Impact of a blended Zotero training program for Cuban master's students

Impacto de un programa formativo semipresencial en Zotero para maestrantes de Cuba

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ABSTRACT

Bibliographic managers significantly facilitate citation and reference management, justifying the need to train graduate students in their use. Given the complexity that mastering these tools can represent, ensuring quality training is essential. In this context, this research aimed to analyze the impact of a blended Zotero training program for students in the Master's in Management Accounting at the University of Granma, Cuba. Using a quantitative, descriptive approach and a non-experimental design, a questionnaire was administered to the 21 students enrolled in the academic program. The main results demonstrated the significant impact of the course: 90.4% of participants had no prior experience using bibliographic managers. However, after the training, 57% achieved high levels of proficiency, and 95.2% expressed the intention to use it permanently. These findings are attributed to innovative pedagogical strategies, such as video tutorials, interactive learning objects, and virtual tutoring via WhatsApp, which led to 100% positive feedback on the materials and 80.9% rating the teaching support as very good. The conclusion is that this training model constitutes an effective framework for developing research skills and bridging the digital divide in academic settings.

Keywords: Information literacy; Digital skills; Research training; Bibliographic managers; Zotero.

RESUMEN

Los gestores bibliográficos facilitan de manera significativa la gestión de citas y referencias, lo que justifica la necesidad de formar a los estudiantes de posgrado en su uso. Dada la complejidad que puede representar el dominio de estas herramientas, es fundamental garantizar capacitaciones de calidad. En este contexto, la presente investigación tuvo como objetivo analizar el impacto de un programa formativo semipresencial en Zotero para estudiantes de la Maestría en Contabilidad Gerencial de la Universidad de Granma, Cuba. Mediante un enfoque cuantitativo, descriptivo y diseño no-experimental, se aplicó un cuestionario a los 21 estudiantes que cursaban dicho programa académico. Los principales resultados demostraron el impacto significativo que tuvo el curso pues el 90,4 % de los participantes carecía de experiencia previa en el manejo de gestores bibliográficos, pero tras la capacitación, el 57 % alcanzó niveles altos de competencia y el 95,2 % manifestó intención de uso permanente. Estos hallazgos se atribuyen a estrategias pedagógicas innovadoras, como videos tutoriales, objetos de aprendizaje interactivos y tutoría virtual mediante WhatsApp, que permitieron que el 100 % valorara de positivo los materiales y el 80,9 % calificara como muy buena la atención docente. Se concluye que, que este modelo de formación, constituye un marco efectivo para desarrollar competencias investigativas y reducir la brecha digital en entornos académicos.

Palabras clave: Alfabetización informacional; Competencias digitales; Formación investigativa; Gestores bibliográficos; Zotero.

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing requires communicative clarity, a coherent manuscript structure, and a logical and consistent narrative that guides the reader to ensure its impact (Arias, 2024). Equally important is critical analysis and synthesis of information, as well as the proper citation of consulted sources. According to Calò (2022) and Santos et al. (2023), this process plays an essential role in the creation of knowledge, as it supports and validates researchers' arguments. Furthermore, it offers readers the opportunity to consult the references used, which facilitates the verification of the findings or their critical discussion, reinforcing methodological transparency.

In line with this, Paz (2023) points out that it is essential that citations and references in scientific articles include exclusively the sources that have been consulted, since the incorporation of unexamined references—known as "ghost citations"—compromises the quality and veracity of the research. This practice changes the process of constructing scientific knowledge and, according to Crisci and Katinas (2020), also affects academic evaluation systems based on citation metrics. These indicators quantify the impact of scientific journals and researchers based on the number of citations received, so false references generate distortions in the accreditation and funding processes for scientific activity.

