

Materials development and coordination in the design and implementation of syllabi in the field of educational organisation

Carme Armengol

Diego Castro, Maria del Mar Duran, Miquel Àngel Essomba, Mònica Feixas, Joaquín Gairín, Xavier Gimeno, Maria Navarro and Marina Tomàs.

Department of Applied Pedagogy

Faculty of Education

Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona

Abstract

The consolidation of the European Higher Education Area requires us to plan university degrees starting from the premise that students take centre stage. In this process, the group of professors in the Area of Didactics and Educational Organisation who teach courses in the degree programme linked to the field of educational organisation have developed a variety of actions aimed at fostering the quality of students' education based on better coordination among all the faculty in drawing up and developing the curricula.

This has entailed breaking with the academic isolation among the faculty involved and developing constant cooperative work, leading us to reflect on the process of teaching learnt by students, assuming beforehand the need to enrich the activity through personal contributions, expressing concerns, providing documents and helping to systematically compile good practices, all with the intention of sharing them and analysing the keys to their success.

General area of interest of this innovation

Collaborative work is assumed to be a necessary condition for teaching degrees with a certain quality and coherence. This project may be useful for any team of professors that shares this premise, as it is understood that it can be a good example for undertaking any other type of activity of a similar sort.

1. Objectives

The purpose of teamwork is to become a professional learning community that goes beyond brief, occasional actions to become regular, lasting cooperation. The specific goals are:

1. To establish a coherent organisation of the contents in relation to the subjects related to the realm of the organisation and management of educational institutions.
2. To approach a new paradigm in terms of how we understand the teaching-learning process. We have to shift from a paradigm focused on what the teacher teaches to a model in which what truly counts is what the student learns.
3. To develop materials that help to perform student-centred teaching and the development of the determined skills.
4. To set up spaces for reflection and debate with regard to the content of the materials.

2. Description of the project

The initiative got off the ground in academic year 2003-04, spurred by the new trends related to the processes of change being brought about by the European Higher Education Area, and partly by the concern with improving teaching, with the implicit hypothesis that any improvement in the coordination of the teaching in the middle term means an improvement in the quality of the degree in terms of academic performance and student satisfaction.

3. Methodology

The working dynamic is simply. The members get together around every two months. The meetings are short, basically focusing on management issues, where decisions are taken and assignments are divided up. Each of the members is involved in the projects and once a term organises a working session in seminar format lasting one or two days. These seminars tend to be held in a quiet place outside the university. The decision to work in a quiet setting is not viewed as an extraneous factor but as a strategy that enables the group members to isolate themselves from the jobs that they all have and to turn this time into a true forum of reflection and dialogue.

This dynamic has been very highly rated since it helps to make headway while also bringing the team together more and consolidating a common culture.

4. Results

It is still premature to talk about results; however, we can outline the products or actions undertaken until now, as listed below:

4.1. The matrix for assigning contents and courses

The first exercise was to draw up a list of the contents that, in the judgment of the members, must be assimilated by Pedagogy students from the standpoint of the realm being analysed. Once this job was completed and the contents were classified based on the structure set forth by Gairín (1995), we determined the courses in the Bachelor's degree and doctoral programmes in which these contents needed to be worked on.

The information gathered and organised into a two-column table was then debated, each of the contents was presented and placed in the course or courses where the members believed that they best fit according to the course description, due to the coherence and difficulty of the contents.

The first draft was then submitted to be validated by all the members of the group. To do this, each member checked the contents assigned to each of the courses they teach and analysed the fit or lack of fit between the matrix presented and what they really work on in the course with students. The following meetings were used to fine-tune these problems between the matrix and the syllabi of the different professors.

Some contents are repeated in two different courses, but they examine the issue at differing depths or examine the content from a different vantage point (indicated in the matrix with a symbol).

It is understood and accepted that the resulting matrix is not the only possible options, but it is the option suggested by the members and can be used to achieve the goals. What is interesting about it is having been able to reach a consensus and that the faculty involved in the courses take this into account when drawing up their syllabi.

