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Combining integrated curriculum and project-based learning: a short film case study from media and communication students

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Abstract

Undergraduate students in media-related fields expect their courses to be focused on real-world work environments, ultimately producing media products that can be proudly shared on social media and become part of their CV. The present paper presents a combination of integrated curriculum (IC) and project-based learning (PBL) to design a year-long activity that traverses various courses through an academic year to produce a quality media outcome. It utilizes face-to-face group interviews with the students and the instructors involved in the experience, survey questionnaires, as well as a comparison of the grades before and after the implemention of the project. The results show that the quality of the media products rised, that overall satisfaction of instructors was high, but students had mixed feelings. The lack of self-assessment tools and the emergence of group conflicts considering the length of the project were cited as the main limitations.

Keywords: *Media; project-based learning; integrated curriculum; film studies.*

1. Introduction

Higher education is in constant search of new learning methods that can capture and maintain the attention of students, maximizing class attendance and student adherence to the programs, while minimizing dropout rates (Aina et al., 2022; de Oliveira et al., 2021). Among the various ways to achieve such goals, in recent years some pedagogical approaches have gained momentum, including integrated curriculum models (IC) and project-based learning (PBL).

IC is an all-encompassing umbrella term that, generally speaking, views courses and modules from a university degree not as independent entities but as lego pieces which converse between them to build a common strategy (Drake & Reid, 2018). IC aims at dissolving the artificial separation between subjects, setting up a framework that brings together the contents, abilities, and fields shared by all of them. Therefore, fusion and interdisciplinarity are frequent buzzwords in IC studies. Although IC is not exclusive of any developmental stage of children, adolescents, or adult education, it has been more often applied in contexts of secondary rather than higher education (Alonso-Sáez & Berasategi-Sancho, 2017).

On the other hand, PBL, although originally conceived in the 1960s (Graaff et al., 2007), has become a well-established learning method that is based on the idea that students pursue their own interests towards the completion of a project that requires learnings from different fields (Krauss & Boss, 2018). PBL also relies on the assumption that as students engage with their own projects, their involvement and overall satisfaction will consequently be higher, and they will feel empowered (Guo et al., 2020). A meta-analytic review of the available evidence about the true impact of PBL on academic achievement showed that PBL usually works, with a moderate-to-large effect size, especially in social science contexts, and in Western educational systems (Chen & Yang, 2019).

Although IC and PBL have been widely used in separate, few previous experiences blending IC and PBL have been reported in the scientific literature. Scholars from Lapland University of Applied Sciences in Finland report a blended learning experience using IC and PBL in combination, indicating that the vast majority of students found it pedagogically motivating (Mielikäinen, 2021).

The present paper reports the design and some preliminary results from a learning innovation project blending IC and PBL (referred to as “IC+PBL” in the following pages), carried out within an undergraduate program in media studies at a higher education institution. Students from media-related areas often complain about the little connection between course contents and real-world work environments, and also expect to produce high quality media materials that can be shared on social media and become part of their portfolio.The aim of the project was to develop a learning activity that will require media students to apply knowledges from various fields and during two consecutive semesters in order to come up with a finished, well-rounded media product.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and aim

The project was carried out with first-year undergraduate students enrolled in a BA in media and communication studies at a large public university in Spain. The BA comprises four academic years and each year consists of two semester of 30 European Credits Transfer System (ECTS). In total, 230 first-year students distributed along three years have taken part in this IC+PBL.

Students from this BA had typically complained about the lack of connection with reality of the offered courses. Specifically, they had felt unprepared to develop large scale media projects once they graduated. An additional source of dissatisfaction had to do with a general lack of motivation to engage in long-term projects.

In order to tackle these issues, the IC+PBL was designed in a way that could boost motivation by giving the students the chance to design their own long-term project, voted by all classmates. The IC+PBL was also structured so that it could realistically replicate the environment of a real-world media production, including all phases from creation, pre-production, production, postproduction, and communication.

2.2. Design and procedure

The IC+PBL was defined as a year-long group project starting in September and ending in May. Teams of about 8 members were randomly allocated at the beginning of the year. All teams had to make a short film about a topic previously decided by the whole class. Each team pitched different proposal, everybody voted, and the most voted proposal was the compulsory topic for every team.

The IC+PBL needed three years to be fully developed. In year one (2019-20), the IC+PBL was in pilot version, and only lasted one semester. In year two (2020-21), the IC+PBL traversed two semesters, with one course from each semester. In year three (2021-22), students had one course from the first semester and two courses from the second semester partially or fully devoted to the IC+PBL. For 2022-23, it is scheduled that the IC+PBL will involve a total of four courses.

The workload was distributed along the courses involved. Typically, first semester courses were used to select the proposals, to look for similar successful projects (i.e., benchmarking), to coordinate between teams in order to produce content and elements that needed to be used by every team (e.g., opening credits, visual style, typography fonts…). The first version of the IC+PBL product was shown in class at the end of the first semester, and the final version at the end of the academic year.

2.3. Assessment tools

The assessment of the development and efficacy of the IC+PBL was based on four criteria:

- A face-to-face group interview with the students to examine their opinions. These interviews were conducted twice in the process, between the first and second semester, and at the end of the academic course.
- A face-to-face group interview with the professors involved in the teaching of the courses that comprised the project. This took place once at the end of the academic course.
- An analysis comparing the students' grades of the main module from the previous academic year and the years after the project was implemented.
- A survey questionnaire shared with the students six months after the completion of the project. The questionnaire asked students about their (i) overall satisfaction with the experience, (ii) the in-group conflicts that the project caused, (iii) how often they shared the media materials that resulted from the projects on social media, (iv) whether they liked that a project traversed two consecutive semesters, (v) if they were proud of the final result.