According to these effects, mastery of citation techniques constitutes a fundamental skill not only for professional researchers but also for undergraduate and graduate students (master's and doctoral degrees). Recent studies demonstrate the existing deficiencies in this area: Howard and Tummon (2025), when evaluating students' ability to create and understand citations in various formats, identified significant deficiencies that demonstrate the need to strengthen training in citational literacy. These findings coincide with the research of Perdomo and Morales (2022), who, upon examining 120 theses from different academic levels, found that 100% of the works presented errors in the referencing system. This widespread problem indicates a marked lack of awareness of citation and bibliographic referencing standards among university students, a situation that directly affects the academic quality of their scientific productions.

In this context, the citation and referencing process becomes a complex task due to multiple factors. First, the existence of diverse citation styles (APA, Vancouver, IEEE, Harvard, among others), each of them with specific requirements depending on the scientific discipline. Furthermore, the heterogeneity of available sources (books, scientific articles, theses, etc.) adds another layer of complexity. This situation is exacerbated when the process is carried out manually or using the limited functionalities of conventional word processors.

To solve these challenges, bibliographic managers emerge as specialized technological solutions. According to Casado et al. (2014, p. 256), these are " computer programs that allow the creation of a bibliographic reference database to store and classify content, create and edit citations and bibliographies in research papers." As Roa et al. (2022) point out; these tools optimize research time and minimize common errors in reference management, thereby ensuring greater precision in academic production.

Regarding their basic functionalities, bibliographic managers present common functionalities according to Cordón et al. (2009) such as the capture and storage of references, organization through categories and tags, automatic generation of citations and bibliographies in various normative styles, advanced search systems, and the ability to import/export bibliographic data. García (2020) adds that certain platforms incorporate innovative collaborative features, allowing multiple researchers to work simultaneously on the same reference database, share annotations and establish academic cooperation networks, which makes them tools with the potential to boost collective scientific work.

Due to this versatility, bibliographic managers have achieved widespread adoption in the research field. The current offering includes numerous options that are constantly being developed, with ongoing improvements in their capabilities. These tools feature advanced features such as document viewing,

highlighting systems, and direct annotation of texts linked to references. From an access perspective, they are classified as proprietary, free, and open source. Their availability varies between web-only platforms, desktop applications, or mobile versions, with multilingual support, including Spanish. Among the most notable options are Mendeley, EndNote, and Zotero, the latter recognized by Kratochvíl (2017) as the most accurate in generating references, along with Mendeley, following a comparative analysis of errors in bibliographic citations.

Recognizing its strategic value for research, academic institutions have implemented specialized training for bibliographic managers. The University of Granma in Cuba responds to this need through integrated courses in its undergraduate and graduate programs, designed to develop digital skills in reference management. A specific case is the Master's in Managerial Accounting, which in its sixth edition included specific training in these tools. The teaching experience generated interest in evaluating the real impact of this training on students. A study in this area could identify learning gaps, optimize curriculum designs, and establish best pedagogical practices for research digital literacy. Therefore, this research aimed to analyze the impact of a blended learning program in Zotero for students in the Master's in Managerial Accounting at the University of Granma, Cuba.

METHOD

The study used a descriptive, non-experimental design with a quantitative approach to analyze the impact of the Zotero course. The target population was the study sample, comprised of all 21 students enrolled in the sixth edition of the Master's in Managerial Accounting at the University of Granma, Cuba, who completed the program between October and November 2024.

Data collection was conducted using a survey technique and a questionnaire consisting of nine questions, six of which were designed according to a Likert scale, with only one of five possible answers. This questionnaire measured the perceived usefulness of Zotero, self-perception of acquired skills, evaluation of the quality of the teaching materials, satisfaction with teaching support, and the course overall assessment. The instrument demonstrated high internal reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.866$), exceeding the minimum recommended threshold of 0.7 for exploratory studies.

The application was implemented anonymously using the Poll For All digital platform, with unique access via a dedicated link (https://pollforall.com/Q/q9kg25gq). Participants completed the online questionnaire at the end of the training, ensuring immediate data collection. The tool automatically generated graphical visualizations of the data, which were then subjected to descriptive analysis (frequencies and percentages) for each variable of interest.