4.2. Files on resources

The analysis of the contents of the teaching led us to consider how to convey these contents and therefore to methodological reflections such as analysing the resources involved. In addition to the richness of exchanges of opinions, we also believe it is necessary to discover whether we involuntarily fall into repeating the same methodologies and resources which, in addition to being unnecessary in some cases, might prevent students from learning about other educational resources.

The exchange of teaching methodologies is also appropriate for gathering critical comments from colleagues about the resources that each member of the team believes is ideal for the different goals and contents proposed. Therefore, the goal was to go beyond the cliché of professors reading their yellowed class notes year after year to open up to colleagues' ideas and determine whether it is worthwhile to introduce changes in one's own practice.

The exchange sessions are organised as follows: each of the members explains one of the activities that they often do in class to develop a given content. The other members ask questions and express their opinions spontaneously.

The exchange activity is compiled in the guise of a file (see Table 1) in which the main features of the activities explained are listed along with other interesting infor-

mation to bear in mind, which has been agreed upon or commented on during the session.

Table 1. Template of the file on teaching resources

Name of the resource:	Structured Exercise <input type="checkbox"/>	Intervention Technique <input type="checkbox"/>
Subject in which it is recommended:		
Content worked (digits):		
Degree programme		
Other degree programmes (course):		
Time needed:		
Subjects addressed		
Requirements for use (group, type of classroom, materials, etc.)		
Best time to use		
Bibliographic reference		
And once the practice is over...		
For further information		

Finally, the compendium of files that is being assembled will serve as a tool for improving the teaching methodology, while it is also a product created by the group that reinforces the cohesion and sense of teamwork.

4.3. The case studies

The case study method is an educational technique which, by describing a situation which is called a «case study», we attempt to bring students closer to a reality for pedagogical reasons. We can say that a case study is a scenario in which there is a series of variables that interact and form a real or hypothetical and global reality that can become a subject of study. A case study can be extracted from real life, a person can gather data on a certain situation they have experienced and turn it into a case study, or you can start from a news items published in the press or another media and build a case study.

The case study method is a useful technique for applying in many fields of education. Students have to analyse the situation, define the problems and reach their own conclusions about the action to be taken, discussing the case study in a team and describing or defending their action plan either orally or in writing. This method fosters debate and communication between students and teachers. The case studies can be used as both an illustration or as a way of practising the knowledge acquired, as well as for evaluative purposes.

The case study method is a teaching strategy based on active, reflexive learning by students which includes analysing situations that might be equivocal, dubious and

uncertain. The learning is more effective when students develop analytical skills in the most realistic situations possible and when they can explicitly set forth their proposed solution. The case study method is particular appropriate for studying the organisation of educational institutions as it enables us to study real, plural contexts that are problematic or in need of improvement.

The presentation of the situation must include: an introduction, the most important characteristics of the main players, the description of the social and/or historical-geographic setting and the questions needed to resolve the situation.

The case study method requires students to participate more compared to other commonly used learning strategies. They must not only learn and understand ideas but also use them when the cases require value judgements. Students have to take decisions and defend their standpoint in the discussion. One essential factor for this method to work properly is providing students with enough information on the appropriateness of the options they choose and the work they have performed. The professor's job entails ensuring that students understand the information and later helping them to perform the work.

The professors teaching the different courses in the field of educational organisation have a certain degree of experience in devising the contents of the course by presenting a case study that can serve as an example for developing the contents of the syllabi, and through them, they also notice that the students are more motivated.

By presenting real case studies, the students are capable of developing skills like: analysis and critical thinking, decision-making as to which action to take, dealing with assumptions and fostering oral expression, interpersonal interaction and creativity. The classes are distinguished by an atmosphere of exchange and interaction between theory and practice, thanks to a type of teaching based on motivating, cooperative learning.

Starting with the case studies developed earlier, the challenge consists of finding the way to address the contents of the syllabi in the different degree programmes and how to implement collectiveness and coherence in our case studies.