2.4. Ethics

The project obtained permission from the universities' centre for learning innovation (REF 2021PID-UB/013). Two revisions of the original project draft were submitted until final permission was obtained. As per university legal requirement, the students involved in the project had the right to abandon it during the first month of each semester and be evaluated by means of a traditional written exam. Students received no compensation.

3. Results and discussion

The qualitative data from face-to-face group interviews showed an overall satisfaction with the PBL. Students appreciated engaging with a project that lasted longer than usual and allowed them to put into practice knowledge and skills obtained from various disciplines and courses. The real-world connection of the IC+PBL was among its most valued characteristics. The students found attractive the idea that the IC+PBLs were discussed in class and that the common topic for everybody was decided by means of a vote.

Students showed criticism towards two main aspects of the IC+PBL. First, they mentioned the lack of self-assessment methods as a limitation of the project. Self-assessment tools were important for some students because, in their opinion, they allowed them to root out students with little implication with the project. This was particularly relevant for teams in which conflicts abounded. Self-assessment tools, as explained by students, would have increased the overall perception that the IC+PBL fairly evaluated each member group, and that the

group as a whole was not penalised for including unmotivated members. Second, the random allocation to groups worked fine during the first semester each year, but by the time the second semester started, some teams began to show disruptions. Students felt that it was ok for first year students to see their teams picked by the professors, as they have not acquainted with anybody yet. However, as the course progressed, they missed some kind of mechanisms to change teams or to stop working with specific individuals.

From the instructors' point of view, the IC+PBL was also satisfactory, but with a number of limitations. The duration of the IC+PBL (one academic year) added an extra difficulty in terms of coordination. The professors whose courses started on the second semester were not as familiarised with the project as those professors with courses in the first semester, and this resulted in some confusion about the progress of the projects, and the assessment.

Concerning the adequacy of the IC+PBL to achieve the aims promised in the syllabus, the results are promising. The students outperformed the grades of similar students from the previous editions of the same course. Table 1 shows a comparison between the grades obtained by students pre and post IC+PBL implementation. The average mark showed a significant increase from M = 7.93 – 8.25 (in the pre-IC+PBL period two different assignments are considered) to 8.41 in the year 2021-22. Arguably, the interpretation of these results is that the quality of the deliverables increased after the implementation of the IC+PBL. No correlation analysis was carried out because the assignments that comprised the final mark were not comparable. Repeated means procedures were not suitable as these were independent samples. No causal relationhip can be established from average grades and IC+PBL implementation.

Table 1. Grade comparison for the course "Audiovisual Language" before and after the implementation of the IC+PBL

	Pre-IC+PBL period		**IC+PBL period →**	
Academic year	2019-2020		2020-21	2021-22
Assignment	Short film	Script	PBL	PBL
Assessment weighting	20%	20%	60%	60%
Average grade	7.93	8.25	8.56	8.41

Source: Own data. Notes: Assessment weighting refers to the percentage for the final grade that the IC+PBL represents. Average grades computes only grades for the specific assignments listed above on a scale of 1 to 10.

However, the results from the survey questionnaires somehow contradicted the overall satisfaction of the students expressed in the face-to-face interviews. Table 2 shows the items asked. Considering the score of 3 as the threshold of neutrality, students indicated relatively negative emotions towards their final product, as seen in the fact that they were not especially proud of it (M = 2.67, SD = 1.50), and that they very rarely shared it on social media (M = 2,

SD = 1.48). This item is very important because it showed the lowest scores from the survey and it does not only capture a perception but a behavioral dimension. Opinions about the IC+PBL lasting two semesters instead of one also attracted relatively negative scores. On the other hand, the overall assessment of the experience was relatively positive (M = 3.25, SD = 0.87), and students appreciated the fact that the same project traversed different courses (M = 3.58, SD = 1.16). These results are preliminary and they only cover the opinion of 12 students. Not only the small number of respondents but the potential bias in self-selection (Bethlehem, 2010) for responding (i.e., did the students who had a worse experience self-select for participating in the questionnaire?) call for further assessments of the experience in the future.

Table 2. Students' assessment of the IC+PBL experience (N = 12)

Item	Mean (SD)
Fights in my team were frequent	3 (1.04)
I am proud of the final product delivered by my team	2.67 (1.50)
I liked the fact that the project lasted two semesters and not just one	2.75 (1.29)
I have shared on social media my team's work so others could see it	2 (1.48)
I liked the fact that different courses were part of the same project	3.58 (1.16)
Overall assessment of the experience*	3.25 (0.87)

Source: Own data. Notes. Items were assessed on a 1 to 5 likert scale (1=totally disagree; 5=totally agree). SD = Standard deviation. *This question asked for a 1 to 5 overall assessment of the IC+PBL experience (1=very negative; 5=very positive).

4. Conclusion

The present paper introduces a combination of an integrated curriculum (IC) and a project-based learning (PBL) experience with undergraduate students from a BA in media and communication. The experience was designed to increase motivation by creating a project that connected real-world tasks in a media production environment with class activities. As an IC experience, it integrated skills and abilities from different courses in a way that students were able to produce more sophisticated products than in one course, one semester situations. Students and faculty staff alike expressed positive opinions about the IC+PBL, while acknowledging a series of limitations such as the lack of self-assessment tools and the difficulty to form groups that stay in good terms and motivated for the duration of an entire academic year. Survey questionnaires indicated that some students had more mixed opinions about the overall experience.

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