RESULTS

The survey administered to Zotero course participants collected their feedback on the didactic effectiveness of the training process and the perceived usefulness of the bibliographic tool. These data provide evidence for optimizing teaching methodology, adjusting pedagogical content, and measuring the level of technology adoption among graduate students. The results presented below systematize this information through quantitative analysis.

Figure 1 shows three graphs that record the students' opinion regarding their prior experience using bibliographic management systems, their intention to use Zotero in their research in the future, and their perception of its academic usefulness. These graphs allow for a comparison of student attitudes before and after the training intervention, revealing a significant trend in each indicator evaluated.

Figure 1. *Master's students' perception of prior experience using bibliographic managers, usefulness, and intention to adopt Zotero after training.*

Source: Prepared by the authors based on graphs obtained from the survey https://pollforall.com/Q/q9kg25gq conducted with the "Poll For All" tool.

As it can be seen in the first graph in Figure 1, 90.4% (n = 19) of the master's students lacked prior knowledge of Zotero or other similar tools, while only 9.5% (n = 2) reported having used this type of software previously. This result demonstrates the relevance of the course as a response to a critical training gap in graduate programs. Furthermore, it justifies the permanent inclusion of this training in academic programs, taking into consideration its enabling nature for scientific research. Its delivery in the Master's in Management Accounting filled a clear training gap and prepared participants with essential digital skills for the efficient management of bibliographic references. This transformation is relevant in the current context, where mastery of technological tools for research is an essential requirement for quality scientific production.

In line with the above, it was also found, as shown in the second and third graphs in Figure 1, that 95.2% (n=20) expressed their intention to use Zotero, while 100% were in the "agree" or "strongly agree" categories regarding its usefulness. These findings constitute evidence of the course's effectiveness in demonstrating the practical value of bibliographic management, transforming technical training into intrinsic motivation to deepen its mastery. Furthermore, recognition of its usefulness anticipates tangible improvements in the methodological quality of academic works, particularly in citation accuracy, bibliographic organization, and regulatory compliance.

Figure 2 summarizes, using three graphs, the master's students' opinion regarding the

skills they acquired in using Zotero, the areas of their research practice where they anticipate significant improvements through its use, and their critical assessment of the teaching resources used during the training. This visual representation allows for a multidimensional analysis of the training program's results.

Figure 2. *Master's students' perception of skills acquired in Zotero, perceived benefits of its use, and evaluation of the course's teaching materials*

Source: Prepared by the authors based on graphs obtained from the survey https://pollforall.com/Q/q9kg25gq conducted with the "Poll For All" tool.

Regarding the acquisition of technical skills, participants assessed their Zotero skills using a self-perception scale. As shown in the first graph in Figure 2, 57% (n=12) were at high or very high levels of proficiency, 38% (n=8) at an intermediate level, and only 4.7% (n=1) reported low skills. As the results indicate, the majority of master's students considered they had at least achieved basic skills for using Zotero, which demonstrates

that the pedagogical design was effective in developing complex skills. However, it is considered necessary to implement post-course monitoring systems to support those who remain at intermediate levels through reinforcement activities that allow them to consolidate the acquired skills.

Regarding perceived benefits, the second graph in Figure 2 shows that participants identified multiple advantages that using Zotero

will bring to their research work. Ninety-five percent (n=20) believe it will improve the organization and management of bibliographic references, while 76.1% (n=16) highlight its impact on the accuracy and consistency of citations. Similarly, 71.4% (n=15) value its contribution to the quality of references, and 57.1% (n=12) recognize its potential to increase research efficiency. Only 4.7% (n=1) do not anticipate improvements in their research process. These findings indicate that the master's students appreciated that this program addresses their need for document management, which reaffirms the validity of the course's implementation.