This unification enabled us to glimpse a first objective: to outline a schema which all the case studies follow. The sections and certain stylistic rules and the length of each section were discussed so that even though the case studies are drawn up individually they all have standardised explanations and discussions and expository clarity. Through reflection and discussion, we reached the following schema:

1. Background: Framing the context, providing information referring to the time right before the situation, problem or case to be resolved.
2. Outlining the problem: In this section, the subject concerning us must be explained with utter clarity, with all the information needed in order to resolve the situation. Some observations to bear in mind are: to not be too long, to not offer information that can divert students from the main goal, and to ensure that students can clearly see the content the case addresses.

3. Questions related to the case study: These are addressed to students, and answering them will help students understand and focus the next section. This clearly contributes to activating their analytical and critical skills as students must identify with the situation and then search for bibliographic information, arguing the sources to resolve the case study if they need them.
4. Guidelines for resolving the case study: Here we enter the part where we put all the theoretical and practical contents into play in a substantial way. Students will have to refer to the list of concepts, the interaction of contents and ultimately the development of the guidelines set. This will enable them to put forth a solution, which depending on the case should also follow certain parameters. The guidelines and questions should also focus the topic and judge the different actions students can undertake. With all these resources, students should be able to take a decision they are capable of defending.
5. Support materials: Students are given two different kinds of materials, first the documents they must work on which must be consulted, and secondly, the essential bibliography which will also be crucial in resolving the case study.

Once the sections that each case study had to have were agreed on, the second task got underway: discussing the case studies that each group member had individually developed.

The main subject of each case study should be clearly explained. It is true that some of them can be used to address other topics as well; obviously collateral factors, nuances or suggestions can always be found that permit other studies, but each of the case studies should be designed to study a given topic within the field of educational organisation. We also agreed upon in which degree programme(s) the cases might be used, as well as their level of difficulty: starter level for the first few years or diploma programmes, and increasing difficulty for Bachelor's degree Master's, post-graduate and doctoral programmes.

A total of 38 case studies were developed, which has given us enough material to work on a vast range of content in the courses. The case studies are set in contexts of both formal and non-formal educational institutions.

The thematic sections and their corresponding case studies are as follows:

1. Theoretical underpinnings: paradigms, school autonomy and cooperation between institutions.
2. The school: sharing the school's educational project with families, the nature of organisational structures, organisational change and evaluation of institutions.
3. Community planning: strategic planning, tenders for educational services and planning for integrating immigrant students into the community.
4. Institutional documents: promoting the educational project, the report, the school plan and the internal system regulation.
5. Teaching teams: meetings, delegating functions, teaching coordination at the university.
6. School architecture: modifying school spaces, safety and hygiene at schools.

7. Functional resources: the school timetable and the budget.
8. Groupings of students: group phenomena (bullying) and behavioural rules for students.
9. The managerial role: models and theories of leadership, the skills and capacities of a leader, managerial techniques, hiring and training of management, evaluation of management and career plans.
10. Organisational culture and climate: analysis of the organisational culture, peer to peer communication, communication with families, participation in organisations, conflicts – concepts and elements, the degree of communication with and satisfaction of families.

These case studies are a valuable, novel kind of teaching material that enables us to address university teaching from a motivating, suggestive and practical approach that manages to achieve collective learning that fosters the improvement of teaching and as a result of our degree programmes.

4.4. Towards shaping common reading lists in the field of organisation

Building a teaching team and/or professional community goes beyond coordinating programmes and activities: we must also share readings, authors and trends. To do this we decided to examine the readings and bibliography that students in the programme are recommended. This job poses some difficulties, as the list must be finite and when the job of choosing or reducing the list begins, teachers are required to engage in a complex, difficult cognitive and ethical process.

Which readings should be made compulsory for students? Which readings should be recommended? The responses to these questions led to collisions between relatively opposing criteria which are listed below:

1. Tension no. 1: Classical/Up-to-date.
2. Tension no. 2: Theoretical/Applied.
3. Tension no. 3: Exclusive to the field/Multidisciplinary.
4. Tension no. 4: Formal education/Non-formal education.
5. Tension no. 5: General/ Specialised.

The first of these tensions is related to the criteria of timing. How often have we criticised a bibliography for not being up-to-date? Yet at the same time a classic book that examines the basic issues in an educational organisation programme is perhaps more recommendable for a student at the start of the degree.

