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Learning and teaching strategic management: a continuous improvement

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1. Introduction

In the context of Bologna Process, Spanish Universities has been adapting in the last years their degrees, methodologies, and teaching and evaluating methods to converge to the European Higher Education Area. In this chapter we describe the evolution in the methodology we apply to the subject Strategic Management that pertains to the fourth course of the Degree in Business Administration and Management at the Jaume I University in Spain, in order to adapt it to the new challenges this new context offers.

Management students had to face a more complex business context with international economies, diverse workforces and rapidly changing technologies (Billimoria, 2000). Moreover, teachers must be also prepared to these changes and to new teaching approaches more centred on the improvement of student's competences.

One of the points the Bologna Process stresses is encouraging the use of a teaching-learning process more focused on students. To this end, we pretend to promote the role of the lecturer as a guide in the learning process and not only as an individual who transfers knowledge. Moreover, the Bologna Process emphasizes the development of student's competences. Among others competences, students of management, as future professionals, need to develop skills in team working, in analyzing, interpreting and giving solutions and recommendations to different management situations.

To these aims, during the last academic courses, we have used tutorial sessions with a reduced number of students that form a group with 5 or 6 students maximum. The tutorial sessions are used weekly and the aim of these sessions is to guide to the students to develop a project related with the design and selection of the strategy in a real firm of the socio-economic surrounding of the Jaume I University. In the tutorial sessions the lecturers of the subject manage the groups with the elaboration of the project, and they help the students with the doubts they may have. It is aimed that these sessions help to a better understanding of the theoretical concepts applied to the concrete case of each selected firm by the groups. Thus, this methodology is consolidated with the experience of the previous courses, but it needs to be improved continuously, considering the new demands and necessities of the new students. The aim of the project we analyze in this chapter is to consolidate the use of tutorial sessions as a method of learning-teaching, to improve with this methodology the

competences developed by students, and to obtain more satisfied students with the learning process and with a greater motivation and interest for the subject. After the third year of application, we explain in this chapter results about the consolidation of the methodological changes.

In the next section we provide a theoretical base of the project developed. The third section presents the overview of the course, where methodology of the course and phases of the project we develop to apply this methodology are explained. Then, we present and analyze results of the project, and we finish with the section where conclusions are explained.

2. Background

Teaching Strategic Management requires being able to offer to the students a wide range of capabilities that allow them to perform a manager job. Learning Strategic Management requires a considerable amount of time and effort. To address a greater emphasis on teamwork and development of student competencies, practice-centred techniques are used in the practical sessions of the subject Strategic Management. Practice-centred approaches emphasize knowledge acquisition through the individuals' social or cultural surroundings, which are central to how concepts are understood and how learning occurs (Sargent et al., 2009). From a constructionist perspective, knowledge is created when new information is available and it is developed through social interactions that develop the own reality of individuals implied (Daft & Weick, 1984). Knowledge is attached in time and space to particular situations and cultures, and therefore practical knowledge applies to the subjective experience of the individual (Raelin, 2007). Therefore, teaching strategic management requires the creation of a learning environment that facilitates this kind of knowledge construction.

Furthermore, this fact implies also that the role of the teacher must change, from a simple transmitter of knowledge to a facilitator of learning. Students must be encouraged to be more autonomous and more reliable in the development of their own competences (Raelin, 2007). It is appropriate that students work in groups because this structure provide a safer environment in which experiment with others to get different learning goals than working individually (Michaelsen et al., 2002). Teachers must maintain a close contact with students, provide feedback of the work done and reinforce their contributions (Raelin, 2007). Therefore, the use of tutorial sessions with small groups of students should be very suitable for the accomplishment of this task.

This mode of learning-teaching process entail several advantages, and two of the more evident are that learning occurs willingly when it is closer to real activities and with the own culture of individuals, and moreover, learning is acquired through discursive interactions between students and between them and the teacher (McLellan, 1995; Raelin, 2007). The teacher must propose a task and guide an assist to the students in the development of the proposed task. The task proposed is the solution or analysis of real-world problems, since this kind of contextualized approach generates learning from a human interaction in the analysis of this problem (Raelin, 2000). The literature but also several programs in worldwide universities show how there is a growing appreciation of the need to integrate theory and practice through approaches that introduce requirements of the real business environment (Raelin, 2007).

