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The class as a qualitative research enterprise



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Abstract

The article describes an educational experience in social research qualitative techniques. The main methodological approach is to organize the university classroom around a single research project for all students, so that the practical section will become the backbone of the organization of the course and help us to contextualize the methodological and epistemological issues, without renouncing them. This example may be of interest in the current dilemma of university education in the social sciences between knowledge transfer and competencies development, offering a possible alternative.

Key words: qualitative techniques of social research, European Higher Education Area (EHEA), epistemology, social sciences, learning-centered teaching, competencies.

Resumen

El artículo relata una experiencia docente en técnicas cualitativas de investigación social. La propuesta didáctica principal es organizar el aula universitaria en torno a un único proyecto de investigación para todos los alumnos, de forma que el apartado práctico se convierta en el eje vertebrador de la organización del curso y nos sirva para contextualizar los temas metodológicos y epistemológicos, sin renunciar a ellos. Este ejemplo puede ser de interés en la actual disyuntiva de la formación universitaria de las ciencias sociales entre transmisión del conocimiento y el desarrollo de competencias, ofreciendo una posible alternativa.

Palabras clave: técnicas cualitativas de investigación social, Espacio Europeo de Educación Superior (EEES), epistemología, ciencias sociales, enseñanza centrada en el aprendizaje, competencias.

Resum

L'article relata una experiència docent en tècniques qualitatives de recerca social. La proposta didàctica principal és organitzar l'aula universitària entorn d'un únic projecte de recerca per a tots els alumnes, de manera que l'apartat pràctic es convertisca en l'eix vertebrador de l'organització del curs i ens servisca per a contextualitzar els temes metodològics i epistemològics, sense renunciar a ells. Aquest exemple pot ser d'interès en l'actual disjuntiva de la formació universitària de les ciències socials entre transmissió del coneixement i el desenvolupament de competències, oferint una possible alternativa.

Paraules clau: tècniques qualitatives d'investigació social, Espai Europeu d'Educació Superior (EEES), epistemologia, ciències socials, ensenyament centrat en l'aprenentatge, competències.

1. The training of social researchers in the current context of Spanish universities

Spanish universities are immersed in a process of change partly related to the educational innovation initiatives demanded by the EHEA (European Higher Education Area). This process brings into question the existing teaching and learning models as well as teaching trajectories, modifying the norm and *professing* new values (Argyris and Schon 1978).

The different reform actions come mainly from the outside and are designed on paper. While there is no exemplary educational innovation strategy (Escudero 1992), and in practice the available strategies are combined, in order to achieve a profound change that affects the “grammar” of schooling, an ascending process is needed (Bolívar 1999), seeking the compromise of all those involved. If this is not achieved, the changes will only be superficial. In order to modify the teaching practice and competences (Zabalza 2003) a self-reflection is necessary that ponders the possibilities for development in the emerging horizontal stage, participation, practical content and students taking responsibility for their own learning.

So, wherefrom should change start in order to cut this Gordian knot of immobility, so that innovation penetrates the organization? There is probably no unique or exclusive response, and the promoters are probably in different functional and hierarchic places. Therefore, to contribute to this initiative, the present report aims to reflect, from the lecture hall, on the dialectic between the perceived constrictions (coming from the entire educational system) and the spaces for autonomy where it is possible to innovate.

The case presented here is part of the subject *Técnicas Cualitativas de Investigación Social* [Qualitative Techniques in Social Research], within the Industrial Relations Graduate Studies at the University of Valencia. The idea, from the very beginning, was to find coherence between form—university teaching—and content—qualitative techniques of social research—. A first approximation to the teaching turning point we envisioned is afforded by Valero and Navarro (2008) in their work *Diez metáforas para entender (y explicar) el nuevo modelo docente para el EEES* [Ten metaphors to understand (and explain) the new teaching model for the EHEA]. Notably two of them: the one where the educational process is a train, where the engine—teachers—pulls the wagons—students—. In this case it is an allegory of teacher-centred teaching, where some wagons may get disengaged and where few or none reach the end destination, which is learning. As opposed to this mental image, the model that is currently promoted is more like a rowing boat, in which the teacher acts as helmsman—still essential— but needs the rowers—students to get *somewhere*. This second metaphor reflects the way in which we wanted to tackle the subject.

