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When Economics Meets Arts... in the Classroom

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine the opportunities for the use of art as an educational resource to stimulate creativity in the teaching of Economics. The need to promote skill development to encourage reflection, critical analysis, imagination, interpretation of reality, the anticipation of change, the seeking of alternatives, etc. is essential in this area of knowledge. The analysis of the use of art as an educational tool through a classroom experience shows the opportunities offered by this approach, although the extent of its use in university education in non-artistic materials is still very low.

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1. Introduction: Art as an Educational Tool

The efforts made in order to improve the quality in higher education have been focused, during the last years, in the introduction of methodologies, which favor a more active learning and more student participation and in the intensification of the use of new technologies. Within the realm of the teaching of Economics, one can also observe some concern for improving teaching methods through different strategies, such as more inclusive classrooms, constructivist approaches and collaborative learning, more interdisciplinary classes, meaningful learning, more participatory practices and fostering of critical thinking (Peterson and McGoldrick, 2009). Recently, an emphasis

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has been made, both from the administrations as well as from the academic fields, on the benefit of developing creativity as a central element, on which higher education must rely.

Fryer (2009) says that in order to promote creativity, one must know what can allow people to be creative and points out the following as key factors:

- Motivation, in the sense of curiosity and persistence or will to work intensely in order to solve something that is vague and to seek a creative solution.
- A repertoire of creative strategies for problem solving and the ability to apply them adequately.
- The ability to imagine, especially the ability to imagine alternative scenarios and to select those most promising.
- The access and familiarity with the central body of knowledge.
- Information searching skills.
- Other transferable abilities, such as communicative abilities and handling of ICTs.
- Specific abilities of the particular subject.

To this purpose, art, as the space for the development of creativity par excellence, constitutes a useful tool in the teaching task in non-artistic subjects, such as economics.

Eisner (1995) specifies different arguments that justify the presence of art in education. First, there are reasons of a contextual type (via manipulation of art), among which its role in the development of creative thinking and its role as mediator in the formation of concepts, especially in the social sciences stand out.

But additionally, there are other reasons, of an essentialist kind, which are more relevant for Eisner, who highlights the kind of contribution to the experience and the knowledge that only art can produce. This perspective conceives of art as a particular and valuable experience in the sense of Dewey (1949). From this approach, art is able to create forms that allow the expression of values as visual metaphors, that enable our sensitivity, and are able to draw attention to aspects of everyday life that are usually overlooked. Winner et al (2013) note “it (arts education) has also been argued to develop skills that enhance performance in non-arts academic subjects such as mathematics, science, reading and writing, and to strengthen students’ academic motivation, self-confidence, and ability to communicate and cooperate effectively.”

Examples of using art as an educational tool in primary and secondary education abound. In higher education, however, they are scarce and they constitute a very recent phenomenon. In order to illustrate this, one can cite some experiences: for example, Watsa and Christophera (2012) analyse paintings, drawings, and engravings that are useful to teach economics; Van Horn and Van Horn (2013) and Tinari and Khandke (2000) use music; Mateer et al (2011), Mateer and Li (2008) and Sexton (2006), explain teaching methods using movie or television clips; Davis (2015) uses poetry. Besides economics, Cepeda (2007), Tereso (2012) and the book edited by McIntosh and Warren (2013) describe several experiences of using art as an educational tool for teaching different disciplines too.

2. An Experience in the Classroom. The objective

The analysis of the experience carried out in the classroom is articulated on the basis of the following research questions:

- The use of art as an educational resource, does it promote critical analysis point?
- The use of art as an educational resource, does it promote the identification of the relationships between the economic, social, political and cultural dimensions, present in the problem of economic development?
- The use of art as an educational resource for an Economy class, does it encourage the development of factors as catalysts for creativity, as defined by Fryer (2009), namely: motivation, the ability to implement alternative strategies for problem solving, the imagination of alternative scenarios, the mastery of basic skills, the search for information, and communication skills?

