COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCEIN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

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Abstract

Roughly speaking, the scientific literature seems to associate assessment with the score a student gets. However, assessment goes beyond that and is only real if students acquire learning. This can be achieved with feedback (formative evaluation). In the 2010-2011 academic year we created a space in "moodle" for students to participate actively in solving activities and case analysis for the subject "The school as an educational space" in the Degree in Teaching for Primary Education in the Faculty of Education (University of Zaragoza). This space allows students to acquire a complementary learning on the basis of self-regulation and according to the feedback they receive. It is also important to consider teaching styles and learning strategies. For this reason, along this paper we will examine how assessment with new tools and techniques can assure quality in the comprehensive assessment through the establishment of some guidelines and didactic strategies. To perform the evaluation of this course, students developed an e-portfolio, uploading it in "moodle" so the rest of students could observe the work other students had made, thus increasing their individual requirement level. The key issue was the authenticity, relevancy and appropriateness of the activities we raised. Undoubtedly, the development of the teaching-learning processes and their assessment can be highly enhanced by the introduction of appropriate tools in the classroom to encourage active student participation and their learning feedback.

Keywords: Assessment, authentic tasks, feedback, skills, learning strategies

Introduction

Roughly speaking, the concept of the teaching-learning processes that the teacher has influences the development of his classes. My conception of this process is that it includes the teaching-learning duality; *didaxis* develops teaching but always as a task directed to promoting learning, and this, of course, in an educational perspective (Contreras, 1990: 19; Alvarez, 2001: 36). "General Teaching" or “General Didactics” is the scientific discipline that studies this process, with the essential support of "Educational Psychology", –within it, of the "Psychology of Learning" (Luckesi, 1987: 29-30) – and from the perspective that both belong to the field of Educational Sciences.

Therefore, and for expository purposes only, in order to capture quite clearly my conception of the teaching-learning process, I will deal primarily with this, first from the perspective of teaching and later on from the point of view of learning, although in both I shall assume and reflect that global, holistic view of this combination that constitutes the learning or didactic process.

The conception of this process and, therefore, of education and teaching, is situated mainly on those paradigms of "General Teaching" called "mediational teacher-centered" and "mediational student-centered" (Pérez Gómez, 1983: 115 -125). These paradigmatic

ascriptions carry a certain interpretation of the role of teacher and of the pupil activity in the teaching-learning process that has its logical implications for design, development and evaluation.

Because I follow the mediational paradigm centered on the teacher, I consider the teacher as a reflective "planner" (Ibid.: 118) of his teaching who, abandoning the tradition of standardized models within the process-product paradigm, understands planning as a process in which he attempts to assess a priori and prepare adequate attention to the needs that his work will face before the diversity (of interests, abilities, cultures ...) of his group of students.

As teachers, we must plan and program from a previous analysis (initial assessment) of the educational needs of the class group that we have been entrusted, anticipating to the responses that the educational program raises in each and every one of the students. Consequently, the teaching guide must be contextualized and flexible enough to be adjusted, permanently, to the evolution of the class group.

Our task therefore is to assess not only the group of students before acting on them, i.e., when planning teaching, but we must do so permanently along the entire learning process (continuous assessment). In this way, we obtain the feedback necessary to make the changes we consider relevant.

In other words, teaching is "a process of decision-making" and the teacher is a permanent "decision maker" (Pérez Gómez, 1983: 116-117): when programming, we decide how we will act in class depending on the characteristics we have detected in our students; when carrying out what has been projected, and on the basis of the messages or responses that our students give to us, we shall decide whether to keep such programming or re-adapt it (formative evaluation).

This decision is necessary to take it on the go, while we make our intervention in the classroom, when we finish the class session ... and we evaluate the learning achieved (final evaluation, we will have a new feedback for the programming of the following processes of teaching and learning).

