World politics online

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Abstract

Innovation has become the main challenge facing today's societies (Gopalakrishnan, S., Damanpour, F., 1997). Contemporary societies are enmeshed in constant transformation (technological revolution, globalised economy, internationalisation of the main social problems), and universities' adaptation to this changing world requires changes in their main functions: research and teaching.

This study is devoted to a teaching innovation implemented in two different courses in the field of the social sciences related to comparative politics and assessing public management. Both cases follow the same logic, and this is why they are being presented jointly. First the application for the course on Comparative Politics in the Faculty of Communications Studies was developed. After regarding it as a success, the decision was taken to pursue the same strategy with a course in the Public Management speciality taught in the Faculty of Political Sciences and Sociology.

Logically, this teaching innovation is not a radical novelty (Osborne, 1998). Nothing new has been invented, nor can we even claim that using a digital platform is a technological innovation. However, there is an idea that has been put into practice and a new product has indeed been created that can even be considered a service to society, and this product has been drawn up by students. Therefore, there is innovation in that the generation of the idea and the development or adaptation of a known technology has become a tangible reality that any citizen can use. In doing this, students' behaviour changed as they saw the new possibilities and learning opportunities of this tool.

Following the model proposed by the coordinators of this book, this text presents the main goals of the project, the work the students had to do, the methodology used to turn the project into a reality and its main results.

General area of interest of this innovation

The creation of a digital platform that can be seen from the outside is an effective tool for stimulating students' motivation, as the work that they do themselves is disseminated and they provide society with highly useful knowledge.

1. Objectives

1. The first goal of the innovation project presented in this article was to create an instrument that would become the applied part of the course in a collective project that would be useful for society and would exist on Internet beyond the duration of the course. In professional life, one learns by doing, and through these projects the students had the opportunity to make and produce materials that we hope are useful. In the case of "Comparative Politics", any journalist or citizen who needs to check reliable information and analysis on the politics of a country will find elements of interest, while in the case of "Assessing Public Management", any citizen who wonders to what extent our governments "are doing well" or "need improvement" in their management of public services will also find relevant information as well as a sort of classification and analysis of this information.

2. We pursued the second goal of this project by creating a useful, externally visible project via Internet: motivating and getting students involved and avoiding the passivity and complacency of traditional teaching approaches in which the professors explains things to students and the students take notes and show on the exams that they are capable of parroting what the professor said in class. University students often complain about the fact that either the teaching they receive is overly theoretical or when they do an applied project, it is irrelevant, artificial or far removed from the real problems that they will find after graduating. By defining a product that was to be created by all of them and that had to be shown to the world, the participants in the course had to activate and – to a greater or lesser extent – participate in a project that was always perceived as real and at least potentially relevant.

3. The third goal was change. The purpose is clearly not change for change's sake, but we did want students to have the perception that they were taking a course that had a different kind of contents and approaches. In fact, in the first session of the course on «Comparative Politics», students were warned that they could change groups and sit in on other professors who were pursuing a more traditional approach and in fact were teaching outstanding classes on the politics of three or four different European countries. Those students who remained in the group, however, had to pledge to work on the politics of the different countries from different regions in the world that they were assigned. Along the same lines, the students in «Assessing Public Management» took on one realm of public services – healthcare, education, immigration, development cooperation, etc. – which they were responsible for and about which they had to furnish the documents and analyses solicited.

Finally, the project sought to transcend the academic or technical nature of the course to turn it into a social activity. In this sense, at least originally, there was an attempt to influence students' behaviour, to prompt a series of interactions among them and draw some impact on the small-scale social sub-system involved in taking a course. This goal is related to the motivation and satisfaction of both students and professors, but it also went a bit further, taking advantage of the fact that the groups were relatively small and contained students who were finishing their degrees and were aware that they had to get the most from their last terms at the university, or at least, from their Bachelor's degree programme.

2. Description of the project

In this section we shall describe the project that the students did, while in the following section on Methodology we shall give a brief description of how the professors managed the project. Given the fact that ultimately two digital platforms were created, the work asked of the students in both courses will be described separately.

