

'Meetings with Professionals': The Success of An Innovative Teaching Methodology Based on Real Business Scenarios at the University of Seville, Spain.

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Abstract

University students, in general, seem to be looking for the purpose of their studies through a narrow lens. This makes it almost impossible for many of them to envision their future in the professional circuit beyond the four-walled classroom. To get around this difficulty, a new learning methodology based on real projects, and informed by the guidelines on structural reforms in pedagogy by the European High Education Area (EHEA), was proposed for courses on Communication Studies. A methodological model oriented towards reworking students' ideas was used to develop an activity called 'Meetings with Professionals' that met the rising career aspirations of the students. This activity brought students and working professionals closer, giving rise to new synergies. It roused students' interest toward the different professions in Communication, and the results, so far, have been very positive and underline the need to establish stronger links between academia and industry.

Keywords: Communication process, innovation, employment, university degree, profession

1. Introduction

The new educational methodologies invoked by university professors conceive students as the center of the education system. Since students are the protagonists in the new approach, this method considers that students must take a series of responsibilities, teaching them to be independent, and imparting the necessary skills to make them take critical decisions. The novel approach reforms the traditional model of teaching–learning. The professor ceases to be the source of maximum and absolute (or complete) knowledge: her/his role changes, and with it, the entire learning system. The professor becomes a guide for students, facilitating the use of the tools and resources needed to examine facts and to build new knowledge and skill sets.

Authors like Salinas (2004, p.7) have highlighted this, saying that the professor "acts as manager of the learning resources and accentuates her/his role as orientator and mediator".

Managing students' own resources and creativity gives rise to several positive outcomes. In the first place, the student establishes a new relationship with the professor, who serves as a tutor (or guardian) to students. Secondly, the role of the professor changes, from being the maximum authority in the classroom to being a collaborator for students.

2. Background: The New University Education

The mission of university education is "to enrich the personality and knowledge of the student in a profuse way and with quality and criteria, that is, to teach her/him a profession in addition to make her/him think, grow as a person, as a trained adult" (Jiménez-Marín, Elías & Silva, 2014, p. 188). In this sense, the teaching-learning process in higher education must be necessarily one with a global vision. For this reason, intellectual training in universities has a certain responsibility towards providing learners adequate personal skills, including the capacity for innovation, thinking up creative solutions, and adapting easily to new and challenging environments.

To date, the educational approach has been witnessing some notable changes, with authors like Robinson (2009, 2011) and Gerver (2009) proposing theories aimed at effecting far-reaching changes in pedagogy based on the formative, ongoing approach. They recommend revisions not only to how studies are organized but also to the purpose as well as the time devoted towards learning a particular subject or skill. This would ensure the learner goes from having a punctual formation and with pre-established times, to having a prolonged formation that will stand her/him in good stead all through life. Of course, the configuration of the current curricula is informed by these considerations as mandated by the European Higher Education Area.

The development of the necessary skills must be cemented into a favorable university context where students develop themselves, mentally and emotionally (maturation), as a result of an active learning which focuses on student participation in the learning process. Furthermore, this system of knowledge acquisition and skill development will enable learners to transmit and transfer the knowledge and skills learned. The quality of university education must be, therefore, in sync with the training offered to future graduates because learners should be employable almost immediately after they leave the university. For this reason, professors must think about their methods and practices and in order to consider their relevance and applicability in real-world scenarios. Thus, there is an imminent need to establish the following as the focal points of higher education: (1) training based on competencies (Saenz, Zambrano et al., 2008), (2) integration of theory and practice, (3) promotion of continuous learning and coexistence of different fields of study, (4) emphasis on autonomous (or self-directed) learning, and (5) an inter-disciplinary curriculum that is based on projects and problems' solutions.

In line with the contributions of Salinas (2004), the present research presents certain fundamental changes in assumptions with regard to three aspects of the learning process:

- Role of the professor
- Role of the student
- Learning methodology

These pedagogical aspects are interrelated with each other, presuming continuous innovation of processes as their key function.