Certainly, the learning process of each student is different from the one followed by their peers, and so is the result. The knowledge that every one comes to conquer is a cognitive construction of his own, peculiar, possibly unique, –the student is the mediator par excellence for his own learning, the protagonist of it–in aspects such as his interests, previous life experiences, the knowledge he possesses and the cognitive processes he activates and how he activates them come into play.

This is the fundamental premise of the mediational paradigm focused on student –in line with the approaches of cognitive psychology of learning-teaching understood as a process that should lead to the construction of knowledge and the development of processing strategies of information from the student (Pérez Gómez, 1983, 120-122), both in his individual work and in cooperation with his peers, and under the guidance and support of the teacher.

To play this role of guidance or assistance, one must start from an educational program based on the knowledge level of students, the cognitive development of each student, and their interests, and then develop the learning process so that it can motivate students and activate their cognitive processes (organization of meanings, transfer of information, coding and decoding of messages). In this sense, the "formal behaviours" are included in general taxonomies by Bloom et al. (1972) –for the field of knowledge– and Krathwohl et al. (1973) – for the affective domain– and the specific one by Valette (apud Gonzalez, 1974: 14), which includes the cognitive and affective domains.

We assume, therefore, a consideration for student learning that exceeds the reception-retention scheme of knowledge transmitted by the teacher, audio-visual or computer resources ... and which requires a more active and autonomous, higher and complex cognitive

involvement. We share the constructivist approach to learning, which, from "Educational Psychology" is the epistemological position that corresponds to the mediational paradigm centered on the student, learning, of "General Teaching".

Consequently, our basic principle, in terms borrowed from Coll (2000: 14), is as follows: "school learning is conceived of as a process of constructing new knowledge on the basis of current knowledge [...]"; and teaching as "an intervention in an ongoing knowledge construction process [...]".

Within this learning theory, it is necessary to bear in mind, following Ausubel (2002: 96), error that amounts to approaching learning based upon reception (associated with the use of presentations and expository techniques by the teacher) as being necessarily rote learning (based, therefore, on memorisation), on the one hand, while regarding learning based on discovery (techniques based on problem solving, either individually or in groups ...) as necessarily significant, on the other hand.

Both types of teaching techniques can induce significant rote learning, depending on the conditions under which learning occurs, as has already been advanced. In both cases learning would be significant if the learning task can be linked in a non-arbitrary and non-literal way with what the student knows already.

As Ausubel adds, "if he adopts an attitude of learning relevant for putting it into practice" (Ibid.). In his analysis of this theory, Pozo (1989: 215) notes that this construction of meaningful learning, which is individual and idiosyncratic, "is not inconsistent with the Ausubelian idea that most meanings are received, not discovered".

The teaching-learning process ultimately seeks that students are able to develop their full capacities, although decisions related to instructional design aspects are defined by the type of institution (physical spaces available) with the design of teaching (teaching methodology, teaching strategies, teacher role, student role, materials and resources) and learning itself (motivation, specific training needs, computer equipment ...).

Basically, it would identify educational responsibilities and challenges to promote democratic progress in Education. Designing this model amounts to participating in a balanced set of decisions about the teaching model, the students-users and the possibilities of technology.

The strategies that we can use in the classroom are useful as long as they involve a teacher activity, student activity, work organization to develop, an organization of space and time, of materials, etc. Using strategies is as simple as ordering items regarding personal, interpersonal, or content issues and implement them. Thus, they can trigger an activity in the group of students and each one of them in particular.

In other words, an educational strategy is "a plan to achieve the learning objectives, and involves methods, means and techniques through which it ensures that students really achieve their objectives and that the chosen strategy somehow determines the set of objectives to be achieved and, in general, any educational practice " (Salinas, 2004: 472).

Methodology and scientific approach: Space in "moodle"

The new degrees in the European Higher Education Area considerably reduce the workload in the classroom and increase work required of the student outside it. This requires from teachers to be able to adapt to new learning environments that facilitate information to the student and content exposure.