The introduction of methodologies more centred in the application of real situations and on the learning process of the students are also in accordance with the aim of the European Higher Education Area objectives. Therefore, as a teachers of strategic management we develop a project to introduce and reinforce this kind of methodology.

3. Overview of the course

In this chapter, we describe a classroom structure in which a combination of traditional masters classes with a practice-centred approaches took place, and then we analyze results of the methodology applied. With regards to the theoretical part of the subject, it is based on the master classes, in which the participation of the lecturer and the individual work of the student are combined. We propose also to improve this part of the sessions by suggesting to the students some situations of firms in which they must analyze the appropriate strategy or do a strategic analysis of the situation, and also by reading and analyzing some real news from the economic newspapers about change in firms or in markets. In the practical part of the subject, tutorial sessions are used weekly and the aim of these sessions is to guide to the students to develop a project related with the design and selection of the strategy in a real firm of the socio-economic surrounding of the Jaume I University. In the tutorial sessions the lecturers of the subject manage the groups with the elaboration of the project, and they help the students with the doubts they may have.

The development of the project that teachers follow to improve the subject has followed the three last academic courses the same structure. The first phase consists on the planning of the project, the second phase deals with implementation and the last one relates to control and evaluation of the project. These phases are explained with more detail next:

A. Planning

The planning of the project includes all the activities to detect the need of improvement of the subject, the justifications of these activities and the development of the actions that will be carried out. In this stage are also included the meetings that will be held among the different lecturers of the subject to define the planning of the course and to analyze the student results of the previous year in order to detect strengths and weaknesses.

B. Implementation

We include here the performance of the tutorial sessions with the students that we use in the practical part of the subject. The tutorial sessions are used weekly. The aim of these sessions is to guide to the students to develop a project related with the design and selection of the strategy in a real firm of the socio-economic surrounding of the Jaume I University. In the tutorial sessions the lecturers of the subject manage the groups with the elaboration of the project, and they help the students with the doubts they may have. It is aimed that these sessions help to a better understanding of the theoretical concepts applied to the concrete case of each selected firm by the work groups. Therefore, during tutorial sessions, students discuss the practical dilemmas but also the application or not of concepts and theories to these actions.

C. Control and evaluation

To carry out a correct control of the achievement of the purposes of this project, we obtained feedback from the students through a survey every academic course. Since the students are

the main beneficiary of the changes introduced, it is relevant to know their satisfaction with the process. In this sense, the student could be seen as the customer of the service, and he evaluates the quality perceived as their global opinion of the excellence of the service (Zeithaml, 1988). On the first stage of application of this kind of methodologies, students must react again this practice-based method, since it not give students universal answers. Nevertheless, as students perceive that this learning method enhance their knowledge and competences, their perception should improve. Therefore, we consider the evaluation of the methodology by students as a relevant approach to measure the development of our objectives. Moreover, the evaluation of the projects can be carried out also through the qualitative observation of the lecturers about the evolvement of the subject and the learning-teaching process, which we include in the assessment of the different results that we will analyze.

4. Results and analysis of the project

As we have explained in the previous section, to carry out a correct control of the achievement of the purposes of the project, was obtained feedback from the students through a survey.

First, to consolidate the use of the tutorial sessions, we asked the students to evaluate the experience of working in groups through the tutorial sessions. As we can observe in Table 1, the students are highly satisfied with this experience. Considering that the measurement scale has the value 1 as the minimum and the 5 as the maximum, we can observe over the three courses a high punctuation for all the items. It should be remarked that in the three analysed courses the results show a high predisposition of the students to work in group. This fact can be due to the benefits they achieve through this methodology (interaction with other students, more proximity to the lecturer, a more attractive learning process).

In general, the high punctuation that the students give to the evaluation of the tutorial sessions allows us to consider that students evaluate positively this methodology as a tool of learning-teaching process.

Questions	Course 2006/2007			Course 2007/2008			Course 2008/2009		
	N	Average*	Standard deviation	N	Average*	Standard deviation	N	Average*	Standard deviation
This experience has allowed me to apply the theoretical knowledge to real situations	68	3.79	0.68	129	3.87	0.79	131	3.63	0.96
This activity will be useful in my professional future	68	3.47	0.87	129	3.59	0.93	131	3.32	0.93

My predisposition to work in teams is high	68	4.07	0.86	129	3.96	0.82	131	3.95	0.96
My predisposition to work in teams is higher now than at the beginning of the course	68	3.31	1.17	129	3.52	1.05	131	3.16	1.21
This activity has helped me to know better to the rest of the partners	68	3.72	0.92	129	4.10	0.97	131	3.87	1.15
* The evaluation of the answers was done through Likert scales 1-5 points, were 1 is TOTALLY IN DISAGREEMENT and 5 TOTALLY IN AGREEMENT.									

