

The practicality of curricula towards improved employability

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in a plunge of worldwide economies and consequently, new economic models must be evolved in order to come out of such an unfavourable situation. Innovation and creativity will be a must to reach success and it is here where young graduates can provide a fresh perspective. Certainly, the education system must also adapt to a new era that will result from this situation and although present curricula can become a constraint to achieve this goal in some cases, a drastic change in classroom methodology is a must. The objective of this paper is to describe that a learning process based on hand-on practice and autonomous learning can result in an upgrade of competences and skills. Therefore, a project carried out by Tourism undergraduates will be introduced in which students become the main characters of their own learning process. As a result, an increase in motivation has been revealed and also, in students' maturity towards the learning experience.

Keywords: *Innovation; methodology; applicability; employability.*

1. Introduction

2020 will be recalled as *annus horribilis* worldwide with over two million deaths and an estimated 420 million jobs loss during the second and third quarters (ILO, 2021), a situation which has been defined by the World Bank as the deepest global recession since the Second World War. Education became affected too with schools and universities closing and suddenly changing their classroom sessions for online training, in many cases without the required instruction for such a methodology. Therefore, adaptation turned the key word for education institutions. Back in time, 1999 also marked a historic milestone when a group of European ministers decided to change university education drastically. Later on, the Bologna process became implemented in the European Higher Education Area: there was a shift from traditional academic instruction, mainly based on the development of theoretical concepts, towards a model based on the development of competences and skills and designed around multidisciplinary in order to foster employability among future graduates. Great efforts had to be made, since the implementation of the credit system took place during the last significant European recession and yet governments had to cater for the required investments to ensure the operating conditions of the credit system. However, it has not been as successful as expected at first, at least not in Spain where youth unemployment is more than double the European average.

Now we are experiencing an unprecedented crisis and once again, the education system must reinvent itself. Higher education cannot afford to carry on with previous standards in the new paradigm that will appear once the pandemic is over. And it is not simply a question of deepening in the online methodology and ensure that higher education institutions update their technology and technological systems to cater for the smooth development of the teaching process. Rather, it is a full shift towards the needs of our societies. Although it is well-known that changes in university systems usually take a long time to be implemented, it is also evident that some action should be taken and decisions made now so that universities become once again valuable tools for society.

One of the main issues to consider is curricula. Sometimes the contents they reflect do not fit in with what society needs and they can become a significant constraint for the teaching and learning process. Since these cannot be changed overnight, it is of paramount importance to introduce changes in the classroom methodology. What the world needs now is innovation and creativity as well as sustainability paradigms at all levels. Young people can bring a breath of fresh air but they need to be trained accordingly.

This paper will introduce one example of such a classroom methodology shift in which students from a Tourism Degree are involved. They establish their own learning pace, grounding it on research, discussion and teamwork, and have a real client to work for who will expect results in a few months. The learning of specific content is facilitated, as they

have to apply it to their teamwork and on the other hand, students' motivation is enhanced by performing tasks that have a clear target to achieve. Proactive and entrepreneurial skills are fundamental at present to revive the business fabric and therefore, they should be instilled among undergraduates to improve their future employability.

First, a brief account will be done on the Tourism Degree curriculum to set the background for change; next, a description will be given on the methodology introduced in the classroom.

2. Tourism curriculum

As an affiliated institution to a public university, our undergraduate curricula cannot be changed. Particularly, the contents for the Tourism studies revolve around management of the tourist business rather than becoming experts in all areas of the sector. However, to manage a business, first, the business must be created, on the one hand; and on the other, and most importantly, management can be performed by Business graduates. This lack can be compensated with the introduction of a range of electives as varied as possible, but in small higher education institutions this assortment cannot be broad because of the number of students. Therefore, in many cases electives are set according to the teaching staff and their fields of expertise. It is a question of costs that universities cannot overlook nowadays.

Examples of the contents are statistics, introduction to economics, introduction to law, business environment, recruitment, strategic management, financial accounting, or management accounting, among others; and they are distributed throughout the Degree. This is demotivating for students because it is not what they were looking for when they enrolled in university. This results in students dropping out which, together with the low employment rates historically, make this study programme unattractive. And although private institutions achieve better results, according to a recent report on Spanish universities (Ivie-Fundación BBVA, 2020), still Tourism graduates have serious problems to find a job. Only 19% of 2014's graduates had a job in 2018 that required a university degree; the rest were either unemployed or performing below their level of training and lower paid. Most shockingly, this is the reality in a country where tourism accounted for 13% of the country's GDP in 2019. Undoubtedly, the tourist sector is certainly complex in terms of employability at present due to the Covid-19 pandemic, but another reality is that the course programmes of the Tourism Degrees do not tackle the sector's needs (Aznar & Pizarro, 2020).

