclesiastical office of archpriest in the nearby village of Hita. This geographical and historical association renders Hita both a concrete and symbolic locus for place-based education. Incorporating such culturally and historically significant sites into pedagogical frameworks responds to increasing calls for experiential, community-integrated, and culturally responsive approaches to teaching and learning [2], [3].

3. Methodology, Objectives and Participants

The overarching aim of the project was to propose replicable best practices for competency-based education through medieval literature. Three specific objectives framed the project:
- To enhance core competencies—linguistic, digital, multilingual, cultural, and civic—through medieval literary content.
- To design pedagogically rich, creative tasks grounded in *The Book of Good Love* as a case study.
- To analyze student-generated proposals for innovative teaching practices.
    The methodology unfolded in three interconnected phases [5]:
    Phase I – Exploration & Planning: Included literary analysis, community collaboration and foundational planning.
    Phase II – Implementation: Rolled out workshops, development of cultural projects and service learning (SL) activities.
    Phase III – Analysis & Consolidation: through the evaluation of the activities carried out, the academic dissemination of the project results and the proposal of best practices.

To examine the results, the last phase involved surveying 121 pre-service teachers from the BA in Primary Education (English) program at the University of Alcalá Participants were asked via Microsoft Forms to reflect on their own didactic proposals and propose innovative strategies for teaching medieval culture to children in engaging and relevant ways. The responses, organically aligned with SDG 4 ("Quality Education"), included proposals such as the creation of digital resources inspired by medieval puzzles, multilingual guided tours in real historical sites, Interdisciplinary presentations or exhibitions integrating literature, music, and role-playing games simulating medieval society, etc.

These ideas, as detailed below, confirmed that medieval texts can catalyze the development of linguistic, civic, and creative competencies in higher education [8].

4. Literature

Phase III involved working different approaches which also supposed teaching with constructivist pedagogies and cultural sustainability. Specifically, Project-Based Learning (PBL) was applied to design multidisciplinary tasks where students explored medieval texts alongside historical and social contexts *[6]*. Multilingual onsite and online collaboration was considered to foster cooperative learning and intercultural communication. Educational Technology was employed to develop digital

artifacts—wikis, blogs, video narratives—that enhanced digital literacy [10] [11] .

The lines below revise and illustrate the methods used to carry out the project.

Building on Freire's dialogic model [3], Service Learning (SL) positioned students as cultural mediators through community-based events. Examples include conducting school workshops—thereby merging academic and civic objectives [9].

Game-based strategies included character role-plays and interactive apps that simulated medieval contexts. "Medieval escape rooms" and narrative-based games reinforced collaboration, critical thinking, and linguistic competence [6].

Activities and assessments were proposed to reflect on the SDGs [13], particularly the goals related to education (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5), and cultural preservation (SDG 11). For example, classroom debates engaged students in reflecting on gender and power dynamics in medieval and modern contexts. This is considered to develop competences with SDGs [12].

5. Results and Best Practice Proposal

Results—organically aligned with SDG 4 ("Quality Education")—revealed a diverse and creative array of student-centered pedagogical ideas. The data provided by the participants integrated language skills—listening, speaking, reading and writing—through engaging, creative, and historically enriched activities that promote both linguistic development and cultural understanding as illustrated in Table 1. These have been grouped into thematic categories for clarity and relate the best practices with the activities and a selection of key competences as acknowledged by the participants: Linguistic and communication Skills, Multilingualism, Digital Communication, and Cultural Awareness & Expression.

Table 1: Best practices proposal related to approach and key competences

#	Best Practice	Related Activities & Approaches	Linguistic Communication Competence	Cultural Awareness & Expression Competence	Citizenship Competence	Digital Competence
1	Role-Playing + Service Learning	Mini-theatre, historical role-play, cultural event participation, guided tours	Develops oral and written fluency through dialogues and scripts	Strong cultural engagement through embodied experience	Promotes empathy and social collaboration	▬Not core unless recorded or shared digitally
2	Multimedia + Gamification	Escape rooms, apps, films, audio exercises	Enhances listening, reading, and language use in interactive contexts	Exposure to culture via media and context	▬Limited	Heavy use of digital tools and platforms
3	Collaborative Interdisciplinary Projects	Research, group work, multimedia outputs	Academic and collaborative communication	Often involves cultural and historical topics	Encourages teamwork and social responsibility	Multimedia creation, research tools
4	Differentiated Creative Tasks	Writing, storytelling, debates, taboo game	Strong focus on language production	Expressing and interpreting cultural ideas	▬Not core	▬Not primary unless tech-based tools are used
5	SDGs & Critical	Debates on medieval themes with modern	Argumentation and	Ethical and cultural	Fosters participation and	▬Possible via

#	Best Practice	Related Activities & Approaches	Linguistic Communication Competence	Cultural Awareness & Expression Competence	Citizenship Competence	Digital Competence
	Reflection	parallels	persuasive language	awareness through comparisons	civic responsibility	digital debate formats
6	Hands-On Activities	Dioramas, costumes, puppet shows, thematic days	▬Less focus but can support storytelling	Strong cultural expression through art and performance	▬Limited	▬Not core unless digitized/shared
7	Community Collaboration	Educational workshops institutional partnership, podcast/resource creation	Writing, interviews, explanatory tasks	Deep engagement with local history and culture	Encourages community participation	Strong if podcasting and resource creation
8	Internationalization & Multilingualism	Translations, international communication, exchanges	Strong development in formal and informal contexts	Cultural exchange and global perspective	Promotes international openness and tolerance	Digital collaboration and virtual / multimedia tools use
9	Virtual Exchange	Online cultural exchanges, virtual classrooms, telecollaboration	Communication in synchronous and asynchronous contexts	Fosters intercultural dialogue	Promotes global citizenship and mutual respect	Essential use of digital platforms and tools
10	Storytelling	Podcasts, blogs, vlogs, digital storytelling workshops	Enhances oral and written narrative skills	Showcases diverse cultural perspectives	▬Not core	Core focus on digital production and sharing

6. Discussion

According to the participant´s results, Table 1 presents a comprehensive overview compiled in ten educational best practices, that integrate diverse activities with the development of key transversal competences: linguistic communication, cultural awareness and expression, citizenship, and digital competence. Through a comparative lens, it becomes clear that certain pedagogical approaches naturally lend themselves to strengthening specific competences more than others.