2.1. The role of the professor

A university professor may be defined as a citizen of the present day knowledge society who takes responsibility for responding to change in a positive way by being able to bring the learner into contact with a continuous stream of new, up-to-the-minute ideas. She/he will also deliver diverse perspectives that are relevant to industry as well as to the sustainable development of contemporary society. Needless to say, the professor must possess the knowledge and skillsets required to classroom conversations. She/he needs to engage the learner and encourage the development of much-needed competencies, to not only improve the learner's chances of being gainfully employed but also to ensure she/he plays an active role in the communities in which she/he lives or operates. In order to be effective, professors face the onerous task of engaging voluntarily in the act of learning throughout life (lifelong learning) and transferring this virtue to the learner, thus establishing a continuous sequence of learners.

It is clear by now that the introduction of ICT in classrooms as well as learning and knowledge acquisition processes have brought with them both technical (e.g., use of electronic devices for teaching) and conceptual (the identity of the professor) changes, besides irreversibly impacting the course content and the teaching/learning practices. With the introduction of ICT, the professor–technology pair becomes a tightly coupled and an inseparable whole. In fact, some authors, for whom the functions of the professor now seem very different from those in the past, have made pithy observations. Heeren & Collis (1993), for instance, talk about the organizational, social, and intellectual roles of the professor; Berge (1995) adds that the previously stated roles can help address four different areas: social, organizational, technical and/or pedagogical. In the vision of teaching that these authors share, the different roles can not only be exercised by different people, but they must also do so.

Seen from the above standpoint, the professor's role changes from the transmission of knowledge to students to being a mediator in the construction of their own knowledge (Gisbert et al., 1997; Salinas, 1999; Pérez i Garcías, 2002). Therefore, it is a vision wherein the professor is totally centered on the student. The professor is close to the student, she/he is human and empathetic, and, as the two of them go along, the professor becomes the student's facilitator and go-to expert in the subject. This approach, which "emphasizes and facilitates learning before the transmission of information" (Salinas, 2004, p. 7), promotes the student's personal growth. The professor becomes a guide or a tutor who provides resources and tools not limited to content.

Following Porlán (2017), external elements (such as relevant content, students' ideas, social or environmental problems, and meta disciplinary knowledge that puts the acquisition of competencies ahead of content acquisition) must be taken into account. Certainly, this is a demanding approach in which the professor is called upon to play a different role than the traditional one, namely that of the magister professor, who gives magisterial lectures.

2.2. The role of the student

Recent research indicates that the true protagonist or the main actor in the learning process is now the student. The declaration of principles adopted by the 2003 Information Society Summit in Geneva states that the information society should be person-centred and development-oriented, in which everyone can create, consult, use, and share information and knowledge, so that individuals, communities, and people can use their full potential to promote their sustainable development and improve their quality of life – based on the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations. These last two contributions are particularly relevant to this research precisely because of their human impact and their social relevance, and they refer in no uncertain terms to the possibility of generating and sharing content in a collaborative manner. This also establishes the key role of technology that enableS the accessing and dissemination of information (that is, information technology – IT) as defining characteristics of humankind's new economic and social frontier.

At this point, it is important to identify the information society whose raw material is information, as different from agricultural and industrial societies based on land, machines, and methods; and this marks the dawn of a new era in which affordable and nimble communication systems, enabled by advanced information technologies, are breathing new life into all transactions and relationships. The idea called information society encompasses a range of industrial and economic activities, social behaviors, individual attitudes, as well as various forms of political and administrative organizations. Ideally, it's a new society where virtually everyone is engaged in creating, accessing, using, and sharing information and knowledge.

The creation, distribution, and manipulation of information forms an integral part of everyday life, culture, production, consumption, and wealth generation in the information society. In a broader sense, it is a community good for those who possess sufficient technologies. Along these lines, Cardoso (2010, p. 123), echoing the words of Castell (1996), prefers to speak of the Information Society as having and amplifying effect on political and economic globalisation, where the online space concerned with data flows becomes increasingly more important, eliminating the physical barriers.

