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Skills evaluation at the University: Experiences and reflections in two Geography modules

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Abstract

The goal of this text is to propose different innovative, skills-based assessment methodologies in two modules from different university degrees. In both cases, the complexity of the assessment was adjusted to both the institutional (as determined by Verifica –National Guide-and the Teacher's Guide) and social contexts (as determined by the students' prior knowledge, their interest in the subject and expectations) through the coordinated use of different techniques that obtained information about the knowledge, skills and attitudes of the students throughout the course. The aim of this article is to reflect on the assessment process and propose new approaches that are better suited to the new institutional and social context.

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1. Introduction

The recent reform of higher education in Spain was implemented in the pursuit of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which was conceived with the idea of putting students at centre of teaching activity, and taking competency acquisition and employability as the main goals of university education, and is outlined in Spanish law RD 1393/2007 of 20 October. A single format has been used in the creation of these new study plans, that outlined in the *Verifica* report, which covers all aspects related to the development of each programme, from the learning objectives to tutoring, skills and, of course, assessment.

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So we find ourselves in a new institutional context, one that is quite established at this point and one to which our assessment processes need to be adapted, because the old assessment protocols cannot be used to assess performance against the new, competency-based learning objectives (Fernández, 2010). We need to go beyond the old assessment culture in universities, based primarily on knowledge acquisition and assessed by means of written or oral tests, and move onto a more complex assessment method, which implicates both teachers and students, and assesses the learning processes rather than the learning outcome. If the idea is to develop competencies, and this means giving students the resources to be able to solve complex problems in the professional (and personal) setting, what we need to be assessing is their capacity to learn and keep on learning throughout their lifetimes. And for this we need new approaches to design, development and assessment (Erwin, 2003; Tejada & Ruiz, 2016).

The aim of this article is to reflect on the assessment process and propose new approaches that are better suited to the new institutional and social contexts. To do so we have looked at two modules from different degrees at the University of Valencia (Spain), though both from the social sciences, and even the same subject, Regional Geographical Analysis, within the field of Geography.

2. Reflections on the relevance of assessing learning at university level

Different conceptions of assessment abound in the literature, upon which it is worth reflecting in the pursuit of a suitable definition in different and determinant contexts. Following Monescillo Palomo (2000), the conception of assessment as a complex process of participative research, based on three phases throughout the learning process and on a set of agreed criteria, is the one that best suits the new conditions of the EHEA. It provides quantitative and qualitative information on both the process and the outcomes, which allows changes to be made throughout the duration of the course to improve the quality of the teaching-learning processes. It not only assesses learning outcomes, but everything leading up to it: the teaching process, the learning itself (the acquisition of theoretical and practical knowledge), and the personal, organizational and material factors involved in this process. The student is the end recipient of the results of this assessment, but not everything revolves around them. It is an on-going process in which the teacher is a provider of methodologies, activities, resources, as well as a means of assessing it all. This assessment is necessary for two basic reasons: one, to chart the achievements of the student and two, to identify any corrections they (or the teaching system) might need.

It is known that certain aspects elude the quantitative assessment of exams, making them difficult to analyze using this assessment tool. The approach popularly known as “continuous assessment”, currently in use at all levels of pre-university education, affords the possibility of developing a more comprehensive assessment process, which does not leave the teacher feeling as though teaching quality has been compromised or competencies lost. Many such assessment methodologies exist, among which that of the peer review stands out, for the participation it requires on the part of the student (Ibarra, Rodríguez, Gómez, 2010).

Given that competencies require the combined application of knowledge, skills and attitudes, a good approach would be to assess the process based on what a teacher has brought to a given learning block (module, lesson, subject), which includes knowledge and skills, and on the learning objectives the student has met throughout and by the end of said block and is able to demonstrate. As Tejada & Ruiz (2016) point out, competency assessment must take as its reference “real situations and/or work simulations from which authentic assessment tasks can be derived” (p. 27). The student must provide sufficient proof, that is, complete a minimum number of assignments to a minimum standard, in order to receive a pass, in such a way that the assessment reflects a student’s ability to solve complex problems in a professional setting. It would only be possible to carry out this kind of assessment adequately, and at a reasonable cost, if it were done so by means of a collegiate approach, that is, in cooperation with all of the agents involved (Tierno, Iranzo & Barrios, 2011).

Ultimately, setting some basic principles for assessment that define and guide the teaching-learning processes is fundamental, because this kind of assessment requires information to be collected on the capacities, skills and competencies listed in the objectives being worked towards in the teaching-learning process. With these ideas in mind, in the following sections we will reflect an innovative assessment method in two practical case studies whose learning contexts and competencies differ.

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