3. Materials and Methods

The activity was held in the Development, Inequality and North-South Relationships class, in the third year of the Bachelor of Arts in Sociology at the University of Valencia, during the 2013-2014 school year. All the students enrolled in the class (fifteen) had to make a 15 minute-long class presentation. Students were given two options for the preparation and presentation of their work in the classroom.

The first option consisted in answering a research question, previously agreed on with the teacher, about an issue related to the problems of economic development. In this case, it was necessary to elaborate work using conventional research resources (books, articles and other library resources).

The second option allowed students to use an artistic resource as the key element of research. In this case, the student had to choose a work of art of any kind and to make an interpretation of it, establishing links between such work and different issues of economic development.

The two proposed options emphasize the fostering of self-managing learning and place the student as the active main character in the process. In both cases, the student must take ownership of the learning process instead of seeing it as the quasi-administrative task consisting in covering the teacher's demands (Zimmerman, 1989). This involvement allows for the development of interest and motivation, given that the student turns into an active agent, but in turn, increases his own demand levels, because learning does not mean a mere process of listening-memorize-answer, but it implies to search, understand and find relations (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

However, the goals of the second proposal are more ambitious. This option, based in the use of art, intends to put together the following characteristics:

- to foster the construction of knowledge, not through the memorization of contents, but through skills development, among which we highlight creativity.
- in facilitating creativity, to allow for the development of the catalyst factors pointed out previously (Fryer, 2009).
- to have present the social and collaborative character of creativity, avoiding the individualization and the isolation of the student during the cognitive process (John-Steiner, 2006).
- to use art as a creativity stimulus (Eisner, 1995) and as a experience generator, capable of generating multiple interpretations of reality (Dewey, 1949) and of imagination (Vigotski, 1972).

For the second option, with the aim of exemplifying the potential that a work of art could offer, a video was shown in class, made by Callum Cooper, with the title *Mine Kafon*, about the work of an artist named Massoud Hassani (<http://vimeo.com/51887079>), who created an artifact deactivating landmines in Afghanistan. Once the video was shown, several examples were offered, on how to link the work of the artist with different problems of economic development, such as innovation, development and territory, quality of institutions, development cooperation, etc.

Regardless of the kind of presentation made, students had 4 weeks to prepare their work, outside of class. The assessment of this course entailed two parts: a written text (70% of their grade) and the presentation of 15-minute duration, in any of the two modalities proposed (30%). It should be highlighted that the assessment system does not favor the realization of any of the two formats (conventional vs artistic), with the goal in mind of not distorting the students' preference for one model or the other.

In order to respond to the research questions, we used a qualitative approach based in natural observation and the analysis, by the teacher, of the development of the project in the classroom and the works presented by the students.

4. Results

Of the 15 students enrolled, only 4 chose the second option. The works presented were the following ones:

- A musical piece. The student called *CCA* presented the musical phenomenon of the *narco-corrido*, through which he managed to reflect the inequality, the violence and the corruption in Mexico.

- A documentary. The student called *STH* presented the documentary *Maquilapolis*, made by Vicky Funari and Sergio de la Torre, which portrays life surrounding the factories that define the bordering landscape between Mexico and the US, in order to show the unequal development and the impact of product outsourcing, brought by the free trade agreements between both countries.
- A story. The student called *LAO* presented a literary story describing the differences between a rich family and a poor one, identifying the implications of economic inequality, characteristic of undeveloped countries, and their manifestation in various issues, such as education, health, employment, social mobility or violence.
- The work of photographer Steve McCurry. Through a revision of the artist's career, the student called *ASA* reviewed the links between economic growth, development, inequality and environment.

5. Discussion

Only 26.6% of the students opted for the work using an artistic resource. Most students preferred to do a more conventional work of research and analysis of bibliographical information, an activity which they have carried out many times in other classes and with which they feel relatively comfortable.

The students who used the artistic resource showed a great freedom in the choice of topics they decided to work on, with the premise of establishing different links between the works of art and the class themes. For instance, *CCA* presented a *narco-corrido*, which was listened to in class, and starting from the analysis of the lyrics, several issues were discussed, such as inequality, poverty, violence, corruption, drug trafficking, or production specialization and trade. This shows the students' imagination when creating their own questions and answers, quite different from the processes in which students memorize content previously established by the professor.

