

Coordination among courses and student involvement

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Abstract

Coordination between faculty from different disciplines is usually a weak point at universities. In this case, the coordination was conducted jointly between two courses in the Primary School Teaching degree, in part of the respective programmes that have a series of points in common. Methodological issues were also a major aspect of this innovation, as we have sought to give students a new role, making them participate more and gain more awareness of their learning. The most noteworthy aspects of the project, however, was setting up a permanent seminar with all the professors teaching these courses so that through shared reflection the teaching proposals could be adapted to the students' educational needs.

General area of interest of this innovation

The experience presented in this article has two focal points of interest: the development of teaching materials that guide students' independent learning track, and the coordination among the university faculty of these students. In highly profession-oriented degrees like teacher training, this second point requires a profound, critical reflection, which is often hard to fit into today's university dynamics. This innovation project shows how teamwork among the faculty, even from different areas and departments, enabled us to convey to students the value of knowledge constructed jointly and the interest in approaching reality from an interdisciplinary, complex perspective.

Likewise, we often speak about the independent learning of those who are learning, although it is not easy to find the ideal midpoint between guidance and autonomy

so that there may be a diverse variety of possible learning tracks. Plus these courses always have large groups of students in short terms, which makes it difficult to closely track individual students and their progress. Developing teaching materials appropriate for designing these processes is a crucial aspect of a teacher's job, always bearing in mind that these materials must be adapted according to the courses and changing circumstances. This is another of the aspects revealed in this experience: sound planning of the teaching methodology, having drawn up the appropriate materials beforehand, produces better learning and higher satisfaction rates. However, this planning endeavour is much more interesting and profitable if it is done within a team of professors in an atmosphere of exchange and discussion that ensures the utmost rigour and more complete attention to the different factors involved in teaching.

1. Objectives

The main goal of the innovation is related to the faculty: it consists of coordination among professors from different areas, with the purpose of giving future teachers a sort of training that is more in line with their professional needs. Analysing the same reality (students, classroom, school) from different disciplines, and therefore with different theoretical frameworks of references that are not necessarily in agreement with each other, and teamwork among professors from diverse areas open up a new perspective and give guidelines to students, who must develop tools to address this complex educational reality based on the disciplinary knowledge they have gained in their degree programme.

The second goal, which is congruent with the first one, is related to the students: to develop the skill of teamwork and the ability to relate knowledge coming from different disciplines in order to be able to understand their future field: education. This skill affects not just the cognitive realm, rather we also consider that the attitudinal aspects encouraged and exemplified by the way they receive their university education are equally important.

2. Description of the project

This innovation project was conducted during academic year 2004-05 in the Faculty of Education at the UAB, in the courses on second language teaching and teaching the experimental sciences in the Primary School Teaching degree programme. These courses have the particular feature that they are taught in the third year of the programme, both in the second term, and they are both compulsory. Therefore, these are two courses that are usually taken during the same academic year. This enabled us to organise a timetable in which one day a week both courses are taught right after each other, which made it possible to set up long, shared sessions. The groups include a number of students that fluctuates from 45 to 65 according to the year and whether it is a morning or afternoon group.

Before entering into details about the different stages and actions involved in developing this project, we must first provide contextual information about these courses and the degree programme in which they are offered. A few years earlier, both courses separately embarked on a process of constant innovation in the revision of the contents of the curriculum and the methodology used to deliver it. In this sense, in both courses the subjects that are examined with the university students begin to be questioned, in terms of both their theory in the corresponding areas of teaching and their reality at schools, which in recent years have undergone a major transformation. Likewise, a reflection on building a body of knowledge that can be updated in the guise of skills that are made up of and relate different types of knowledge has led the faculty in these two courses to consider, each on their own, a more participatory methodology, closer to the needs of the future teachers that enables them to put into practice some of the most necessary skills for exercising this profession.

This project is designed and presented from the perspective of the area of Second Language Teaching.