As we can observe, Role-playing and service learning, for example, stand out for their effectiveness in promoting linguistic fluency and cultural awareness. Activities such as historical reenactments and guided tours offer students immersive experiences that foster both oral and written communication while deepening their understanding of cultural contexts. These methods also enhance citizenship competence by encouraging empathy and social collaboration, though their impact on digital competence remains limited unless the activities are digitized or shared online.

In contrast, multimedia and gamification approaches—like educational escape rooms, language-learning apps, and film analysis—excel in developing both linguistic and digital competences. These interactive methods immerse students in language-rich environments while building familiarity with digital tools. However, their contribution to citizenship development tends to be weaker unless carefully contextualized.

Collaborative interdisciplinary projects emerge as well-rounded practices, supporting all four

competences. Group research and multimedia outputs help students communicate effectively, explore cultural or historical themes, work collectively, and use digital tools meaningfully. Similarly, differentiated creative tasks, such as storytelling and debates, prioritize language production and cultural interpretation, though their impact on digital or civic competences depends largely on implementation.

Integrating themes like the Sustainable Development Goals into reflective classroom discussions connects medieval content to modern ethical questions. This approach not only fosters persuasive language skills and cultural awareness but also cultivates civic engagement. Digital tools can be integrated, though they are not central unless intentionally used in formats like online debates.

More tactile practices, such as hands-on tasks—including building dioramas—prioritize cultural expression and creativity. While these enhance engagement and performance-based learning, their alignment with digital and citizenship competences is minimal unless extended into digital formats or public sharing.

Community collaboration, on the other hand, proves highly effective across the board. Whether through institutional partnerships or podcast creation, students develop linguistic precision, cultural insight, civic responsibility, and digital literacy. This practice exemplifies how local engagement can serve as a powerful pedagogical framework.

Practices involving internationalization and multilingualism also show strong results, particularly in developing linguistic skills, cultural exchange, and digital collaboration. These initiatives, including translation projects and exchange programs, build global awareness and tolerance.

Virtual exchange programs similarly rely on digital tools and synchronous communication to promote linguistic and intercultural competences. They also instill a sense of global citizenship, encouraging students to engage meaningfully across borders.

Finally, storytelling through digital media—via blogs, vlogs, or podcasts—places digital competence at the forefront while also reinforcing narrative skills and showcasing cultural diversity. Although not primarily aimed at citizenship development, these activities offer indirect benefits through public engagement and identity expression.

The table has helped illustrate that while all best practices support linguistic and cultural competences to varying degrees, the integration of digital and citizenship elements requires deliberate design choices. The most effective strategies are those that blend creativity, collaboration, and contextual relevance, aligning educational activities with broader developmental goals.

7. Conclusions

This project demonstrates that working medieval literature in current teacher training—with case studies such as the universal *Book of Good Love*—can transcend traditional academic boundaries to become a dynamic tool for developing essential 21st-century competencies. By embedding literary study within experiential, civic, and globalized educational practices, the initiative aligns humanities education with sustainability, innovation, and cultural engagement [12].

The methodologies employed—service learning, gamification, interdisciplinary collaboration, and multilingual engagement—offer a scalable model adaptable to diverse academic contexts. Most importantly, the project repositions medieval literature as not merely historical content but as a living educational resource that fosters critical, ethical, and global perspectives among learners.

References

[1] Bendix, R. (2009). Heritage between economy and politics: An assessment from the perspective of cultural anthropology. In L. Smith & N. Akagawa (Eds.), Intangible Heritage. London: Routledge.
[2] Falk, J. H., & Dierking, L. D. (2013). The Museum Experience Revisited. London: Routledge.

[3] Freire, P. (1993). Pedagogy of the Oppressed. New York: Continuum.

[4] Garcia Esteban, S. (2025a). Juan Ruiz y la Cultura castellana. Madrid: Archiletras.

[5]Garcia Esteban, S. (2025b). "El libro de buen amor: un proyecto interdisciplinar APS para la educación en competencias clave" en Lastra Sedano, A. y Rubio López, M.(coords.), Monográfico: Formación crítica y reflexiva a través de la metodología Aprendizaje-Servicio: compromiso entre universidad y sociedad, Alcalá de Henares: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Alcalá

[6] Gee, J. P. (2003). What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

[7] Kolb, D. A. (1984). Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

[8] Levstik, L. S., & Barton, K. C. (2011). Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle Schools. New York: Routledge.

[9] Richards, G. (2007). Cultural Tourism: Global and Local Perspectives. New York: Haworth Press.

[10] Smith, L. (2006). Uses of Heritage. London: Routledge.

[11] UNESCO. (2015). Recommendation on the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections. Paris: UNESCO.

[12] UNESCO. (2017). Education for Sustainable Development Goals: Learning Objectives. Paris: UNESCO.

[13] United Nations. (2015). Sustainable Development Goals. New York: United Nations.