3. Project description

In this section, a brief overview will be provided on the situation of the tourism sector that led to the development of this project, together with unemployment data. Then, a detailed description of the project will be given.

3.1. Source of the project: relevant data

If those study programmes did not match the sector's needs before the pandemic, now they are nowhere near close. A brief glance will give us an idea. Worldwide, there has been a drop of 74% in international arrivals (UNWTO, 2021), a loss of US\$ 1.3 trillion in export revenues, and experts predict that it will take between 2.5 and 4 years for international tourism to return to 2019 levels. Regarding Spain, the rate for international arrivals fell by 78% and besides, tourism and hospitality account for 58% of workers under temporary employment regulation records, which is really serious as a great deal will turn into collective dismissals once those records deadline is over. However, domestic tourism in search of open-air activities, nature-based products and rural tourism has arisen to compensate the loss of arrivals to a certain extent.

On the other hand, rural depopulation is a severe problem in Spain where 61.5% towns and villages have less than 1000 inhabitants (INE, 2021) and 5% of the population live in 53% of the territory. More specifically, the autonomous community of Valencia already presents 500 abandoned villages, 72000 people live in villages under 200 inhabitants/km², and 71 communities are in risk of extinction (mostly in the province of Castellón) with a population density of less than 8 inhabitants/km². In other words, there is a stark risk of depopulation and the trend is still ongoing. Nevertheless, the fact that travellers are now looking for a more sustainable, authentic and responsible experience is a valuable chance to reverse the depopulation trend in rural environments.

This serious scenario led us to design a project that would cover a number of issues in the Tourism degree programme:

- to serve the sector with innovation and creativity tools,
- to help diminish the trend of depopulation in rural territories while focusing on values such as sustainability at all levels and respect and tolerance towards traditions and lifestyle, thus avoiding mass tourism and also searching for heritage preservation,
- to acquire specialist knowledge through hands-on learning,
- to enhance soft skills acquisition during the learning process,
- to develop autonomous learning.

Therefore, an analysis was made first to decide on the nearby area that could serve as the target to revitalize a rural population, i.e. Alto Palancia, a region in the province of Castellón (north of Valencia) which has 27 municipalities where 72.1% live in only 5 of those villages (Portal Argos, 2021) or in other words, 27.9% inhabitants live in 22 small villages. Out of these, the village of Caudiel was chosen, since it has lost 86.3% people in 10 years (Europa Press, 2021), the average age is 50.3 and presents a negative natural increase (more deaths than births). Concerning unemployment, 2020 saw an increase of 2.2% in which 60.9% are

women; conversely, young people account for only 15.2%, although this is because they leave the village in search of employment in bigger towns where they will probably swell the ranks of the unemployed too. The fact that youth unemployment in Spain represents 40.7% cannot be ignored, if we compare it to the 17.8% figure in EU27 (EUROSTAT, 2021). Likewise, female unemployment in Spain almost doubles the figure for EU27. Therefore, Caudiel was an ideal target to implement a revitalisation project.

3.2. Description of the project

Firstly, contacts were made with the local authority and its corresponding dynamisation group to inform them in broad terms what the project would consist of and how it may help revitalize the municipality. Their reply was positive at once and the academic organization began.

It was decided that all students would get involved except for those in their last academic year, who must focus on their internship and final degree project. Every group would work on a specific task depending on their previous specialist knowledge and the schedule was established as follows:

Table 1. Project schedule.

| <i>September</i> | <i>October</i> | <i>February</i> | <i>April</i> | <i>May</i> | <i>June</i> |
|--------------------------|----------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|
| Analysis on municipality | Visiting the village | Bootcamp: two-day field work | Two-day co-working space | Results presentation in the village | Results presentation at home institution (fair format with culinary experience) |

For the initial stage, students must work in their own groups to carry out different types of analysis on the municipality depending on their content knowledge whereas for the rest of the project the three groups are working together sharing information and establishing ways of coordinating their work towards the common goal. Furthermore, several seminars are being held in order to provide students with the necessary tools and specific knowledge required to develop their tasks. Thus, they learn on design thinking methodology, business intelligence, or culinary heritage, among others. In these seminars students achieve specialist knowledge from professionals in the respective fields and therefore, they also get first-hand contact with the sector business network. This is a crucial experience, since students realize on what the sector requires and companies get acquainted with these potential employees and their practical way of learning and acquiring the indispensable soft skills for working in tourism. With regard to specialist content acquisition, all the subjects involved derive the

application of the theoretical contents towards the project in development. Meanwhile, students are coordinating both their classroom activities and regular contacts with Caudiel's municipality and neighbours.