All the courses in educational organisation in the curriculum of Pedagogy in our faculty are more applied in nature, as the more theoretical aspects are set aside for the post-graduate programmes. Even so, following the maxim that the *best practice is the best theory*, all the contents require a theoretical substrate, and therein lies the second tension in the use of the criteria for choosing texts and readings.

A third criterion to be borne in mind when choosing the texts was about the search for readings that are exclusive to the field of education and educational organisation,

or whether it was more appropriate to list texts that address the issues in a more multi-disciplinary manner. We often noticed overlaps in the contents of the courses because other disciplines, like educational policy, educational planning and others, also cover the same topics. This can be explained by the fact that it is difficult to address the subject from a single discipline.

A fourth tension that arose in the criteria was derived from the field of application of educational organisation: only in the field of formal education, or also in non-formal education? Might the texts from the non-formal realm be less academic or contain conceptual errors?

The fifth point that arose as a possible dilemma refers to the more or less applied nature of the subject. Should students study or learn particular experiences, or is it better to get them to grasp the concept globally so that later they can apply it in different situations?

The team of professors in the sub-area of educational organisation aimed to debate these criteria. And once again what arose were questions that can be used to build a team vision while also leading to individual growth as professionals in that the debate enriches each educator's own positions and convictions on the subject.

5. Conclusions

We can highlight the innovative nature of the case studies developed, which made possible methodological development of the contents of the areas focusing on developing student skills. We believe that systematising the readings, files on resources and case studies fosters reflection, analysis and critical thinking based on elements from a familiar reality in professional situations. We believe that resolving tasks from this methodological perspective also involves the development of cooperative work among students, given that the very nature of the instruments developed can be resolved only with debate, comparison and negotiation of the solution. The nature of the material drawn up in itself entails sharing the applications and updating the resources so that their innovative personality is retained while eliminating much of the overlap and gaps in subjects and activities that are developed when teaching the courses.

Right now it is very premature to talk about empirical evidence to endorse the fact that applying these working materials has contributed to improving students' academic performance. We can claim that the project has fostered greater cohesiveness among the faculty, which has in turn fostered the creation and complementation of our shared knowledge. Developing the materials meant not just consolidation of the coordination needed to set up a calendar of contents and resources, but it also created a forum of exchange to address subjects that get the faculty involved by creating a reflection on proposals and future curricula and research.

This process has motivated the professors to improve their practices and gain further awareness of the skills that we aim to foster through our practices.

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Interesting links

- <http://www.sistema.itesm.mx/va/dide/inf-doc/estrategias> [2008]
DIRECTORATE OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT (DIDE) (2007): El estudio de casos como técnica didáctica. Academic Vice-Rector's Office, Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey

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Project leader

Carme Armengol
Department of Applied Pedagogy
Faculty of Education
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
carme.armengol@uab.cat

Presentation of the working group

The working group is made up of professors who teach courses related to the field of the organisation of educational institutions within the Faculty of Education. In acad-

emic year 2003-04, the group was set up as a teaching team with the goal of improving the coordination among the professors, taking the principles inherent in a professional learning community as our foundation.

Members of the project

Diego Castro
Department of Applied Pedagogy
Faculty of Education
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
diego.castro@uab.cat

Miquel Àngel Essomba
Department of Applied Pedagogy
Faculty of Education
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
miquelangel.essomba@uab.cat

Joaquín Gairín
Department of Applied Pedagogy
Faculty of Education
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
joaquin.gairin@uab.cat

Maria Navarro
Department of Applied Pedagogy
Faculty of Education
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
fcolomer@telefonica.net

Maria del Mar Duran
Department of Applied Pedagogy
Faculty of Education
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
mariadelmar.duran@uab.cat

Mònica Feixas
Department of Applied Pedagogy
Faculty of Education
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
monica.feixas@uab.cat

Xavier Gimeno
Department of Applied Pedagogy
Faculty of Education
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
xavier.gimeno@uab.cat

Marina Tomàs
Department of Applied Pedagogy
Faculty of Education
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
marina.tomas@uab.cat