Table 1. Evaluation of the tutorial sessions

Secondly, in order to evaluate the consolidation of the tutorial sessions as a method of learning-teaching in the practical part of the subject, we asked to the students about the contribution of the tutorial sessions to the understanding of the subject. In the three courses, we can observe that the results of the survey show that through this methodology is achieved a higher and better understanding of the theoretical concepts, as it is shown in Table 2. Because the scale has the value 1 as the minimum and the 5 as the maximum and all the items overcome the average value of 3. It is worth note that in two academic courses the most valued characteristic of the tutorial sessions has been that through this methodology is achieved a more progressive and continuous of the concepts of the subject. In the course 2007/2008 this item obtained also a high punctuation but the students valued better the fact that through this methodology is achieved a higher and better assimilation of the theoretical concepts.

Questions	Course 2006/2007			Course 2007/2008			Course 2008/2009		
	N	Average*	Standard deviation	N	Average*	Standard deviation	N	Average*	Standard deviation
Through this methodology is achieved a higher and better assimilation of the theoretical concepts	68	3.79	0.68	129	3.86	0.86	131	3.59	0.97

Through this methodology is achieved a more progressive and continuous of the concepts of the subject	68	4.07	0.86	129	3.82	0.77	131	3.62	0.92
The development of the tutorial sessions has facilitated the learning process	68	3.31	1.17	129	3.69	1.00	131	3.50	0.96
* The evaluation of the answers was done through Likert scales 1-5 points, were 1 is TOTALLY IN DISAGREEMENT and 5 TOTALLY IN AGREEMENT.									

Table 2. Contribution of the tutorial sessions to the understanding of the subject

We also asked the students to evaluate the contribution of the tutorial sessions to the interaction with the lecturers. As we can observe in Table 3, in the three analysed courses the results show that the use of tutorial sessions actually favours in a great measure the interaction between student-lecturer. It also favours the change in the role of the lecturer and promotes a learning process more active and participative. Over the three years, the students coincide pointing that the most important contribution of tutorial sessions is the fact that they favour the exchange of ideas with the lecturers.

Questions	Course 2006/2007			Course 2007/2008			Course 2008/2009		
	N	Average*	Standard deviation	N	Average*	Standard deviation	N	Average*	Standard deviation
The tutorial sessions favour the exchange of ideas with the lecturers	68	3.97	0.75	129	3.80	1.03	131	3.95	0.89
This methodology has helped me to know better the lecturers	68	3.84	0.85	129	3.61	1.08	131	3.69	1.09

I have perceived a change in the role of the lecturer in the learning-teaching process thanks to these sessions	68	3.75	0.83	129	3.51	0.99	131	3.41	0.90
The role of the lecturers in these sessions is the that of guiding to the student in the learning process	68	3.93	0.69	129	3.70	0.93	131	3.51	0.91
The role of the lecturer in these sessions is that of transmitter of knowledge	68	3.53	0.83	129	3.32	1.02	131	3.26	1.04
* The evaluation of the answers was done through Likert scales 1-5 points, were 1 is TOTALLY IN DISAGREEMENT and 5 TOTALLY IN AGREEMENT.									

Table 3. Contribution of the tutorial sessions to the interaction with the lecturers

Also with regards to the development of the methodology, but in this case to their contribution to the development of students competences, we asked also to the students about the role of tutorial sessions to develop a set of capabilities that we consider crucial for its training as a future managers. In table 4 are presented the results of the student’s evaluation of the contribution of the tutorial sessions to develop the mentioned capabilities in the academic courses analysed. As we can observe, the use of tutorial sessions helps to the students to develop capabilities so important such as to make a critic reasoning, recognize and manage diversity, take joint decisions and/or defend their own ideas, among others. It is remarkably the fact that the students of two courses (2006/2007 and 2008/2009) coincide in the fact that the most important contribution of the tutorial sessions have been to help them to learn to respect others opinion.