In the context of the blended learning modality implemented, where only one in-person meeting was held, complemented by virtual activities, teaching materials took on a central role in the learning process. When evaluating the quality of these resources, their clarity, comprehensibility, ease of assimilation, and sufficiency were considered. The results were categorical, with 100% of the students falling between the "agree" and "strongly agree" categories, as it can be seen in the third graph in Figure 2. This unanimous perception validates the instructional design applied, as it shows that the teaching materials effectively fulfilled their function as substitutes for continuous in-person interaction. Furthermore, they constitute the basis for autonomy, enabling subsequent consultations and self-directed learning, crucial for the ongoing appropriation of knowledge. These findings

acquire great significance in the current educational setting, where hybrid models that combine the best of in-person and virtual learning are sought.

Figure 3 displays three graphs related to the evaluation of the training process in relation to the assessment of the attention provided by the facilitators, the level of satisfaction with the course, and the willingness to recommend the use of Zotero to academic peers. This graphic representation allows for a joint analysis of the human, pedagogical, and technology transfer components that determine the success of the educational intervention.

Figure 3. *Master's students' perception of the training experience in terms of teaching attention, satisfaction with the course and willingness to recommend Zotero*

The attention received from the facilitators has been:

Very good	
👥 17	80.9%
Good	
👥 3	14.2%
Average	
👥 1	4.7%
Low	
👥 0	0.0%
Very low	
👥 0	0.0%

Please indicate your level of satisfaction with the course.

Very satisfied	
👥 17	80.9%
Satisfied	
👥 3	14.2%
Neutral	
👥 1	4.7%
Dissatisfied	
👥 0	0.0%
Very dissatisfied	
👥 0	0.0%

Would you recommend using Zotero to other master's students for their scientific research?

Yes	
👥 20	95.2%
No	
👥 1	4.7%

Source: *Prepared by the authors based on graphs obtained from the survey https://pollforall.com/Q/q9kg25gq conducted with the "Poll For All" tool.*

Regarding the human component of the training process, the evaluation of the attention provided by the facilitators yielded very positive results. As it can be seen in the first graph in Figure 3, 80.9% (n=17) of participants rated the attention as very good, 14.2% (n=3) as good, and only 4.7% (n=1) considered it average. Very positive is that no teacher selected the negative categories (low or very low). These findings demonstrate a high level of satisfaction with teaching performance, which implies greater motivation, particularly in a course predominantly run online. Furthermore, it reflects that the implemented tutoring strategy was adequate for the training needs of digital skills. These results acquire greater significance when considering that

teaching technological tools requires mastery of the content and specific pedagogical skills to guide adult students in autonomous learning processes.

As a culmination of the comprehensive course evaluation, participants expressed high levels of satisfaction with the overall training experience, as shown in the second graph in Figure 3. The data indicate that 80.9% (n=17) declared themselves very satisfied, 14.2% (n=3) were satisfied, while only 4.7% (n=1) adopted a neutral stance. It is significant to note that no master's student expressed any dissatisfaction. These results corroborate the effectiveness of the instructional design adopted in its combination of in-person and virtual instruction, which positions the course as an institutional benchmark for future training in

digital research skills. It is also considered that overall satisfaction integrates several dimensions previously evaluated positively (quality of materials, teaching performance, perceived usefulness of the tool). Beyond the areas that could be improved, these data demonstrate that the program managed to transform an identified training need (the initial lack of knowledge of bibliographic managers) into a consolidated skill valued by students.

As an evidence to the impact generated, 95.2% (n=20) of the graduate students expressed their willingness to recommend the use of Zotero to other graduate students for managing their research, as reflected in the third graph in Figure 3. This almost unanimous level of approval goes beyond mere technological acceptance to turn the master's students into natural promoters of the bibliographic manager, which can lead to the creation of informal peer-to-peer learning networks that strengthen the research culture. This phenomenon can generate a multiplier effect that benefits the entire academic community of the institution. This result combined with the high levels of overall satisfaction reported, positions Zotero as a suitable technological solution for graduate research needs.