Therefore, web sites of the "add" type (teaching digital ring) or "moodle" are used more frequently, especially from this academic year onwards. This almost- obligatory use of this type of media, for either uploading teaching materials, making publicly available information for students, or showing indications when performing a task or assignment, etc.,

promotes teacher training in a more effective way through the use of these websites in the classroom and outside it (non-contact modes).

The potential of these supports is endless, from creating forums that promote active and interactive participation of students, examinations, statement of qualifications, and access to materials.

At the University level it is quite common that each subject has its own space for the teacher to notify students' work deadlines, conditions thereof, activities to do and even for him to upload materials either in PowerPoint or in pdf formats, so that students only have to download it, print it and take it to the classroom.

Thus, while this makes work easier for the student, it also minimizes their role in the classroom, since they practically do not even have to take notes. Since using this space is almost a must, as students themselves request it, because in virtually all subjects they have a space, the teacher feels somewhat conditioned to use this type of resource.

"The school as an educational space" is a subject that is taught in the first year on the Degree in Teaching for Nursery and Primary Education. The class group has a large number of students attending class daily, and may thus participate in the continuous assessment option.

Several lecturers in the Department of Educational Sciences believe that while "moodle" is commonly used in any subject, it might be useful in this one as well, as long as we give an approach to it that would allow us to improve student learning. We start from the consideration that a proper assessment improves student learning.

Therefore, we created in "moodle" a section for students to develop a portfolio, by collecting the practical sections which they had performed throughout the semester as well as their personal contributions.

The purpose of introducing this experience in a Degree in a subject, whose delivery is already difficult due to the novelty of the introduction of the Bologna Plans, was doubly increased because we did not know for sure about the possible results of this experience.

A total of 83 students uploaded in "moodle" their e-portfolio, making it visible to the other fellows. Our goal was that the work that all students undertake preferably in an individual way could be seen by other colleagues. This increased the level of individual enforcement.

We also asked students, as work belonging to the practical credits of the subject, to rate in groups of 5 people and always justifiably, the work that other colleagues of the same class group had done.

To do this, we gave students a number of indications so that they first developed a grid of evaluation. Then, in groups, they filled the grid with which they would evaluate the work of their peers.

These dynamics implied that students developed their social skills so that they could work together. In addition, the objective pursued (developing a cooperative learning) favoured the positive interdependence of all members of the group, because that student who was not willing to actively participate and make contributions, was actually conditioning his other colleagues on the rating they would get.

Also, students were granted a fully active role in the evaluation process, so that they were encouraged to evaluate the work of their peers. The willingness of students in a group should be high so as not to influence the group-level qualification that they would receive from the teacher.

Once students evaluated the work of the e-portfolios of other colleagues, they had to explain to the whole class group the reasons for the rating that they had given, showing both their positive and negative considerations. This involved a high level of individual

enforcement for cooperative work to develop properly in each of the groups created by free appointment.

Results

The implementation of this experiment in the evaluation process within the European Higher Education Area has been highly satisfactory. The change from the type of teaching given so far has been considerable and has involved the adaptation to a new educational setting.

The structure of the subjects of the different degrees of the Bologna Process is different from the previous approach, and this causes changes in the organization of each of the subjects, as well as reducing class hours, distribution of credits between teachers from different areas of knowledge.

Currently, there is not a single teacher responsible for a subject (in general terms), but this involves several lecturers, who are teaching two, three, four credits per subject. While this new distribution amounts to a close teamwork with other colleagues, it also has implications for the planning and organization for each individual teacher.

The results that we have obtained after this experience allow us to state that the introduction into the classroom of new digital media makes work easier for students and gives them a more active role (not just interactive).

In "The school as an educational space" we have achieved that students become involved in the work to be done, not only conditioned (as is otherwise usual) by the interest of every student in the marks obtained for the course (there are always students who are more interested in obtaining a high rating, while others are concerned simply about passing the subject, regardless of those who show no interest whatsoever in passing the subject), but also because, as we propose, the rating of each person will condition the group score.