Questions	Course 2006/2007			Course 2007/2008			Course 2008/2009		
	N	Average*	Standard deviation	N	Average*	Standard deviation	N	Average*	Standard deviation
Capability to make diagnosis	68	3.49	0.58	129	3.66	0.76	131	3.26	0.96
Positive attitude for the change and innovation	68	3.68	0.76	129	3.70	0.76	131	3.37	0.84

Capability of analysis and synthesize	68	3.78	0.74	129	3.83	0.80	131	3.55	0.77
Capability to organize and plan	68	3.99	0.80	129	3.64	0.83	131	3.58	0.78
Written communication and realization of projects	68	3.94	0.80	129	3.45	0.94	131	3.84	0.79
Computing knowledge applied to the business study	68	3.26	0.96	129	3.64	0.77	131	3.74	0.85
Information management	68	3.55	0.89	129	3.42	0.91	131	3.32	1.02
Ability to talk in public	68	3.49	1.09	129	3.51	0.84	131	3.47	0.85
Problems resolutions	68	3.46	0.91	129	3.81	0.81	131	3.34	0.90
Joint decision take	68	3.96	0.70	129	3.80	0.79	131	3.82	0.80
To identify and search information	68	3.97	0.79	129	3.62	0.77	131	3.88	0.85
Conflicts resolution	68	3.54	0.86	129	3.78	0.91	131	3.45	0.81
Development of interpersonal abilities	68	3.68	0.93	129	3.46	0.94	131	3.58	0.95
To recognize the diversity and multiculturalism	68	3.35	0.98	129	3.85	0.86	131	3.40	1.01
Respect others opinion	68	4.03	0.82	129	3.68	0.81	131	4.03	0.95
Critic reasoning	68	3.93	0.67	129	3.94	0.80	131	3.76	0.90
To expose and defend the own ideas	68	3.93	0.83	129	3.72	0.83	131	3.89	0.81
To detect the own strengths and weaknesses	68	3.79	0.93	129	3.54	0.82	131	3.77	0.80
Autonomous learning	68	3.49	1.02	129	3.51	0.84	131	3.58	0.94
Leadership	68	3.54	0.90	129	3.46	0.94	131	3.63	0.82
* The evaluation of the answers was done through Likert scales 1-5 points, were 1 is TOTALLY IN DISAGREEMENT and 5 TOTALLY IN AGREEMENT.									

Table 4. Contribution of the practical part of the subject to the development of the next capabilities

Therefore, we have observed that the use of these sessions makes that the students get a better understanding of the subject and a nearer relationship with the lecturers and it also favours the development of important managerial capabilities that will be crucial for its professional future.

Finally, to check if the use of tutorial sessions enables us to obtain more satisfied students and students more motivated and interested in the subject we have obtained also their general opinion over the three academic courses through a yes/no question.

With regard to the satisfaction of the students with the use of tutorial sessions, as it can be observed in the Figure 1, students are highly satisfied with the use of this methodology. Figure 2 shows the percentage of satisfied and dissatisfied students. It is worrying the fact that the percentage of students dissatisfied with the use of tutorial sessions has increased in the second year. Nevertheless, the percentage of students with satisfied increases in the last year, but it does not reach the level of the first year of application. Although the percentage of students not satisfied with the tutorial sessions is marginal, it should be considered in future years and it is necessary to think about the possible problems that these students may have had.