The development of competencies, at the heart of the current university debate, acquires certain peculiarities when it comes to teaching research methods and techniques:

“Training in research, even though not strictly professional training, presumably prepares one for the research practice. However, it often rests on the illusion

that a high level of theoretical, methodological and epistemological knowledge is enough to guarantee a research practice that is both ethical and fruitful. Oblivious to the fact that empirical research, be it in the laboratory or in the field, is above all the kind of work that requires, as such, more than just knowledge.” (Perrenoud 2005: 28; author’s translation).

1.1 Our proposal

The pedagogical strategy was structured around a single research project, to be carried out by the participants (students and professors), transforming the lecture hall into a laboratory of qualitative research techniques. This was based on a conviction, previously expressed by the great sociologist Wright Mills: that social research is in great part a craft; but, at the same time, if it is not accompanied by an epistemological-methodological reflection it may be reduced to a mere technical application (which he called *abstract empiricism*).

More specifically and to synthesize (we will get back to this later on): what we did was to form a single research team with the class. We risked travelling the *dialectical spiral* of Pichón Rivière, where the learning process advances in loops each bigger than the other, and this, opposed to the linearity established by the academic syllabuses (see figure 1).

We then tried to solve the difficult dilemma between our authority and their autonomy in the choice of topic; we had a *terrifying* experience with the elaboration of the theoretical framework; we tried to help them embrace the information-gathering techniques; and, finally, as an exam, we proposed a reflection on what it meant to research the social reality in methodological, epistemological and ontological terms.

1.2. Premises of the proposed learning process

Firstly, that the students acknowledge the profound meaning of the fact that *research means to produce new knowledge*. The flagship was to transform attitudes and move from student-consumers of knowledge—breaking away with mechanical repetition—to students-producers of knowledge, to move from study to research. This is an important issue in all subjects, but particularly so in research method-

DESCRIPCIÓN DE CONTENIDOS

1. Elementos metodológicos y técnicos de la investigación cualitativa

1. Aproximación metodológica al análisis de la realidad social: método, metodología y técnicas
2. El pluralismo metodológico y la complementariedad de lo cuantitativo y lo cualitativo en la investigación sociolaboral
3. Paradigmas y perspectivas en la investigación cualitativa
4. La organización de la investigación cualitativa

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1. La investigación documental
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3. La entrevista en profundidad
4. La metodología biográfica
5. El grupo de discusión

3. Análisis y presentación de la información

1. El análisis cualitativo
2. Elaboración del informe de investigación

Figure 1: Academic syllabus of Qualitative Techniques in Social Research, within the Industrial Relations and Human Resources Graduate Studies at the University of Valencia

¹ Bolívar (1999) refers us to Tyack and Cuban (1995) who use the expression “grammar of schooling” to refer to the total of forms, norms and rules that govern teaching. This grammar is relatively stable, since all components of the system (class, school, district) maintain a strong mutual interdependence.

ology since its ethos is to produce knowledge. They will become professionals who will have to incorporate social research in their actions. Research is necessary in the present-day society. It is not a matter, as indicated by Perrenoud (2005) of directing the training of researchers only towards the Nobel Prize, not even the training of those pursuing an academic career:

“These *base researchers* will need competences, that are not those of the front line researcher, but that are equally useful, since in large projects a great amount of qualified work of verification and data treatment is needed that does not require substantial creativity, but which cannot be entrusted to mere technicians. In a society that is so dependent on technological progress and on the advancement of knowledge such as ours, for some time now discovery has been a collective effort, that requires an *inventive* leadership, but also many *small hands*, as in a *couture* company.” (Perrenoud 2005: 42; author's translation).

Secondly, that the students may *understand the concepts of methodological theory after having experimented with it*. To explain without practice the methodological application of the *surprise* or of the *naïve question* is almost impossible. Following the postulates of John Dewey, we understand research as a trade that one can learn by doing. This implies it is necessary to be exposed to the situation of fieldwork, of collecting qualitative data, when still without sufficient training, since we learn from experience, and it is this precise situation that allows us to develop fieldwork abilities. The fear of error is one of the most frequent obstacles in education. However being wrong is part of the work process and professors can and should express their own doubts. The auto-reflective, theoretical and empirical process, the back-and-forth, should be seen as learning stages.