None of the four presentations was focused on descriptive aspects or of memorization of a class topic. Instead, the presentations consisted in linking different concepts by revisiting, in a non-linear path, different issues connected with each other and with the work of art. For example, the work of *STH*, whose starting point was the industrial landscape surrounding the border between Mexico and the USA, brought up the opportunity to discuss issues like industrial outsourcing, territorial development, immigration, labor exploitation and competitiveness.

The content of all these presentations had a strong multidisciplinary character. The concepts related in these presentations were varied in nature, that is, not only economic but also social and cultural, so that the problems of economic development were presented from a holistic, not fragmented perspective.

Moreover, students have shown a diverse capacity to mobilize the different creative factors identified above. The cases presented show high motivation and willingness to work in order to offer a creative vision (factor 1) on traditional problems of underdevelopment, by using unconventional resources such as music, photography, video and literature, depending on the case. This motivation for the realization of an activity they considered innovative and different from what they traditionally do in their Sociology classes influenced the high quality and the creativity of the presentations.

Although in some cases the creative strategies applied are more elaborated than in others (such as the work on *narco-corridos* or the literary story), undoubtedly all of them transmit the feeling of being the product of searching for creative discourses and resources (factor 2).

The capacity of imagining alternative scenarios is the less evident factor in all these works (factor 3). All of the students have concentrated their efforts in the comprehension and the critical analysis of underdevelopment's collateral problems, such as violence, inequality, exploitation of labor or environmental degradation, yet always in a creative way. However, the imagination of alternative scenarios in the sense, for instance, of suggesting processes of social transformation is lacking in all of the cases. This shows the students' greater predisposition to identify economic and social problems, given the greater complexity and risk entailed by the design of transformative strategies of reality.

The initial information contained by any of the artistic resources presented is usually far from the central core of knowledge corresponding with the problem, which is many times just suggested in said artifact. In every case, these resources have acted as catalysts to access those areas of knowledge that the student wished to enhance (factor 4).

Given that the work is not centered in the analysis of an academic text containing the information and references about a topic, all of the students have had to develop skills for searching information relevant to their objectives

(factor 5). Last, all the works were presented and discussed in class. This allowed the introduction of the collaborative dimension of the process of knowledge construction, as well as of communicative skills (factor 6).

The interpretation of results facilitates the answer to the research questions posed before. The experience made in the classroom supports the idea that art can promote student creativity, reflection and critical analysis, and the connection with disciplines close to Economics. Art can be a good tool to mobilize the factors catalyzing creativity, especially the motivation to solve problems, the capacity to apply creative strategies for problem solving, the imagination of alternative scenarios, the interest in becoming familiar with the specific knowledge of class topics, the information search and the communicative skills.

6. Conclusions

The experience presented constitutes an example of how the use of art in the Economics classroom can promote the development of creativity in the process of knowledge construction. However, it should be pointed out that few students voluntarily opted for using the artistic resources in their presentations, which indicates that misgivings or doubts among students may occur, before they venture into practices that they consider riskier, which will have to be addressed when designing this kind of practices in the classroom. Other issues that may constitute lines of research to be developed in the future include how to assess the students' creativity in the learning of Economics and in the competences related to creativity.

Departing from these ideas, some additional questions emerge that may constitute research lines to be developed in the future. The first one is how students' creativity can be assessed in higher education. Even if tools have been designed and applied, in order to assess this skill in elementary and secondary teaching (e.g. Lucas, Claxton and Spencer, 2012), this dimension is yet to be explored in the university teaching. The second one is how to select techniques to use art in order to foster creativity in the Economics classes, exploring possibilities where the student is a creating agent of the artistic practice with a formative utility, such as in fields like image edition, video or animation. The third one is how to assess the impact of artistic practices in the learning of contents and in the other competences related to creativity.

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