DISCUSSION

The integration of bibliographic managers into graduate training constitutes a strategic axis for strengthening research competencies in the contemporary academic context. This research, developed within the Master's Program in Managerial Accounting at the University of Granma, Cuba, provides empirical evidence on how training in digital tools such as Zotero can transform traditional research practices. Among the results, it was found that 90.4% of the master's students lacked prior experience with bibliographic managers before the course, a finding consistent with reports by Fuada (2022) in similar training contexts. This coincidence denotes a recurring training gap in graduate programs, which justifies the inclusion of training in digital research tools. The curricular integration of these contents responds to the documented need to optimize academic reference management.

A significant outcome of the study was the high reported willingness to use Zotero: 95.2% of participants indicated they would use Zotero in their research, while 100% (strongly agree and agree) acknowledged its usefulness. These results exceed those reported by Speare (2018) at the University of Manitoba (69.6%) located in Winnipeg, western Canada, where the availability of workshops on multiple bibliographic managers explains its partial adoption. However, they contrast with the findings of Nitsos et al. (2022) at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, one of the largest in Greece, where 68.4% of graduate students did not use these tools despite being aware of their advantages. This divergence indicates that specialized and continuing education, rather than simple access to the technology,

determines its effective adoption.

Regarding the acquired skills, although 57% of master's students perceived themselves at high or very high levels of mastery, the persistence of 38% at an intermediate level reinforces the need for post-training follow-up, as proposed by Rodríguez and López (2021). These authors, when evaluating a similar program with EndNote for doctoral students, identified that 91.3% of participants only achieved a basic level, despite the training received. This parallel highlights a cross-cutting challenge in the appropriation of bibliographic managers: the gap between initial instrumental knowledge—mastery of basic functions—and advanced application in real research contexts, which demands integration with complex workflows and critical thinking to strategically select, organize, and cite sources.

Regarding perceived benefits, participants highlighted anticipated improvements in bibliographic organization (95.2%), citation accuracy (76.1%), referential quality (71.4%), and research efficiency (57.1%). These expectations align with the findings of Gallegos et al. (2017), who demonstrated that training in bibliographic managers reduces citation errors by 70% among students at the Faculty of Administrative and Economic Sciences at the Technical University of the North in Ecuador, demonstrating the impact of using these software programs in improving the quality of the research process and the preparation of scientific documents. However,

as Quispe and Rojas (2023) advise, the persistent lack of knowledge (33.5% use at the National University of San Marcos in Lima, Peru) requires proactive strategies: early training and accessible guides, as implemented in this study.

Regarding the teaching materials, the unanimous positive assessment (100% agree or strongly agree) validates the quality of their design (clear, understandable, easy to assimilate, and sufficient). To achieve this result, the strategy was to design concise and short tutorial videos (no more than two minutes), each of which explained one of Zotero's features. Audio and text subtitles with commentary were also incorporated throughout the audiovisual materials, and were prepared at a basic level for easy understanding. This strategy, supported by Tomczyk et al. (2023), demonstrated that basic multimedia resources allow academic programs to be modernized to work in an increasingly digitalized educational world. This is because this teaching resource is innovative and inclusive, increases motivation, and allows for personalized learning rhythms, allowing users to stop and repeat as many times as desired. Furthermore, this way of presenting content facilitates the assimilation and retention of concepts.

In addition, the implementation of eXeLearning as a complementary resource proved to be an effective pedagogical strategy for learning Zotero. This approach integrated hierarchical content trees with practical exercises that offered immediate feedback and

self-assessment opportunities, allowing students to monitor their progress. To facilitate comprehension, the materials incorporated visual elements such as explanatory images, structured texts, and concept maps that organized the information in a didactic manner. This experience coincides with the findings of Purnomo et al. (2023), who developed similar training modules in which they combined eXeLearning with WhatsApp for online learning. Their study validated the pedagogical suitability of these resources and demonstrated their effectiveness through comparative tests that showed significant improvements in academic performance.