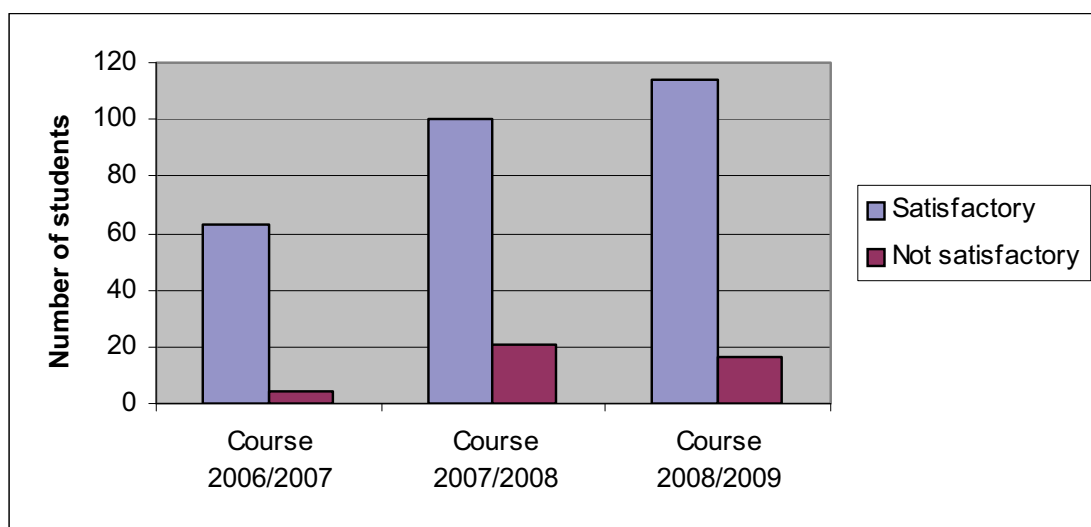


Fig. 1. General evaluation of the student's satisfaction with the tutorial sessions

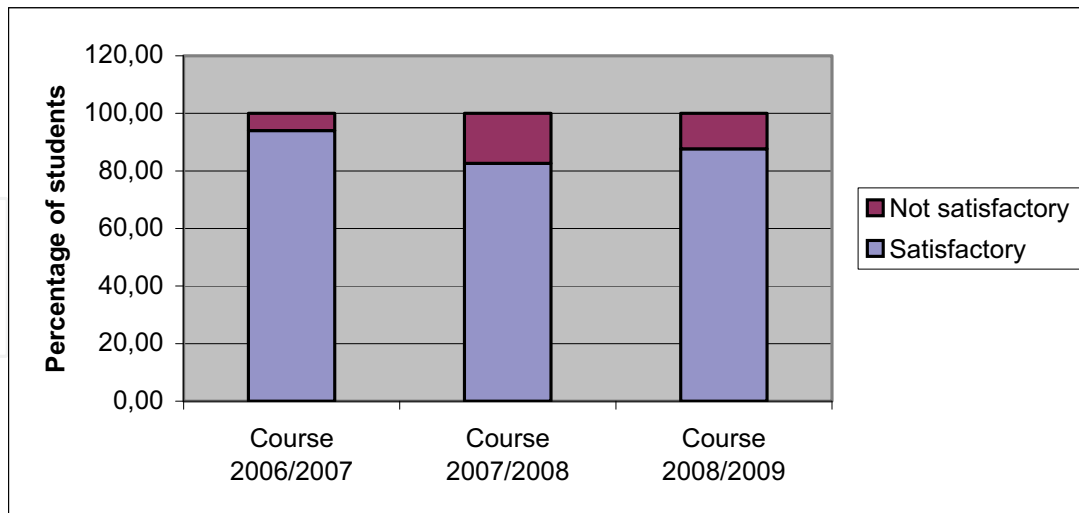


Fig. 2. Percentage of students in each academic year with their evaluation of their satisfaction with the tutorial sessions

5. Conclusion

The analysis of the data presented in this paper shows that the results of the projects carried out over the academic courses 2006/2007, 2007/2008 and 2008/2009 are highly satisfying. We have overcome all the expected results. The students have a high degree of satisfaction with the development of the subject and the use of tutorial sessions has allowed them to apply better the theoretical concepts to a real case, and they consider also that the use of tutorial sessions help them to understand better the subject. Furthermore, the close interaction among students and lecturers necessary to develop satisfactorily the tutorial sessions favours the creation of a valuable relationship between them that favours the exchange of ideas and has a positive effect in the learning process. The use of tutorial sessions also favours the development of some capabilities extremely valuable for its professional future such as the ability to have a critic point of view and to understand and cope with different points of view. All these facts put together have had as a result students interested in the subject and satisfied with the tutorial sessions. In general terms, the main result of these projects after three years applying them has been to obtain a more satisfied students with the learning process, students with a greater motivation and interest for the subject and with a stronger knowledge in strategic management. This practice-oriented methodology allows the creation of an environment of learning where students develop they learning through a social and constructivist approach, since through the interaction with their partners and with the teacher allow them to a develop their learning process.

As challenge for futures years, we should mention the necessity to reflect on the use of tutorial sessions given the fact of a decreasing rate in the level of satisfaction with them. Although the percentage of dissatisfied students is marginal and the rate of satisfied students surrounds all the years the 90%, we consider important to think about the reasons that have lead to dissatisfy a few students. Furthermore, we pretend to introduce other activities to bring nearer the necessary competencies to perform their future professional

activity as well as new activities that provide to the students a better understanding of the business literature.

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