Thirdly, conceiving qualitative research as *a dialogue of four voices*, that involves the voice of the relevant authors on the subject, that of the researcher, that of the study subjects and the voice that emerges from the review of the quantitative data. We enter that dialogue the moment we produce a line of argument from which we *summon* certain authors (thereby excluding others), the interviewees (interviewed individually or in groups) who contribute complex social relations in which they are immersed and, also, and no less important, the voice of the researcher who interprets the empirical material (quantitative-qualitative) and enters in dialogue with the theoretical one. The idea of *dialogue* is fundamental so that students understand the need to produce an integrated text that from beginning to end follows a line of argument. Furthermore it implies that students must know how to introduce their own perspective, overcoming the tendency to assemble, without integrating, theoretical propositions and empirical interpretations.

Fourthly, keeping students outside the sphere of influence of professors. This is in line with the characteristics of scientific knowledge, to which one arrives through discovery and not by the authority of those who enunciate. In this framework, *professors provide the path for learning so that students discover the knowledge by themselves*. To be helmsman of this gnoseological boat, professors must be in possession of a certain command of philosophy and practical experience in the subject they teach, not just ency-

clopaedic and accumulative knowledge. A current line of work in teaching social sciences (Copetti 2010) points out the importance of epistemology in teaching them, and favours students visualising a path to discover knowledge on their own.

As a final premise, we would like to add that it is not only the result of the research project that we have to assess. *Evaluation has to focus on the learning process*, assessing which the starting point and which the degree of personal growth was, starting from individual experience, but also the collective and specific experience that we had (Perrenoud 2004: 40-41). To us, this shift from the assessment of the results to the assessment of the process has also been a learning experience. Perrenoud (2004: 41) cites Cardinet to state that this author “insists on the evaluation of the learning conditions more than the knowledge acquired, since it allows for much faster regulations”. And also reminds us that our work as professors is not to *assign a numerical value* at the end of the school year, but to evaluate the process—which is learning—and gradually impose corrections, changes.

2. Materials and methods: what we did

The main objective of the subject—as stated in its teaching guide—is that students acquire the necessary knowledge, competencies and abilities to devise and carry out qualitative social research in the professional area of labour relations and human resources. This objective materializes in providing the student with an operative knowledge regarding the different qualitative methods and techniques used in social sciences and their application to the social reality.

Fred Newmann and the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools in Winsconsin (CORS) (Avery 2010) reflect on the relationship between education and meaningful learning. From their proposal we adopted some principles that allowed us to organize our actions: involving students in manipulating information to produce new meaning and knowledge (what Newmann calls *higher-order thinking*); focusing training on the more important ideas of the techniques in qualitative research; sparking a conversation between professors, students and among peers filled with content on issues relevant for the subject and the research project; and searching for value outside the lecture hall, affording connections with wider social contexts.

Faced with the differentiation between theoretical and practical classes which follow the sequence of themes and sub-themes; the conducting wire of our work has been to formulate a research project in which the methodological theory is *summoned* by the practice of research. And it is this simple standpoint that gives strength to the approach. We also decided to change the pattern of working in small groups where the professor tracks work by tutoring, to a single project where the professor acts as main researcher (coordinating the team formed by the entire class). Normally the design of the projects consists of practice outside the classroom, whereas, in our case, decisions were discussed, reflected on and justified in class. The project was tailored in view of all the participants, with expert guidance. The aim was to acquire resources and to learn how to mobilize them in the same context, the class. Thus different points of view and difficulties were shared among students and professors. And the methodological decisions were made that were necessary for the project to advance.

This allowed teaching to focus on the development of competencies, since “what good is it to enunciate learning objectives in terms of competencies if the syllabus is built as a sum of disciplinary knowledge? (...) The issue of competencies usually plays a minor role in the construction of training programmes which prioritize disciplinary contents.” (Perrenoud 2005: 38-39). In fact, we had no choice but to *reinvent* the teaching guide, reaching agreements with students and with the coordinators of the subject, since we were moving away from what was officially stipulated for it.