Likewise, the vast majority of the master's students (80.9% very good and 14.2% good) considered the attention received by the facilitators to be satisfactory. To achieve this result, the teachers had to develop strategies to promote fluid communication during this period, since the course was delivered in a blended learning environment, making it very important to maintain communication with the students. To this end, a WhatsApp group (https://chat.whatsapp.com/E9WPVeEGT7U6 oNALMAWMr0) was created, where students exchanged information almost in real time. This space served to clarify doubts, provide guidance on the activities to be carried out, and motivate them to study at all times.

This experience using WhatsApp aligns with that presented by Fuada (2022), who similarly used this instant messaging system as a means of communication for Zotero training

at the Indonesian University of Education. The authors argued that the choice of this mobile application is practical and adapts to the internet conditions of each participant, claiming that this practice is the first to be implemented in this country since it is generally used via videoconference or carried out in person. The authors described that through this online training, students were able to master Zotero because it facilitated group communication and collaborative learning, allowing the exchange of information in real time, in addition to helping to awaken interest in studying and activate the student.

However, the use of WhatsApp as a communication platform was not, in and of itself, the key to success in virtual tutoring. Its effectiveness depended on the application of good teaching practices, including the design of purposeful pedagogical interactions, the creation of a climate of academic trust, and the establishment of clear protocols for participation. This experience aligns with the postulates of Henao et al. (2022), who identify the essential roles of the virtual tutor as facilitating spaces for meaningful interaction, facilitating collaborative learning, guiding knowledge construction, providing timely feedback, and motivating continuous progress. The implementation of these principles transformed an everyday communication channel into a powerful educational tool, demonstrating that technology acquires pedagogical value when combined with sound teaching strategies.

As a result of this training experience, 95.2% of the master's students expressed being very satisfied or satisfied with the Zotero course, which validates the program's thematic relevance and the effectiveness of its methodological design. This high level of satisfaction explains why the same percentage is willing to recommend the tool to their academic peers, which demonstrates a successful process of technological appropriation. These findings discover theoretical support in the studies of Morgan (2024), who documents how students who receive Zotero training adopt it for their research work and become spontaneous promoters of the tool among their colleagues. Similarly, Pinedo and Valles (2021) emphasized the indispensable nature of these software programs for university thesis students, highlighting among their advantages the systematic organization of sources, the standardization of citations, the standardization of references, and the facilitation of collaborative work.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study demonstrate the significant impact of Zotero training implemented in the Master's in Management Accounting. The high proportion of participants with no prior experience (90.4%) demonstrated a critical training need, which the course effectively addressed. This is confirmed by the fact that all students recognized the Zotero tool's usefulness for research, 95.2%

expressed their intention to use it, and more than half (57%) achieved high or very high levels of basic competencies. This success is attributed to an innovative pedagogical design that strategically combined multimedia resources (short tutorial videos and interactive learning objects in eXeLearning) with a virtual tutoring system using WhatsApp. This led to 100% of participants positively evaluating the teaching materials and 80.9% rating the teaching support as very good. The overall satisfaction with the training process, reflected in the fact that 95.2% would recommend the course to their peers, validates this model as a benchmark for institutions seeking to develop digital research skills.

These results highlight the need for mandatory curricular integration of bibliographic management training in postgraduate studies, the implementation of post-training monitoring systems to consolidate technical skills, and the adaptation of teaching resources to the technological specifics of each institutional context. As demonstrated by comparable international experiences, this approach improves the methodological quality of academic work and fosters a culture of scientific collaboration based on standardized tools. The study thus provides a validated framework for bridging the digital divide in research, particularly in institutions with limited access to specialized commercial platforms.

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