

International Conference on University Teaching and Innovation, CIDUI 2014, 2-4 July 2014,
Tarragona, Spain

The impact of writing case studies: Benefits for students' success and well-being

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Abstract

University professors often use case studies because they provide a fertile basis for the application of theoretical concepts to real world situations, enhancing student participation. The present correlational study aims to present social psychology's students from the University of Barcelona (UB) as active participants of their learning process through their work with case studies. Results demonstrate that students made significant learning through the writing of case studies, which has benefited their results in the final exam, course grades, and course's satisfaction.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the Scientific Committee of CIDUI Congrés Internacional de Docència Universitària i Innovació.

Keywords: Case studies; significative learning; social psychology; teaching innovation; teaching-learning process.

1. Introduction

Since the early twentieth century, the renowned *Harvard Business School* began to write descriptions of real cases so that students could learn beyond textbooks, and this technique has become a powerful teaching tool (Christensen & Hansen, 1987). Case studies can be defined as stories that represent real, complex and contextualized situations, which often involve dilemmas, conflicts or problems with no obvious solution (Davis,

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1993). According to Boehrer and Linsky (1990, p. 45), a good case should present: "an interesting and provocative situation that fosters empathy with the characters" and focuses on "the intersection between organizational or situational dynamics and perception, judgment and individual action". The use of this technique is especially suitable for building the capacity of diagnosis and decision-making in the field of social problems, where human relations play an important role (Leonard & Cook, 2010).

University faculty members, seniors and juniors (i.e., Escartín, Ferrer, Pallàs, & Ruiz, 2008), have found, in the case studies, an active and collaborative approach that can promote their students' learning process (Kunselman & Johnson, 2004). In this sense, case studies seem to be useful to enhance the acquisition of skills by students, relevant to the academic and professional development in different disciplines such as psychology, nursing, law or business, to name a few (Scott, 2007).

Specifically, it has been argued that this teaching method is effective for the development of skills such as critical thinking (Popil, 2011), communication skills (De Miguel, 2005) or teamwork (Piqué & Forés, 2012), and to promote exchanges and collective construction of knowledge. Also, case studies often help develop the dialectic between theory and practice, providing fertile ground for the application of conceptual content to real world situations, overcoming the gap between academia and the world of work (Barkley, Cross, & Mayor, 2005; Mayo, 2004).

Using case studies in the teaching process represents an exciting approach to teaching, which can help students take more responsibility for their own learning, both inside and outside the classroom. On the one hand, it has been shown that using case studies in the classroom is beneficial for teachers, because they encourage reflection about the teaching role, renewing their interest in the course material, and increasing their level of enthusiasm, which can be transmitted to the students (Kunselman & Johnson, 2004). Furthermore, case studies can promote intrinsic motivation of students for their own learning process, assuming learning experiences and authentic assessment in which they have to experience the consequences of solutions to real situations (De Miguel, 2005).

Case studies can take different forms, ranging from simple situations to complex scenarios, and can be presented as multiple or single cases, as well as simulations based on real problems or based on people's own experiences (De Miguel, 2005). The preparation for being able to use this methodology has typically fallen under the responsibility of teachers, being a difficult task due to the amount of resources needed to develop them (Forrester & Oldham, 1981; Jones & Russell, 2008; Popil, 2011). But, what if university students could take over the responsibility of creating their own case studies as a tool for formative and summative assessment?

The ability to deal with this type of learning activities depends not only on the knowledge of the theories and practices regarding the field of study, but also on the ability to contextualize the concepts learned in a creative and innovative way. In other words, unlike the case study prepared by professors, we believe that the case studies developed by students can actively facilitate collective building of knowledge throughout the students' learning process (Escartín et al., 2008; Piqué & Forés, 2012).

The purpose of the present study is to allow students of the subject Social Psychology at the Faculty of Psychology (University of Barcelona, UB), experiencing a significant and meaningful learning, as active participants of their own learning process. Within a nutshell, students were asked to create a case study where they had to contextualize the theoretical contents included in the course outline (i.e., social perception and cognition, socialization, social identity, attitudes, social influence...), and their success and well-being in the course were examined.

2. Study description

For the implementation of this innovative teaching method, we selected the compulsory subject Social Psychology, offered at the 2th semester as part of the Degree of Psychology at UB. A total of 82 students from continuous assessment (10 male students and 72 female students) voluntarily participated in the study. The activity was carried out in pairs to promote interdependence, collaboration and creativity. The average length of the case studies was about six pages. The task consisted of four phases:

- *Phase 1.* Before starting the activity, students were asked to work on a case study prepared and facilitated by teachers. The basic intention at this stage was to (1) disclose the nature and characteristics of a case study, which

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