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Chapter 16

As Life Itself: Authentic Teaching and Evaluation of Professional Consulting Competencies in a Psychology Course

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ABSTRACT

The authors present an innovative practice of authentic evaluation of competences carried out in the “teaching and learning strategies” course of the psychology degree. The evaluation proposal central to this course is based on a real, relevant and socializing practice context in which students have to act as counsellors to respond to a high-school teacher’s request: to improve a teaching sequence or unit. In order for this authentic project to work and generate a gradual construction of learning, course teachers used a series of evaluation strategies directed at the assessment of both the result and the learning process and aimed at facilitating students’ learning self-regulation and teachers’ provision of educational help. Results show that students value the processes of formative assessment because they allow them to act in an authentic context. In turn, teachers are highly satisfied with the involvement and quality of the projects.

CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE PROPOSAL

The teaching and evaluation system we present in this chapter was specifically designed for a particular elective course, “Learning strategies”, framed within the Psychology degree and, more precisely, within the Psychology of Education specialization (Faculty of Psychology at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona). This elective course takes place in the first semester of the fourth and final year, and has 60 hours of on-site lessons. It is based on a firm belief that learning should be functional and motivating in order for it to be significant. The bases of the proposal are articulated through three basic areas:

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promotion of the professional counselling competencies, learning-service focused on the student and authenticity of the designed teaching and assessment activities.

The main goal of the course – as well as of all the subjects in the Psychology of Education specialization – is to train competent counsellors in solving the prototypical and emerging problems students will find in their professional future professional. Working in a cooperative group structure, students should counsel a teacher about the design of a teaching unit. This unit should be adapted to the characteristics of his group-class and integrate teaching of learning strategies.

The following sections describe the innovation carried out on the course, detailing how the organization of the learning-service was, and the support provided to students to achieve such participation. We will focus on showing the formative evaluation processes, noting those activities and resources that, from our point of view, enable students to self-regulate their learning. Also, we will analyse the results obtained by students and the possible impact on their professional community. Finally, we will discuss advantages and limitations of some of the activities planned and provide some future-oriented indications for improvement.

AUTHENTIC TEACHING AND EVALUATION PROCESSES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Before proceeding to describe the educational experience, it is necessary to know the theoretical assumptions that have guided our practice. First, we must define what we mean by learning-service project, since it is the backbone of the course. According to Puig (2007), *“learning-service is an educational approach that combines learning and community service processes into a well-articulated project in which participants are trained by working on real needs of their surrounding environment with the aim of improving it”*. Thanks to this exchange – the collaboration between current and future professionals – students learn first-hand what it means to participate in the professional community. This means that learners will have to go beyond acquiring knowledge to practice their interaction, problem-solving, organizational and management, and communication abilities. In other words, they will have to learn how to act strategically if they want to be competent in facing professional problems.

The benefits of this methodology, learning while a service is performed – in this case counselling teachers——, have been widely demonstrated in recent studies, mostly focused on the university level and in different disciplines (Martin & Puig, 2014; Mayor & Rodríguez, 2015, Ramón, Juárez, Martínez & Martin, 2015). Research results indicate an increase of knowledge, higher appreciation of community’s beliefs and values, increased interest due to a better understanding of both theoretical and practical aspects, and high involvement in the project’s development process and its subsequent implementation.

In the experience we present, we wanted to adopt this methodology, not only for its effectiveness on students’ learning processes, but also for the needs of teachers. Teachers require in-service training in acquiring new resources and strategies, requests that are often constrained because of the lack of time to engage in transforming and optimizing their class sessions. The fact that a group of students counsels them on their daily practice and develop some materials that they can use immediately, allows them to participate in the project without having to spend a lot of extra time on it. In this way, we can intervene in a double line: students’ learning and improvement of the practice of other education professionals. Also, it is worth noting that this exchange has been highly valued, especially with regard to the update of ideas involving the participation of passionate students and the transference from theory to real life.

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