2.1. Improving the course on Second Language Teaching

As a result of a student and teacher evaluation at the end of the every academic year, and a joint reflection effort among the faculty teaching this course in the Primary Education Teacher degree programme, some years ago a process of changes and improvements in the course on Second Language Teaching (Guasch, Milian, Ribas, 2003; Guasch, Milian, Ribas, 2006; Ribas et al, 2005) got underway. First, some of the readings that students use as sources of documentation for their small group work were changed to make them more up-to-date, more closely related with the issues that pose the most difficulties at school, and more adjusted to what the job demands of them.

The working methodology was also reorganised, fundamentally based on independent work by small groups of students guided by the teachers via instructions on the projects, the documents following up the projects and the group tutorials. Questionnaires passed out at the end of each academic year gave us highly valuable information to help us change the course with the goal of getting students more involved, fostering independent study and effective knowledge with the issues that are currently experienced in second language classrooms in a context of multilingualism.

2.2. Coordination among professors teaching the same course in two different degree programmes

The course on Second Language Teaching is taught under the same title in two different degree programmes. Since it is a course that has been on the curriculum for some years now, we have had to constantly update the contents as a result of research into language learning, and also based on the changing social reality. Therefore, a course that was started in back in the 1970s aimed at providing elements for teaching and learning Catalan in the Spanish-speaking population living in Catalonia has now become a

course that aims to provide future teachers with guidance on teaching the different languages on the school curriculum in a much more multilingual and multicultural environment than 30 years ago. Obviously, this change has been gradual, but in the past five or six years it has led the professors teaching this course to set up a permanent seminar on innovation, sometimes with officially recognised projects and other times without them, in order to prepare and assess the development of the programme and the classes throughout the entire academic year. At different points, the changes that are being introduced, in terms of both the syllabus and the methodology, have been presented and discussed at departmental meetings.

2.3. Coordination of the course on Teaching the Experimental Sciences

Given the fact that both courses affect the same students during the second term of the third year, the first task consisted of establishing contact and coordination among the professors of both courses. As these professors come from different fields and scientific traditions, this was perhaps the most difficult yet interesting undertaking. Months of meetings were needed to explain the syllabi and methodologies in order to identify their common points. With regard to methodological issues, the job was easier: we quickly saw that they shared many of the same points of departure and that the transversal skills that both courses covered were quite similar. With regard to the contents of the syllabi of both courses, as both of them aim to provide useful tools for professionals working as primary school teachers, they used two theoretical frameworks from each of the fields that enabled them to find points in common: content-based language teaching (Snow, M. A., 2001) and speaking to learn science (Lemke, 1997; Sanmartí, 2003). This common subject led to contact with teachers from a primary school in order to get recordings of classes that illustrate our interests and serve as baseline material for the joint session with our students. To this end, we designed a working proposal that consisted of two double sessions, one at the beginning of the term and the other at the end, in which we analyse the same school reality from both perspectives: second language teaching by means of a content-based course, the sciences, and the role of language in the conceptualisation and learning of scientific contents. These are the declarative contents located at the crossroads of both courses. What is more, as mentioned above, another content, this time attitudinal, referred to the fact of joining up two different disciplines with their referents, to teamwork and to providing different visions for analysing a single reality – the class in all its complexity and richness.

2.4. Evaluation of the innovation

The entire process was evaluated by the students through a questionnaire and a group conversation at the end of the academic year. The comments from students were quite favourable and they admitted to a certain degree of surprise at first: in their words, it was the first time in their degree programme that two different courses were merged

to work together. They made several suggestions arguing in favour of this cooperation because, according to them, it gave them more realistic information on the professional practice of being a teacher. From the teaching perspective, a project of this kind fosters student autonomy, places them in situations that are closer to what they will find in their professional practice, and enables them to see an approach to education based on inter-disciplinary dialogue and teamwork.

2.5. Student involvement and participation

Compared to a traditional approach in which students fed certain knowledge in a linear fashion through oral explanations and individual readings, we chose to develop a methodology that is organised around the student's perspective. Based on a variety of sources, students have to become able to assimilate information and assess it and consider it in relation to their experience and the challenges posed by today's schools. For this reason, the learning is based on exploratory dialogue (Mercer, 1997), and the different tasks are organised by alternating individual work and reading and individual reflection first, then coming to agreements in small groups of three through scripts for the subsequent discussion, and finally a public discussion with other groups that have examined the same subject. Throughout this entire process, the role of the professor consists of designing the assignments, setting the timeframes and place for doing them, choosing and guiding the readings and discussions, and providing feedback to the individual and group assignments through written and/or oral comments. This interactive process at different levels enables teachers to develop regulation mechanisms that foster learning and facilitate the development of the skills needed to take the right decisions when exercising the teaching profession.