Therefore, the students were more motivated to work together with a level of participation of all group members. Access to "moodle" is simple. They have information about the theoretical block of the subject and they also access the practical program they have to develop. The only condition is that the work they had to do individually was evaluated, in addition to the teacher, by his own colleagues.

We believed that that this would encourage individual effort (Individual enforceability) and, consequently, when working in groups, it would encourage positive interdependence.

Due to continuous complaints from students regarding the lack of participation of some classmates when they were working in groups, we decided that by focusing on the work to be done differently, we could improve the degree of involvement of all members of the group.

The development of practical sessions, of an expository kind, was covered with the public presentation in "moodle" of the work that each student had undertaken.

Furthermore, the fact that, in groups, they had to justify the reasons for which they had given a rating to the work of a fellow amounted to their reading all the papers of all students in their class group, detailing in the evaluation grid specific issues (provided by us, on the content and skills), sharing their assessments with others and presenting their considerations to the class group.

The most relevant aspect in itself was not the development of the e-portfolio, which was a prerequisite to qualify for continuous assessment in the subject, but their participation in groups, thus developing learning strategies, and also their ability to work in groups.

Overall, our assessment is that this type of cooperative learning in a subject of the Degree in Teaching for Primary Education fosters relationships in the class group, promotes teamwork, motivation to work and enables a continuous and formative assessment.

In addition to the rating of the group, the teacher, when the students upload their e-portfolio in "moodle", evaluates, in each collected practical work, the individual work of each student.

The new blended learning environments need to be developed further. The supports facilitate the work of teachers, but they require a well-defined methodology for students to learn. Assessment proposed as final grade to students that have pursued a course or subject in a semester does not improve learning.

By contrast, continuous assessment does allow the student to learn. Moreover, the implementation of methodological principles that facilitate teaching of this type requires some teaching styles that cannot be regarded as a priori proposals that can work equally in any educational context.

Currently, teacher training is no longer regarded as the transmission of technological knowledge that can be applied in a standardized way, but is aimed at developing skills in teaching for a rigorous analysis of the educational context (regardless of the mode of teaching), specifically of the training needs of students, and heuristics that can be used to address such needs. The need to use digital media as new teaching and learning environments is real in this framework of the European Higher Education Area.

Conclusion

The scope of university education has traditionally provided an educational setting in which innovation models and methodologies have been ongoing and wide-ranging, perhaps because the weight of academia-type curricular demands has enabled professionals and researchers to understand the development of the teaching-learning process as a task which is essentially educational, motivating and fully adhered to the experience of students.

In the history of education a number of didactic models have been remarkable. In the U.S. context, the figure of John Dewey, a representative of pragmatism, stands out. This philosopher and educationalist promoted the so-called reflexive methods, noting that the work of teachers (applied to school) should be transmitting content, but never considered regardless of how they are worked upon, i.e., methods.

In this sense, the teaching style postulated by Dewey could be summarized in the following terms, for the field of Early Childhood Education: select problematic situations related to the lives of children, discuss the problem in groups, formulate hypotheses for its resolution, develop observations and experiments to collect data which may allow verification of the ideas or hypotheses and apply the results found as part of the learning process.

The teacher should interact with each student and with the groups formed to develop simple investigations rose, avoiding any competition. In his speech, the teacher should present the contents of the activities undertaken in a global way (Dewey, 1971, Joyce and Weil, 1986).

This style is applicable to the university. The teacher should not introduce content in isolation, particularly in this current distribution of credits between areas of knowledge. The content must be related, by presenting the student with a conflict situation (case analysis) in which he may need to gather information, formulate hypotheses, work in groups, share information...

This is a process in which, as Dewey states, the results are part of the learning process. These results, sometimes difficult to assess, must contribute to improving student learning. In the European Higher Education Area the teacher serves a useful role akin to that of researcher or at least to that of the guide to simple investigations or inquiries that students have to perform.