The «Comparative Politics» project asked each student to tackle the contents and political and economic analysis of one country in each of the five regions into which this course was divided: Africa, Asia, the Americas (North, Central and South), Europe and the Middle East. The classroom discussion was conducted by regions so that the different students could make their contributions to the discussions on specific subjects based on their knowledge of a country.

For example, when examining the democratic development of the Middle East – a region that is characterised by the absence of democratic regimes, with the exception of Lebanon – the approach consisted of discussing the politics and absence of democracy in neo-traditional systems like the one in Saudi Arabia, in repressive technocratic systems like in Libya and Syria, and in mobilising clerical regimes like Iran, so that the students could perceive the differences with other regions, in addition to testing certain theories on democratic development using real cases.

The information that each student was asked to provide consisted of five files per country that had to precisely fit within the number of characters agreed to for each section:
1. A file on basic information, the same points for all the cases.
2. A summary of the history of the country.
3. A brief description of the main political parties and a commentary on the past five presidents of the country.
4. A brief political analysis.
5. A brief economic analysis.

It was understood that for the first three files, students had to search for information and present it within the established format, while for the last two files the students had to demonstrate the knowledge they had acquired during the course and play with the concepts presented at the theoretical lectures by the professors by applying them to each specific case.

In the project «Assessing Public Management», groups of two students were asked to take on a realm of public services (healthcare, education, immigration, culture, research and universities, development cooperation). The goal of the project was to provide empirical evidence on the progress (or backsliding, if applicable) of Catalan / Spanish healthcare with regard to the main goals of each sector. For example, in the case of healthcare, the main goals ultimately included were related to high quality clinical practice, access to healthcare services, the efficiency of the spending, the improvements in the health of the population and the guarantee of patients' rights.

For each realm, three different products had to be produced:

1. A table of the main goals and the indicators for each main goal;
2. A list of documents evaluating the realm, trying to include international, European, Spanish and Catalan documents;
3. An analysis of the degree to which these documents provided objective or subjective (perceptions) information related to the main goals and the indicators identified in the first product.

Each group had to give a mark from 0 to 10 indicating to what extent the indicators of the main goals in the realm were covered by public or private documents and reports that are accessible to any citizen who sets out to find this information.

In this case, then, there was theoretical and consensus work with the other participants in the class about the main goals of each realm, a research project seeking technical information, and a more analytical project about the quantity and quality of the information included in the set of reports that each group had found. A look at the website shows how some groups did an excellent research in terms of finding and analysing documents from the international, supranational, state-wide, Catalan and local spheres.

3. Methodology

A team of four people worked on this project which produced the two applications mentioned above: two professors and two IT specialists. The relationships with the students were forged via the professors, who gave students all the support they could by responding to their questions, seeking information and acting as a sounding board for their proposals.

Initially we had thought about creating a mixed committee of students and professors to monitor the quality of the materials that were produced, but ultimately the professors took on this role. The IT specialists played a key role in designing and operating the platform, and their proposals modified the initial plan. The platform consists of a website that includes the database which can be modified by any authorised student or professor. During the academic year, the platform enabled any student to check their colleagues' projects, and at the end of the course, once all the materials had been reviewed by the professors, the website was made visible to the outside world.

The main stages in developing the product were:

3.1. Developing the project

In this stage, the students discussed the proposal with the professors in charge of the courses chosen. Basically we evaluated the information available and determined to what extent what we were setting out to do already existed on Internet. We also determined the technical knowledge needed and the different possible options of final products. Finally, the decision was made to implement a project that dovetailed considerably with what was ultimately produced.

3.2. Implementation

The implementation of the project began one term before the students took the course, as we had to design and launch the digital platform. In this second term, the platforms were designed, and we became convinced of the need to combine short texts, tables and images in the more visible part of the website with downloadable reports that could be as long as needed. This strategy was used with the «Assessing Public Management» platform, as the «Comparative Politics» platform was constructed over a database that determined where texts could or could not be included and how long they could be.