It is true that the different professors and degree programmes have sought the means for getting students involved in the new approaches to university studies, but we must also acknowledge that in this realm there is heavy inertia, and the structural barriers, such as timetables, the lack of time, etc., make it difficult for the professors and students to meet. For this reason we believe that the interest of this innovation lies in setting up a point of departure that can be considered and extended to the new curricula that are being drawn up today.

3. Methodology

The methodological changes implemented in our courses came from asking ourselves questions on:

1. What contents do we need to teach? In addition to declarative contents that come from scientific knowledge, what is the role of procedures and attitudes, beliefs and values in students' learning?
2. What role should students play in the courses?
3. What values does cooperative work foster?

4. What role should the professor play?
5. How can we do a type of evaluation that becomes an educational tool?
6. How is this pre-service training linked to the professional world?

The main instrument used in implementing this innovation was teamwork among the faculty for exchanging ways of working and finding points in common among the different courses that might be interesting for the students' education. Teaching coordination is an indispensable element for improving the quality of teaching, especially in a profession-oriented degree programme. We should point out that this type of coordination does not have a tradition in universities and often has no place among the different tasks that a university professor is required to do.

Likewise, the materials that have been produced are a result of this joint effort and are subjected to revision every academic year by the same faculty. Specifically, we should point out the audiovisual materials made by working jointly with teachers in a primary school and the development of scripts and questionnaires for holding the joint sessions between both courses participating in the project.

4. Results

The results of this innovation have been both satisfactory and solid, in the sense that we started a line of cooperative work among the entire faculty of a course and between two different courses which will remain in place in this degree programme. The assessments of students who finish the term are satisfactory without reservations, in the sense that it is a task that requires them to interact with their knowledge in an active, personal way, and that enables them to contextualise this new knowledge in their future profession. In any event, we should also state that it is crucial to work with students' initial expectations, as whenever we want to break inertias and propose a type of work that requires more involvement and more effort, it is necessary to accompany it with a sound explanation that enables the students to understand it and share the meaning of the undertaking. The proposal must be interesting enough and forge enough bridges with the professional world so that students accept it as their own from the outset. One key element in the success of this experience is the planning and guidance of both courses, which based on several years of experience and teamwork among the faculty, has become a fairly well-balanced and experienced proposition that has materials and a pace that allow for progress in students' learning.

In this sense, the materials developed and the working dynamic in both courses are also outstanding results. The work in small groups of students, the initial questions to help them set their goals, the readings and discussion scripts that help them to think more than just mimic, the meetings to share knowledge and points of view developed by each group: they all constitute a methodological approach based on students' activities viewed as a purposeful process which takes place in a context that makes it significant and makes possible the involvement needed to turn it into a space of learning.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, we wish to first point out the interest in the coordination among the professors of different courses and from different departments aimed at training the same students. This interest is important as faculty coordination is not a practice either provided for or valued within the functioning of the university system. In this case, as these are profession-oriented degrees, this cooperation is extremely important in students' education, as the contributions from the different courses should help students to gain a global view of the profession and know how to use the different knowledge in each field to perform competently and appropriately given the needs of their future working situations.

The second interesting aspect is the use of a methodology that gets students involved actively, that enables them to take an interest in forging relations with the profession for which they are training. If we professors are capable of planning a type of effort that requires a responsible, autonomous effort by students, we will be laying the foundations for useful, interesting learning for their future profession and for the education of our country.

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Project leader

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Presentation of the project leader and the working group

The head of the project is a professor and researcher in teaching language and literature in the stages of compulsory education: primary and secondary. She especially works on project on teaching and learning writing and grammar. One of her points of interest is the role of meta-linguistic activity in the linguistic training of school children in multilingual settings.

The members of the group conduct research in the fields of language teaching and teaching the experimental sciences. In both cases, their interest lies in classroom research and the relationship between research and teacher training.

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