Although this last idea about space seems to us essential to understand the new situation in which we find ourselves, we do not end up agreeing with the expression "information society". It is true –the role of the student, insofar as she or he is totally immersed in this society of knowledge, is different from the traditional one. However, such new educational models should not end up limiting themselves to enabling the accumulation of knowledge by the learner; how different is this new pedagogy from the old if all it does is easing the accumulation of knowledge using technological devices? The learning process in the Internet-era should pivot around "educational actions related to

the use, selection, reuse, and organization of information" (Salinas, 2004, p. 8) by the learner. This exercise will help the learner to develop critical thinking skills, to enable her/him to choose between two or more alternatives (decision making), and help her/him to grow up to be a responsible citizen who can contribute towards developing the society in a sustainable manner.

With the arrival of the Internet and ICT, more and more processes and systems are available to learners than ever before, in order to share information and to work collaboratively as a team without having to be confined within the four walls of a classroom. Sure enough, one cannot afford to belittle the importance of face-to-face interactions in the real world of business since these nurture essential human capabilities in learners; however, it is very likely to develop these human attributes online. In this context, great strides made by Spanish virtual universities, like the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, the Universidad a Distancia de Madrid, and the Universidad Internacional de La Rioja, as well as the modernized Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED) bear testimony to the favourable impact of online academia, and these institutions are gaining wide acceptance (Vinuesa & Fernández, 2016).

2.3. The learning methodology

Pardo (2007) considers education as one of the disciplines that has most benefited from the explosion of new technologies, especially those related to Web 2.0 (marked by more dynamic websites, apps, user-generated content, social media). ICT has brought about remarkable changes to the teaching–learning methodology. As pointed out by authors like Sangrà & González (2004), the technology is not really inventing new learning methodologies but, in fact, providing the resources to do it. Riding on the back of ICT, virtual universities are enabling highly effective face-to-face university teaching. Decisions linked to the design of teaching (instruction) are made on the basis of questions related to the:

- Type of training: virtual or face-to-face offline.
- Teaching environment: teaching strategies, role of the professor, role of the student, resources used, evaluation...
- Aspects directly related to students: e.g., age, objectives, motivation...

This is a new way of making teaching decisions based on real-time access to information or student–professor interaction, and this makes administer a specific course far more easy for the professor, nudging the learners toward the learning goals, and getting them to perform a desired training action. For their part, the learners can attain the desired level of proficiency faster. The new methodologies work by designing a training environment that involves engaging in a series of decisions that are somewhere between a solid, classical pedagogical model and the real and as-yet unexplored possibilities for knowledge and skill acquisition for both students and professors in the presentday (Latona, 1996; Salinas, 1997, 1999; Moran & Myringer, 1999). There is a radical shift from the current pedagogy and evaluations system, which are largely top-down and teacher-led. Embracing the new model is also about expanding the space for criticism, teamwork, self-training and, of course, reflection in both classrooms and workspaces.

A good plan of action is to promote self-training among students, and this would require the learner to carry out “independent” work, as clearly set down in the curricula, that will be evaluated for both academic and extra-academic credits (SET: European Diploma Supplement), with the professor stepping in, where required, in the role of an experienced and trusted advisor (mentor). Thus, the new methodology lays emphasis on the need to align the learner’s work with her/his attitudes and aspirations, which, in turn, ensures the learner internalizes the desired competencies faster. Following Jiménez-Marín, Elías & Silva (2014, p. 190), the researchers drilled down a little further to what is needed to be done according the new pedagogy:

- To guide the learner in the acquisition of resources required to perform the activities suggested by the professor.
- To mentor the student on ways to construct the strategies for assimilating each one of the desired competences.
- To establish pedagogical strategies with the participation of the students themselves.
- To focus on the learning activity and the learner, not on the teaching activity and the professor.
- To get the learner to agree on the competencies to be developed, taking into account the learner’s expectations as well as social-environmental and labor requirements.