2.1. Linearity or dialectics in learning?

It is common for a syllabus to go from general to specific. Normally in methodology subjects (as can be observed in figure 1, the contents of our subject were no exception) they start with some epistemological aspects on paradigms, to later move on to logic and the organization of the research and the study of the qualitative techniques of social research. We consider this particular order of the syllabus not very compatible with our perspective of focusing learning on the students. The question is how to tackle the importance of epistemological aspects with first year students who have no specific referents regarding the production of knowledge because they have not had any research experience. How to find examples and specific elements on such abstract issues without at least some shared and experienced references. At this point, to speak of ontology, epistemology and reflections on the nature of knowledge means placing the students on foreign grounds.

Similarly, we must also consider that most students who take the subject Qualitative Techniques have previously taken Quantitative Techniques. This situation alone deserves an epistemological debate. To put it briefly, due to the prevalence, to this day, of scientism in pre-university education, an acceptance of the realistic —naïve— vision takes place, which prevents the inclusion of subjectivity within scientific knowledge. In order to break this barrier, to fully understand the potential of qualitative techniques, it is necessary to grasp that there is an *idealist* vision of reality. And this can be learnt better by first taking a *qualitative glimpse* and discovering that it offers us a range of relevant information in order to understand our society, in a different way from the *reality* obtained by studying it with quantitative techniques.

In view of the foregoing, the changes introduced in the order of the syllabus and in the development of the subject followed two criteria. First, the more philosophical subject matter was interspersed while students learnt qualitative research techniques and perceived their entire potential. And the second criterion was introducing another theme in the syllabus: the substantive discussion (starting from a jointly elaborated theoretical frame of reference) on the topic of the research project. Dedicating classes to the conceptual development of the topic may seem a heresy in a methodology subject that is about “the how” in research. However, a minimal conceptual development of the topic is essential to give meaning to the research techniques, which were the next step. Regarding the techniques, the order set in the teaching guide was observed (see figure 1) since they were handled following a natural-artificial vector. Although, as will be seen further on, each technique was practiced in form prior to its theoretical presentation. The idea was to begin with a technique like observation: “If you want to know something, why

not go to the place where it happens and witness it, experiment it and maybe even take part in it? These are natural activities, but we will see that they are also abilities that one can learn and fine tune.” (Babbie 2000: 258). To finish the technique of group discussion: an artificial situation created specifically for the purpose of the research underway (Ibañez 1983). In the midst of all, the in-depth interviews, the biographical method and the content analysis.

2.2. Issue: the elusive middle point between autonomy and tutoring.

The first big decision was the choice of topic for the research. In addition to the classic criteria for setting its limits, it was anticipated that it had to fulfill another set of requirements: be sufficiently attractive for all students; easy access (for example, be related to public spaces, that are independent with respect to the place of residence, age or gender); and, naturally, that it were related to their field of study, which is labor relations. The choice was a study on shop assistants in clothing stores (neighborhood shops, department stores...). However, in the exercise for the choice of topic (carried out in class) they suggested issues related to the seller-buyer relationship, and not to labor relations: systems of authority within the organization, definition of tasks, working conditions, and organizational culture. We were then more directive in order to shift the focus from marketing and sales issues to other labor relations, which are issues more related to their field of study.

Now the question is, whether after all the statements regarding our premises it is advisable to *take them by the hand* in the choice of topic. In answer to this, we resort once again to the educational metaphors of Valero and Navarro (2008). In this case that of the recently planted tree that needs a stake, or tutor, to lean on until it is well rooted. According to these authors it is teachers who must devise the road that inexorably leads to learning. Let us keep in mind that the first steps require greater support so that the following ones need less and less, once students have acquired the appropriate abilities.

In class, we jointly wrote up the title, an introduction to the topic, the justification, the main concepts and the general and specific objectives. The project ended up being titled: *Trajectories, social practices and identities of shop assistants in the clothing shops of Valencia: a comparative analysis and construction of typologies*. This is a title that already reflects the possibilities of a project based on qualitative research techniques, with the general objective to analyze the different trajectories in the process of identity construction of shop assistants in clothing shops in the province of Valencia, evaluating the influence of their life stories, of the labor conditions in which they perform their tasks and of the culture of the organizations to which they belong.