If learning acquired by the student is not real or meaningful, it will soon fall into oblivion, which will be detrimental to their future professional work.

The structure of the subjects involves the practice of cooperative learning, based on the principle of cognitive activity. Consequently, the teaching style is characterized by verbal interaction between teacher-student, playing the first one the role of a facilitator of learning.

"Moodle" facilitates student learning because it allows the teacher to be a true guide to student learning, making a continuous and formative assessment in which the student learns through the evaluation process.

The type of learning that the student takes also has to be significant learning applicable to the professional field in which he will work. Ausubel developed a theory of meaningful learning, demanding a teaching style aimed at favouring the hierarchical structure of concepts through the use of the so-called "advance organizers"; when the teacher has already identified the inclusive elements of each student in each area of learning, he must prepare the new information so that it is properly connected with the inclusive concepts.

All this implies that, before carrying out the curriculum design, the teacher should evaluate the student's cognitive structure to determine whether or not there are specifically inclusive elements; the organization of the curriculum will aim to significantly relate them with the student's cognitive structure (Ausubel, 1973; Ausubel, Novak and Hanesian, 1983; Torre, 1997).

The inclusive elements and prior knowledge that Ausubel (1973) posits can be identified in the student not only from the initial assessment, but all through continuous assessment based on the conception of the teaching-learning that each teacher has.

It is obvious that the cognitive approach, with the obvious differences between the representative authors, promotes consideration of education that includes learning theory of the learner-centred mediational paradigm.

The teaching style that is delimited in it conceives teachers in a non-directive way, in so far as they are basically the facilitators who are guiding student learning, focusing on their interests which become "problems" to be addressed and resolved in the learning process and, in turn, taking into account the intrinsic diversity of the class group that demands an individualized education.

Therefore, teaching, seen from this epistemological position, is usually interpreted as a technological process of problem-solving (Pérez Gómez, 1983); that is, the teacher makes use of didactic knowledge and technology that he has in order to lead the student to the resolution of problems (case studies, such as those used in "The school as an educational space", posted on "moodle"), proceeding in a fully contextualized way, i.e., with no preconceived universal teaching strategies, without recipe of any kind, because each problem, each teaching situation is inherently different.

Undoubtedly, the image of the teacher as reflective professional (Schön, 1991) is in full agreement with Dewey’s proposals on reflective methods because reflection, as a heuristic tool, must be seen both in teaching and in learning. Or else, Dewey’s approach on the resolution of problems or development of small research can be considered, without doubt, as the prelude to the cognitivist assumptions about learning.

Strictly speaking, the future of education in the university should be fully characterized by the principles of the process-product paradigm (Pérez Gomez, 1983); it has always been an academic education, with a rigid path of teaching styles in the life of the classroom.

In the framework of the European Higher Education Area, teaching tends to be much less academic and modalities based on both face and non-face modalities to give the student an inquiry into the knowledge and acquisition of it through the internalization of concepts, cooperative learning, practical presentations, etc.

The Bologna curricula are designed to foster in the classroom the beginning of the activity, i.e., the student should be the main protagonist of his own learning, which appeals to his intense cognitive activity, always facilitated by the logical gradation of the complexity of the proposed activities.

Thus, they get meaningful learning, where the student must be able to integrate their prior knowledge with that which is newly acquired, so that the latter will be meaningful, learning both by reception and within the constructivist paradigm. Only if this condition is met can we speak of functional learning and enable learning from evaluation.

The need to develop students' cooperative learning is unquestionable, where individualisation should be supported and compatible with cooperative learning (diversification of teaching-learning situations), since the latter improves both socialization processes and also student learning.

Resorting to the diversification of teaching resources (digital, on paper ...) it stimulates student learning and allows the teacher to reconcile the teaching-learning dichotomy in the context of the European Higher Education Area, in which Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are of great significance and functionality.

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