Certain authors talk about “Learning 2.0” deployments, which, according to Piscitelli (2005), promise more collaborative learning processes. These also allow for more innovation and envision a pedagogic model richer in tools and information/knowledge artifacts, allowing as well professors and learners to contribute to an expanding knowledge base. Along this road, in the early 1990s, Gibbons, Limoges, Nowotny, Schwartzman, Scott and Trow (1994) were already discussing about the idea of socially distributed knowledge, further enhanced through the use of applications that favored access to knowledge for the maximum number, easy exchange of information, and collective generation of content. That is to say, an interchangeable, cumulative, and collaborative knowledge that can be shared, transferred and turned into a public good with the potential to serve all members of a community. Johnson (1992), for his part, proposed four different types of learning that the advent of new learning methodologies has made feasible:

- Learning by doing
- Learning by interacting
- Learning by searching
- Learning by sharing

3. The case: ‘Meetings with Professionals’ as an exercise in innovative teaching

The communication between different actors who make up society continues unceasingly. Furthermore, these communication tools have evolved significantly to the advantage of the new generation, the so-called millennials, born between 1982 and 2004 (Moya & Orozco, 2017). Also, practitioners in higher education are dealing with a new type of twin-faced user, the “prosumer,” who is both consumer and producer at the same time; more than just being an observer, the prosumer constitutes the core element of the teaching process (Macías-Alegre, 2016). Besides, here is a learner who is always-on, with devices at her/his fingertips capable of sharing, creating, informing and communicating; because communication is inseparable from the lives of this new generation of learners (Gómez, Roses & Farias, 2012).

For this reason, the teaching innovations considered in this research are tightly focused on this type of user and they go beyond staple content generation. The restyling of pedagogy is informed by the opinions of these key actors, by their responses and various other contributions. The 1st edition of ‘Meetings with Professionals’ was held in the University of Seville (Spain) in 2011-2012, exclusively for the benefit of degree students of Advertising and Public Relations. The results were very positive in subjective and objective terms:

- Great attendance by students
- Enthusiastic participation by industry professionals
- Search by recruiters of student CVs (curriculum vitae)
- Internships for students in the participating companies
- Positive feedback from students (as satisfaction surveys evidenced)

The 2nd and 3rd editions of ‘Meetings with Professionals’ were held in successive academic years with identical results. However, these editions also included degree students from Audiovisual Communication and from Journalism, besides those from Advertising and Public Relations. These two editions were not organized under the umbrella of the Innovation and Teaching Improvement Projects of the University of Seville, which brought with it some negative consequences. For example, financial crunch meant some professionals from outside of Seville could not be included in the program. The 4th and 5th edition (the last one) were financed by the University of Seville.

3.1. The context: Faculty of Communication (University of Seville)

The Faculty of Communication, founded in Gonzalo de Bilbao Street in Seville and currently operating out of the Technology Park of Isla de la Cartuja (Island of the Carthusians) in the Guadalquivir River at Seville, is celebrating during 2019 its thirtieth anniversary. The center includes a specialized library of audio and video resources on communication, LCD screens, projectors, three large classrooms including a virtual one, radio classrooms, audio studios, four computer rooms, several seminar rooms, celluloid photo studio and laboratory as well as digital photography booths and classrooms.

The Faculty of Communication offers a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees and it admits more than 3,600 students across various courses, such as degree courses (in Audiovisual Communication, Journalism, and Advertising and Public Relations) and double degree programs (in Journalism and Audiovisual

Communication). To complete this academic picture, there are four official master's degrees, namely, in Communication and Culture, Creative Writing, Script, Narrative and Audiovisual Creativity, and Institutional and Political Communication.