2.3. Frame of reference: a theoretical Frankenstein

Another suggestive, but difficult experience launched, was to draft the theoretical frame of reference of the research project in a collaborative way. We incorporated the idea of “technology enhanced learning” (Llorens Largo, 2011) and the accomplishments in the area of information technology at the university of Valencia, which have been highlighted by the doctoral thesis of Moreno Clarí (2009). To this end we were assisted by a specialist in scientific documentation who taught two classes in order for students

to develop the necessary informational competencies that would allow them to carry out a search of scientific documents, leaving behind inadequate practices of internet use (unlearn in order to learn). Each student searched for, read and developed a report card with the main ideas of a text related to the research topic. In spite of our insistence that it were a text of proven academic relevance, part of the students continued with the copy-paste from the Internet practice.

An initial line of reasoning was drafted for the theoretical framework (with many ellipses to leave *paths* open) to be completed in sequential interventions. To this end a list was elaborated (in an arbitrary order, such as the alphabetical one) which would work as “relay”. The first started to introduce the ideas deemed pertinent to the topic, in keeping with the initial line of reasoning. The second could incorporate new things, or freely modify what was already written and so on. This proposal worried them because the individual work would not be reflected and would be diluted in the group work. This was another barrier to overcome: the attitudes focused on individual learning patterns, to move on to a collaborative one. We then tried to convince them, by showing them the relevance of their commitment to the task (beyond the grade), of the implication in the learning process. Finally, we reached a compromise; each student would mark in red their contribution and not only send their work to the relay but also to the professors for evaluation purposes.

The result was a theoretical Frankenstein, since -despite insisting on the fact that a text is re-written uncountable times-, each person included a theoretical item making no attempt to modify what another colleague had written, with a few honorable exceptions.

Nevertheless it was an interesting experience because, on the one hand, it illustrated the practices that need to be modified in order to be able to carry out research in groups and on the other hand, it allowed a more precise delimitation of the object of study and its conceptualization. As an additional note, we would like to mention the relevance of teachers’ providing topics for research in which they are experts. It is an additional way to show students the importance of theoretical preparation in order to better define the project.

2.4. Acquisition of information gathering techniques.

In the learning of techniques, again, the established order was turned on its head. Instead of beginning with the theoretical-methodological account of the technique, followed by the construction of the information gathering instrument and the fieldwork, a different sequence was used. First we carried out a small practice “as a game” with a few rules but without explaining the theory. For instance, we sent them out to observe shops (either food or clothing establishments) with a small script. The results were exposed in class and we assessed the difference between “looking and observing” and doing so “in an orderly fashion”, that is, previously preparing what we would focus our eyes and ears on. Once the task had been carried out and reflected upon we could move on to a brief explanation of the theory in class and to reading a good theorist on the subject of participatory ob-

servation. We were then ready to elaborate the observation script of our research project, which we tackled in the lecture hall through group dynamics.

The interview procedure was similar. First, we had a demonstration between the Professor-Interviewer and a Volunteer-Student-Interviewee. Then, students carried out interviews of their peers on a fictitious research, following a script. In groups of three they took turns in changing the roles of interviewer, interviewee and observer. After this experience, we had a class on theory and reading the material in order to finally move on to elaborate the script for the open interview of our research project. For the interviews we also used audiovisual material, especially for analyzing non-verbal communication.

This afforded students an understanding of the theory based on experience, to then, repeatedly, go back to the experience as a person transformed by the theory.

2.5. The exam: the ontological unblocking

An exam was planned in the teaching guide. Since a dynamic of continuous evaluation was privileged, the exam was considered just another event; therefore a written assignment was required in the second half of the course. It was an essay of around 1,500 or 2,000 words, which would depict a reflection on the theoretical considerations and discover the ontological, epistemological and methodological dimension of the research focused on the clothing store shop assistant. They were also expected to provide a simple example of how they would conduct the research with quantitative techniques so as to discover the differences studied between both methodologies and grasp the magnificent expression that says, “if you can measure it, then it is not what you are looking for” (Alvira 1983: 53). It was a complex exercise that caused some degree of mental block in most students; therefore it turned out to be an even more interesting exercise for those who *suffered* the unblocking.

