

Can we teach without giving classes?

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Abstract: More than ever, in the 21st century, is essential to acquire competences to learn, to find and manage the information that is needed to solve the anticipated problems or the unpredictable ones. Teaching must be organized towards the acquisition of these competences (basic skills), providing to students activities in which their commitment, responsibility and critical exercise of freedom are essential. I briefly present a case of teaching, at the university, based on negotiation and project work. The teams have created e-portfolios (open portfolios on the internet, blogs) and only 5 of the face-to-face 48 hours were expository (lectures by the professor). The approach has generated interest and high motivation and allowed the proper production and construction of knowledge by the students

1 The assumptions

Our context is the Knowledge Based Society/Economy. In teaching, knowledge is presented in the form of content which determines the syllabus of subjects that are defined by professors, whose knowledge is validated by the academic system. It is mandatory to point out that perhaps there is a danger of 'downgrading' of other knowledge, other than this, when one considers that knowledge is 'official' when it is translated into disciplines. The content is always the product of a selective tradition of knowledge (Apple, 1990). The teaching-learning process does not exist 'outside' the world or the people lives, as wrote William Kilpatrick in 1918, speaking about the project method, which I practice.

I perform the teaching profession for 30 years, 13 of them in college, 17 at the university. When developing my practice I always tried to 'escape' the exposition of content permitting students to discover for themselves the 'material' required by the formal curriculum. As I wrote on another occasion: "the students were never in our thought and practice, 'passive consumers of education' because we never were 'active distributors of education' but 'active situations generators for potential learning'" (omitted for revision, 2004: 87).

Teaching means to me, the organization of the teaching process according to the learning of that capacity to learn, creating, based on the content/skills prescribed, activities that generate difficulties to overcome and questions to clarify, in an iterative process.

Moreover, writing about my classes, as suggested by Kincheloe (2008: 84), I consolidate my vision of education as "a praxiologic act of emancipation" and I gain a "tacit awareness of the theories and assumptions" that guide my practice.

2 The pedagogical approach

The experiment took place in the subject Technology and Educational Communication II, a discipline that integrates a Degree in Education at University of Minho (1st year, 2nd semester). This subject stands as a space for reflection, analysis and exploitation of Information Technology and is based on the need for a new pedagogy of sharing and collaboration among peers.

The work was carried out in teams of five elements (nine teams) and documented on blogs that served as digital portfolios. The weblogging systems are not e-portfolio systems but they serve this purpose, for the moment, allowing to break the institutional structure of formal education and disciplinary compartmentalization of knowledge, that the Learning Management Platforms mimic. The institutional platform (Blackboard) was used only for distribution of materials.

In the first class, I presented my work proposal: co-construction of the syllabus and project work by teams. The proposal was accepted and I presented the issues that could/should be treated. I gave examples of activities — all involving multiliteracias (The New London Group, 1996) —, and recommended readings. Each team should submit and present a theme based on a selection of these texts.

In the second class, the activities plan was put in the institutional platform. Table 1 shows these plan, synthetically, that served as a guide for the project work which management was in charge of the students. The regular time for face-to-face classes was 48 hours. I used 5 hours for classic lectures (by the professor), 21 hours were devoted to presentations by students and 22 hours were devoted to the supervised team work.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES

A – The digital portfolio as a learning support.
Creating and maintaining a team e-portfolio

B – Implications of the Networked Information and Communication Technologies in Society: prospective vision. Reflective and critical comment of the movie EPIC 2014 and a timeline construction.

C – Podcasting: argument/direction/post-production of thematic short vodcasts.

D – Researches on the Internet (commented description, for each search, about various issues/topics, explaining the search procedures).

E – Recommended Readings: presentation of specific thematic (recension/review).

Table 1 - The activities negotiated and carried out by students.

This plan included the details of the activities, the evaluation criteria and indicators and respective weighting.