Faculty of Communication also serves as the coordinating institute for the Interuniversity Doctorate in Communication (established by the Royal Decree 99/2011/Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness, Spain) and launched in collaboration with the University of Malaga, the University of Huelva, and the University of Cadiz. This doctorate has six lines of research in which students at the Faculty of Communication carry out their doctoral or PhD-level studies: (1) Audiovisual Communication; (2) Advertising and Public Relations; (3) Journalism; (4) Educommunication and Media Literacy; (5) Communication, Cultural Industries, and Entertainment; and (6) Communication, Literature, Ethics, and Aesthetics.

The Faculty of Communication also offers various expert courses and specialization programs, in addition to its masters degrees. Similarly, students also enjoy the option to follow courses taught by the Institute of Languages of the University of Seville. Throughout the year, this Faculty brims with myriad training and cultural activities, promoted by the teaching staff and students themselves, such as congresses, seminars, round tables, projections, representations, cultural weeks, exhibitions, and workshops.

3.2. Objectives

Starting from the proposition that the student is the epicenter of the didactic or instructional process (and leaving aside her/his role as a passive subject in the classroom in order to be much more involved in the learning process), we can emphatically state that the student is responsible for her/his own enabling relationships with the professor and with the world around her/him. For this reason, our objective has several purposes underneath it:

- Improvement of the personal curriculum vitae (CVs) of the students
- Orientation of the students in order to get them ready for the difficult job search
- Creation of synergies between professionals

In the same way, it is pursued:

- Devising a real-world approach to the business dynamic
- Relentlessly searching for creative talent and other inputs
- Committing to teamwork
- Developing a sense of empathy with the work and its environment.
- Instilling in learners the quality of being adaptive
- Imparting knowledge on how to participate in public and private tenders
- Identifying the contributions of the project-based learning pedagogy to the training of university graduates
- Forging specific strategies to improve the teaching-learning process and integrating the same into the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS)
- Instilling in students a sense of responsibility when dealing with real-life scenarios.

Lagardera states that "nothing educates per se and, at the same time, everything in life is likely to promote an educational situation" (1992, p.55). Duart (2002) also says that learning is first and foremost about educating oneself with a view to form one's own being. And this is a process that keeps maturing throughout human lives. Therefore, from the very inception of this proposal, the researchers considered education as well as the synergy between industry professionals in a different light, and they proceeded to apply their understanding to the study of audiovisual communication, journalism, advertising, and PR. Specifically, these disciplines were considered since they cater to industries that are witnessing unprecedented degree of change, so much so that the academia associated with these disciplines is constantly looking out for new approaches and techniques that can pep up the performance of the learners.

3.3. Student's needs

This project was born out of the acute need felt by students at the Faculty of Communication for improved engagement with working professionals with "been there, done that" kind of experience. Learners were not driven by a rather narrow and ad hoc objective of landing internships, which in any case is managed under the umbrella of optional subjects of 6 or 12 credits. The idea was for students to listen to industry stalwarts as they give a first-

person narrative about their professional journey so far and they get key career tips and information on potential pitfalls. Specifically, students flagged the following needs:

- Students had access to one company only, so there was a need to establish links with more companies
- Networking between students and working professionals was far from adequate
- The students looked for first-hand advice from professionals on how to find gainful opportunities in industry
- Above all, students desired to observe the dynamic of professional work settings, getting a real feel of it.

3.4. Methodology

The first editions of the 'Meetings with Professionals' project consisted of, literally, meetings with professionals only. Gradually, these meetings were complemented by visits to the professionals' workplaces by various groups of students, some of whom had volunteered for the same while others were picked by the participating professionals. By now, the project has had several editions, and in the 2018-2019 academic year, it led to another inflexion point, namely, a white paper competition 'Paper Awards - I', in which students voluntarily participated.

The 'Meetings with Professionals' initiative, so far, has hosted talks or workshops by several eminent professionals from audiovisual communication, journalism, advertising, and PR, and they have walked the students from these disciplines through their work experience. They have gone to great lengths to vividly describe their daily chores, and this kindled interest in their profession, which, although in recent years the number of contracts has increased substantially, continues to be a great unknown among communication students. These industry practitioners have also engaged the students with at least one activity directly related to the course of study. The results showed that the involvement of the students was absolute and that the synergies created went beyond the strict boundaries of the university, as work links were created between students and companies.