Throughout the course, we tried to create a comfortable environment, a space that would promote the active participation, which is essential to ensure learning, lowering the pressure of *getting the grade*, letting them know they would be evaluated on the weekly work submissions and participation in class. Because it is no longer a matter of controlling the contents amassed, but of learning abilities and skills for the exercise of their *future profession*, as well as assessing student implication.

3. Results and conclusions

3.1. Small achievements and satisfactions: learning

The first answer is both easy and quick: the master-apprentice relationship was fruitful, producing a learning experience rooted in both dimensions: theory and practice. *Experienced learning*, permanent in the long-term memory and an individual adaptation thereof to their own capacities and interests. On our part, we have *pocketed* the expression of satisfaction shown by most of our students. In some cases they regretted not getting involved sooner. Also there are those who do not feel comfortable, the *good students*, those who go after the grade and prefer exams because it is where they feel more competent and competitive. However, the majority of students are willing to travel innovative paths of learning. In this sense,

² The classes were taught by the specialist in scientific documentation Lourdes Castelló, whom we thank for the contribution and we exempt of all responsibility for any statements made in this article.

we would like to take up the cudgels for these students and reconsider whether to a great extent their passivity resides in the way classes and the course are planned.

Knowledge is something more than concepts, it also includes criteria and structure: it is there that learning should occur through action, and the critical reflection influences the *apprehending* of elements beyond what can be assimilated through exercising memory and repetition. Thanks to the processes carried out in the lecture hall, the practical work, etc., students gradually developed *tailor-made* learning experiences. They each give their best, knowledge becomes flexible and it adapts to interests and moments, to previous knowledge, to every mental structure and their effort. The reward is not just the grade. And this can be carried out without taking away from competitive incentives, which are still valid, since grades can give access to scholarships or jobs.

The learning objectives for this course (not incompatible with the objectives stated in the teaching guide) were more basic or elementary and, in turn, critical: changing to some extent attitudes and behaviors regarding the expected learning, regarding what research is and with respect to their own qualitative research. The objective was in fact to endow the expression *qualitative outlook* of the maximum amount of content, making them aware of this outlook, which is essential in order to carry it out. It was not a matter of knowing a range of qualitative research techniques and applying them to some example, we had to plan an active learning experience, tutoring them in a new —to them— way of constructing knowledge. Linking the objectives of university training with those acquired in an experimental and professional manner; without forgetting the habit of debate and the exercise of pluralism, a reflexive stance, an intellectual identity and the zest for learning (Perrenoud 2005: 47-48)

3.2. Conclusions

The greatest contribution we would like to highlight from this experience is the enunciation of the premises, which constitutes an attempt to encode the approach adopted in the subject. The idea of loops that go from explanation to practice, to experience that occurs previously to the assimilation of concepts, is one of the premises that may have a greater impact in order to replicate this teaching experience. Also, that of carrying out a single research, the design thereof emerging from the entire group as well as facilitating the work on the theoretical frame of reference of the topic prior to the teaching-learning of research techniques. All this led up to the next step, the third-degree reflection of the epistemological, ontological and methodological type in an interstitial manner, throughout the subject (avoiding unintelligible introductions for the students). In short, methodology wise we inverted the sequence of the course guide, moving from specific (the practice) to the abstract (the theory) and from *natural* (observation, conversation) to the *artificial* (information gathering techniques). Furthermore, regarding the topic, we began with a few intuitive ideas, to then delve into the theories and redefine the research topic. The metaphor which best describes this process is that of a spiral, with progress and setbacks, where reconsidering the *already seen* aspects is carried out under a new light, adding towards a new starting point.

Finally we took notice that teaching should not be the isolated work of each professor. Imbernón, in the article “New professors for a new university. Conscience or pres-

sure?” demands “new alternatives in relation to teacher training so as not to apply obsolete training processes and instruments” (Imbernón 2000: 37). He suggests, “(...) a restructuring of the University and of the teaching staff that allows, for instance, the constant self-reflection on the teaching practice in the lecture hall” (Imbernón 2000: 38). The present article is a self-reflection and self-criticism attempt, but also a proposal, as a way of advancing on a path that is built with our footsteps too, as an active part of the educational community.

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