The assessment/classification of the team work was an exclusive responsibility of each team (10% weight). The activities were presented in class, discussed and evaluated by all. The teams filled an Excel file for auto-hetero-evaluation. For security reasons, at the end of the semester, teams gave me a report on printed version with the blog/e-portfolio and a final reflection about the methodology adopted and the work experience (two positive aspects, and two negative aspects plus a synthesis sentence). Based on these comments and sentences, I present the perceptions of these students about the classes.

3 The opinions of the students

In Table 2, I quote (in adapted way) the negative aspects that were raised by teams.

NEGATIVE ASPECTS

The high exigency level to fulfill the work demands, but that turned into motivation.

Excess of work, mainly due to the workload required by all the subjects of the course.

Lack of bases (previously knowlegdge).

Length of some tasks for which it was necessary to learn how to do many things.

Fun, but that turned into knowledge.

Some abuse of freedom in the classroom

Morning schedule(they would prefer afternoon schedule).
Lack of individual assessment.
"There are no negative aspects because we exceeded our expectations."

Table 2 - Negative aspects

I do not consider exigency and fun as negative aspects, and nor do these students. The big workload may be a reality, but I think the work proposal was feasible.

I will mention now the positive aspects stated, grouped according to their focus.

POSITIVE ASPECTS	
FOCUS	RECORDS
Performance of the Professor	The autonomy (provided by the professor), which generated flexibility and adaptability. The Professor methodology focusing on the student, based on research and the acquisition of skills (e.g. speaking in public, conflict management in teams, and the exploration of technologies). The Professor's work (clear and concise speech and work proposals very interesting, raising the interest of students for the subject). Few lecture classes. The timely planning, that allowed students' organization and guidance. Variety of assignments (challenging).
Perception of spaces for autonomy	The generation of dynamic classes, interesting and attractive. Greater autonomy and commitment from the student. The difficulties that led to personal development and knowledge construction. The personal satisfaction. The fact that the work done allowed the acquisition of knowledge besides the technology in it's self, and creating moments of great satisfaction. Freedom with limits.
Management of learning in teams	Acquisition of knowledge through the work performed (some knew more than others and this allowed the mutual aid inside the teams). Perception that the team work was difficult but has contributed to the personal growing, as it taught how to respect the other.
Perception of the evaluation process	Better acquisition of knowledge. The assessment actually continuous (preventing accumulation of work at the end of the semester). The assessment format (in teams and really continuous). Demonstration of what is the true continuous assessment.
Type of learning done	Exploration of new technologies and acquisition of ICT skills. The objectivity of the work. The content of classes and the work done (which will be a good basis for future professional life).

Table 3 - Positive aspects

The pedagogical approach seems to have 'brew' the autonomy of these students, generating commitment, personal development, satisfaction, allowing them to grow as people through the mutual aid and awareness of the other. It also allowed the construction of knowledge and the development of computer, planning, organization and evaluation skills.

The University of Minho carries on an institutional assessment of Teaching. Students do

complete a survey, each semester, with a scale of 6 points (completely disagree-completely agree), stating their opinion about 25 statements on the subject and the professor. The "Overall Assessment of the Subject" and the "Overall evaluation of professor" were quoted at 4.36. In this evaluation, I am placed on the University of Minho average. In other words, I exercised my professional autonomy in line with the values and principles that constitute me as a person and professor, and fulfilled the obligations that the institution expected me to fulfill. The way I fulfilled those obligations was, however, my responsibility.

4 Constraints and challenges

This way of working has some constraints. Students are not used to self-accountability and collaborative work. It is difficult to manage the tutoring aspect. It requires a lot of dedication because these kind of work with students requires managing several creative projects at once. However, it creates challenges: time management, ability to 'tune' on different issues and different people, creating spaces for dialogue, promoting the social construction of knowledge and amplifying the voice of the students. And, yes: we can teach without 'giving classes'. Students do learn.

References

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