Following are some of the professionals who participated in the project during the academic year 2018-2019:

Blanca Miguélez

Course: Art Direction and Advertising Creativity

Blanca has been a prolific art director at some of the leading Spanish advertising agencies (e.g., Publicis, Leo Burnett, Contrapunto BBDO). In addition, she regularly collaborates with 'El Programa de la Publicidad' (Instituto de Empresa).

Ana Aranda Rico

Course: Cultural Industries

Ana specializes in animation, and currently she is busy developing 2D animation videos and motion graphics as a freelancer. Being a scriptwriter and storyboarding expert for the likes of Pixar, a subsidiary of Walt Disney Studios, Ana also provides them with creative inputs. Ana graduated in Audiovisual Communication from the University of Seville and she followed it up with a degree in Advertising and Public Relations, also from Seville.

Rocío Herrera Sánchez

Course: Account Management and Communication at the Point of Sale

After obtaining a graduate degree in Advertising and PR from the University of Seville, Rocío founded an ad agency, Good Company, where she serves as director.

María Eugenia González

Course: Consumption Theory

María, founder and director of ELiE Health Solutions, a maker of food supplements that promote gut health, also attended the launch of a butyric acid solution for patients with problems of intolerance to certain food stuffs.

Elena Espinosa

Course: Art Direction and Communication at the Point of Sale

Elena, an online and offline graphic designer at SDOS, a provider of digitalization and marketing services, presented two practical sessions on popular graphic design tools that students needed to create visuals for their projects.

Patricia Vázquez

Course: Communication at the Point of Sale

Since 2012, Patricia has been head of communication strategy at the point of sale for Adidas and Reebok brands at sports goods major Adidas. Previously, she worked for the fashion brand Calzedonia, and before that, she had worked with Inditex. Patricia was a student of the University of Seville, with a graduate degree in Advertising and Public Relations.

Jonatán Camacho

Jonatán is an international merchandiser at fashion retailer Inditex. He is a graduate in Advertising and Public Relations from the University of Seville.

4. Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that higher education is indeed going through a period of transition and the curriculum is slowly but determinedly including competencies relevant to the professional needs of students. The delivery of the new curricula and the demands of industry require the teaching staff to renew their skillsets on a continuous basis. In this specific case under consideration, the objective was to enhance the analytical and critical skillsets of the students, in turn, improving their information search capability, enabling them to make better decisions, and developing their skills as team players. Based on direct observation of the students who had participated in the teaching innovation project, the researchers concluded that the students fared positively, edition after edition, in terms of achieving the previously mentioned objectives. Students, for their part, were also quick to realize the scope of the new curriculum and its potential application in real-world business scenarios. Likewise, professors who have satisfactorily implemented this new methodology, look ahead enthusiastically to participate in the initiative, year after year. Although organizing these meetings requires a certain commitment from professors, and, to a certain extent, it raises some risks for them since they will have to renew their class methods and practice, the truth is that the scope and results achieved represent an adequate recompense for professors, by their own admission.

It is also important to point out that this kind of methodology makes work with students easier for the professor. Moreover, it brings into being a collaborative system that boosts creativity, that is much more efficient than traditional learning environments, and in which there is little or no place for information hoarding (informational selfishness) by individuals. At the end of the day, students and professors are positive about the system and their overall satisfaction quotient is reasonably high.

Such initiatives not only refine students' academic competencies but also their hands-on skillsets, which can significantly improve their employability. The success of their students on the job circuit will be psychologically and financially rewarding for most professors, motivating them to plough back their skills and knowledge into the teaching method, so as to renew it on a continuous basis.

Financing

The teaching innovation project 'Meeting with Professionals' was made possible with financial assistance by the University of Seville through the Own Teaching Plan in its line "Support for Teaching Coordination and Innovation of the University of Seville in the innovation modality: Type B - Collaboration Networks for Teaching Innovation".

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