The next step was to present the project to the students as part of the courses, both of which were elective. From the start of the course the students were explained the main features of the project, and they were given a calendar of activities in order to reach the end of the term with a finished product that they themselves could show to their families and friends. The calendar was followed, and both the professors and IT specialists made an effort to have the materials ready to go and the platform up and running before the term was over.

During the term, approximately half of the classroom sessions were used to train students in instrumental aspects and to discuss their progress in gathering and analysing the information they were assigned. Therefore, the course was both a combination of 14-15 theoretical lectures, which the professors pledged would not be more than this in order to set aside enough time for the discussion session. In these sessions, each project was discussed in an orderly fashion by presenting the functioning of the platform and discussing the students' contributions by region in one case, and realms of public service in the other.

One of the main bottlenecks in the project was revising the texts to ensure the veracity of the information, the acceptability of the style and in general to make sure they fit within minimum standards of quality. In the revision process, we detected major errors that could discredit the project as a whole. In this phase, the intention was for the students themselves to be the ones who adjusted their contributions, but given the fact that we only had one term, the revision process could only be conducted once.

3.3. Dissemination of the experience and expansion of the web platform with new categories

One of the advantages of using a digital platform is that it can be quickly disseminated by Internet. Although the experience is quite recent as this article is being written and our website does not yet have links to other websites, we hope that more and more people gradually discover it, use it and link it to other platforms.

Once the initial goals were reached based on co-production with students, we believe that these instruments we have created can be further disseminated if we encourage professors – not just the ones who have participated in this experience – and experts to make qualitatively significant contributions. In this sense, we have included a new field on «Comparative Politics» that we call «The Expert's Opinion», and we have invited specialists in sectorial politics to write brief analytical reports based on the information and the reports that the students in the course wrote.

4. Results and conclusions

Innovation only exists when a result has been produced, and in our case this result does exist and it can be seen on Internet. Of our four main goals, we think that they have largely been reached in terms of creating a socially useful product that resulted from a collective effort with the aim of remaining in place after the academic term is over. Students' benefits were also quite positive in terms of their motivation and satisfaction with the courses, the teamwork, and their perception of change compared to what their most common university experience had been.

Interestingly, when posing the question of innovation in teaching, it is often framed in terms of difficulties, obstacles and barriers, despite the objective need for innovation perceived by most of the stakeholders in order to improve their performance, meet students' needs and strengthen the legitimacy of the university as an institution. Our experience did not come upon major hurdles, which confirms to us the idea that it is possible to introduce changes and try new experiences in university teaching. We only had the sensation that the point of departure was not so favourable inasmuch as some of the students did not seem very motivated. Yet ultimately even the most reluctant ones ended up getting involved and producing relatively high quality materials.

In terms of this quality, we obviously found contributions that were very well constructed alongside others that needed complete overhauls. We believe that in part the excessive attention to the formal aspects might have run in detriment to the content. In this sense, the product is not characterised by depth but by breadth and by the fact that it facilitates access to resources in terms that did not exist before. The doubt does not lie so much in whether the product is useful – it is – as in whether the students might have learnt more using a more traditional approach in which they had to do more research work in the library and preparing an academic paper. In theory, however,

there are enough courses that pursue this course, and we believe that our approach is closer to a real work experience outside the university.

With regard to the platforms created, one of the unresolved question is the language. For the time being, «Comparative Politics» is a website primarily in Catalan, while «Assessing Public Management» aims to offer its contents in both Catalan and Spanish. In fact, some Erasmus students prepared contents in English, which we have not yet been able to include. However, the main challenge, now that the foundations are laid, is to extend the project even further and provide not just information and resources but also high quality analyses, something that universities should excel at and yet that is difficult to find.

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Interesting links

- Project website: http://cpdp.uab.cat/politica
- http://www.xavierballart.com [2008]

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Financing

Supplementary materials on the CD-ROM

Demonstration of virtual content for the subject.