Students must work in self-managed teams and teachers become facilitators and although this learning methodology may become complex, the process is going smoothly as they are used to working on the basis of project-based learning (PBL). It is widely acknowledged (Elizabeth & Zulida, 2012; Ab Rashid et al., 2016; Ansarian & Mohammadi, 2018; Aznar, 2019) that this methodology is greatly beneficial for students due to its focus on specific and realistic issues and authentic interactions. This results in students' becoming more motivated and communicative so that this skill is also enhanced; in addition, critical thinking is stimulated as well as autonomous learning. Consequently, students acquire a number of skills that will be transferred to their careers later on.

The cornerstone of the PBL methodology is teamwork and although it is well-known how complex this may become, it is a fact that on the one hand, students value positively the upgrade of their competences once the project is over, but on the other, they can become very critical with regard to the distribution of work among the members of the team (Aznar et al., 2012). Therefore, the role of the facilitator is crucial at the initial stages of the project for several reasons: to ensure that there will be a smooth progression of the various tasks; to make them become aware of the complexities of teamwork so that they will be trained to be successful in their careers; and to enrich discussion, critical thinking and problem-solving.

A valuable outcome of PBL is students' motivation. In this project this has been key from the very beginning when they were welcome by the mayor and local government representatives. It is from this moment when they realized they were responsible for developing a project for a real client. As a result, this initial visit to the village became a boost in their eagerness and willingness to be creative and develop initiatives. And although the pandemic has forced to adapt and turned the bootcamp task into a virtual one, students are still enthusiastic about the study they are accomplishing. One of the most important objectives of the project was to make students the protagonists of their own learning and hence, press releases have been published in which they can be seen doing field work, news on their work progression are constantly published on social media, and they were even invited to a radio programme to inform on their experience.

The project will finish in three months and the most awaited moment is the presentation of results to the local government. Work is already well advanced and there is no reason to believe it won't be successful both for students and for the village representatives. However, students are beginning to feel the pressure of time and their responsibility. So, once again the role of the facilitators is crucial to guide them through the final stages. Besides, students are

learning what it means to work under pressure, which is something they will get confronted with during their careers.

Concerning assessment, every subject belonging to the three courses shares 25% of their grades towards this project. Students are assessed on their analysis, their results, their teamwork, and their communication skills. In addition, peer assessment is also pondered, since this is a valuable tool to make students aware of the importance of evaluating their own teamwork. And although students know they are going to be assessed, at present their interest is focused on the work at hand and meeting deadlines, which in turn is another example of preparation for their professional careers.

4. Conclusion

Learning through practical experience has always been considered as relevant in training, however nowadays it is of utmost importance. And although curricula take a crucial role as developers of specialist content knowledge, innovation in classroom methodology through hands-on tasks and assignments can ensure the right acquisition of such knowledge.

This paper has aimed to prove how the application of specialist content can enrich the learning process with the acquisition of both hard and particularly, soft skills that cannot be achieved through theoretical concepts. Through a project work based on PBL methodology, students are being trained for the following issues:

- Field learning, as students acquire knowledge without being aware of it and also, are more inclined to learn in the classroom because they see meaning in it. Furthermore, by being introduced to research methods in the first year of their degree, they prepare for their final thesis.
- Employability through the development of teamwork, working under pressure, meeting deadlines, enhancing their communication skills, evolving crucial skills in their professional sector, managing uncertainty (and the present pandemic has been the best case study, unfortunately), and what it means to work for a real client.
- Society, because students are taught to assume a set of values such as, a respect towards culture, their contribution towards sustainability and to reverse the trend of rural depopulation. Moreover, their youth entails a fresh perspective for a sector in need of reinvention.

Therefore, this methodology has turned from PBL (Project-Based Learning) to RPL (Real-Project Learning). The results at the end of the academic year will reveal whether the client is satisfied with the outcome, but what is evident is that students' satisfaction with their own learning process has improved significantly.

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