

## Exploring innovative and creative ways of teaching

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### Abstract

With the intention of providing a starting point to reflect on both aspects in which the subject Teaching Innovation and Introduction to Educational Research in Arts of the master's degree in Teaching in Secondary School breaks up and merges, we created a situation, understood as a learning environment, that seeks to show us how we react before a situation different from the expected one. For this reason, we played with the idea of a classroom in construction, something that still has to be finished off. We created confusion and surprise, but slowly a discussion started. And from the reflections raised, the exchange of opinions and relating the assignment to other subjects of the master's degree, in particular with Learning and Teaching of Art, we began to go more deeply into the meaning of various concepts related to teaching and research by means of projects carried out in groups and from different approaches. The purpose was to offer a space to experience through action, to get to know our previous ideas and how to approach the different research paradigms.

### Keywords

Innovation; teaching; projects; reflection; action; research



## 1. Introduction

As from the academic year 2009/2010 the new postgraduate degree in Teacher Training in Compulsory Secondary Education and Post-Compulsory Schooling, Vocational Training and Language Teaching begins in Spain. Its main aim is to “offer future teachers the pedagogical and didactic training required by the current regulations”<sup>1</sup>. To end these studies -students must have a Bachelor’s degree to be able to take this course- students must present a final master’s dissertation which can be considered as “an academic work that summarises all the competences developed during the Master’s degree and in which all the learning training modules take part –specially the Practicum- and as a research related to teacher practices in the corresponding specialization”<sup>2</sup>. In the subject *Teaching Innovation and Introduction to Educational Research in Arts* we address the different research paradigms and we expect the students to get to know the necessary tools to become teachers-artists-researchers. In many cases, it is the first contact that they have with educational research. Students have different backgrounds, they come from the Faculty of Fine Arts, Architecture, Art History or the Music Conservatoires. In relation to students with a musical background, we notice that, except for some specialisations such as Musicology or Music Pedagogy, there doesn’t exist a research tradition or the need to submit written papers during their studies. For this reason, as from the academic year 2011/12 we included in the programme of the subject as a compulsory requirement that students take the *Informational Competences Course* offered by the General Library of the University. In this course different themes necessary to achieve any written paper are dealt with such as the tracing of information in the Internet, bibliography search, search engines and databases, how to quote, APA or CIDE rules and some electronic resources (Google Docs, Blogs, Wikis, etc.). In this way, the formal aspects of the written works

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<sup>1</sup> Subject’s programme: [http://www.usc.es/es/centros/cc\\_educacion/materia.html?materia=76701&ano=64](http://www.usc.es/es/centros/cc_educacion/materia.html?materia=76701&ano=64)

<sup>2</sup> Subject’s programme: [http://www.usc.es/es/centros/cc\\_educacion/materia.html?materia=76701&ano=64](http://www.usc.es/es/centros/cc_educacion/materia.html?materia=76701&ano=64)

that are required during the postgraduate degree, specially the final master's dissertation, are covered.

## 2. The theoretical background

The reasons which took us to begin this subject with a performance-related experience have their roots in a series of schools of thought that come in their origin from the philosophy coined by John Dewey (1859-1952). We pretended to create a situation that contributed to the breaking-up of the precepts that *a priori* our students have because, in our point of view, for future teachers most important of all is reflection directed to drawing up questions such as: what type of teacher do I want to be? What relationships do I want to establish in my classroom? What kind of learning will I propose to my students? Etc.

The attitude with which students come into a classroom is, very often, an attitude of wait, a passive attitude. They come in waiting to receive, accustomed to the active role of teachers. Their mission usually is to listen to what they are told in an oral way. The fact of finding an upset classroom aims to surprise and confront our students with a different situation that leads to changing the attitudes they normally adopt: come in, look for a seat, sit down, wait, listen, look at the whiteboard, answer if they are asked, etc. We wanted to initiate them, as future teachers, into a different dynamic that receives nourishment from surprise and that is the creator of enriching experiences through reflection. As Villar Angulo (1994) states based on his study of Dewey and Goodman, reflection starts from an initial point of uncertainty, doubt or perplexity, looking for the solving of curricular problems or the search for materials that can help solve the matter. In this sense, we can talk of an *intuitive thinking* of teachers that directs their personal and particular conceptions to the resolution of an aim, which in our case is a possible contribution to the qualitative improvement of Arts Education in Secondary School.

Dewey (1949, 1971) understood education as an anthropological-social process by which man develops, in interaction with others, through the reflective action of cultural experiences. The basis of his educational position rests on two basic pillars: the meaningful experience and the experimental verification. Being more specific, in his classic work *How we think* (1910) Dewey argues that, before a situation that entails a difficulty, people can adopt three possible positions: avoid it, imagine that one can control it and, lastly, really deal with the situation. If one adopts this last solution, one normally begins to reflect.

Nevertheless, in spite of all the time that has passed since the statement of these ideas, already beginning the second decade of the XXI Century, we find that the revolution that was expected in education during the last Century has yet to come. We are a lot of teachers that believe that education is at a standstill and continues in a paradigm that should already have been overcome. Teachers such as us, who work in the initial training of future teachers, have the responsibility of addressing teacher practices that aim at the improvement of education in this Century. Many are the authors (Acaso, 2013; Agra, 2005) that pursue the creation of a new model, of innovative practices that contribute to the germ of a new didactic approach. As María Acaso (2012) points out, when a teacher decides to open the door of his/her classroom he/she is already establishing small changes, *invisible pedagogies* that have the power to transform habits and attitudes far from negligible.

Whilst everything is in transformation, the educational world stays the same, anchorage; María Acaso (2013) invites us to start the *rEDUvolution*. Combining the words *revolution* and *evolution* she encourages us to carry out a real transformation of the educational spaces and she does this by proposing a road map that comprises several phases:

- To accept that what we expect to teach is not what students learn.
- To walk towards a change in power relationships.
- To live the classroom, occupying it.

- To move from appearance towards experience.
- To give priority to research and not to evaluation.

The final part of the experience belongs to a collaborative type of work in which activities were proposed to be resolved in groups integrated by students with different backgrounds (Faculty of Fine Arts, Design, Music Conservatoire, Architecture, Communication, etc.); students had to develop their own ideas and organize them around a common theme (from different perspectives) to achieve, at the end of the assignment, the union of all these parts as a whole. All things considered, with this experience, and taking into account the contributions of the A/R/tography, we aim to transform knowledge through action by means of reflection and continuous analysis that allows us to comprehend the process and meanings (Irwin and Springgay, 2008).

### **3. The experience: The process' beginning**

As a starting point strategy of this subject, we created a situation to observe the reaction of students when entering our classroom before a situation different from the expected one. For this reason, we played with the idea of something in construction: tables badly placed, chairs on tables, white paper covering chairs, tables and parts of the classroom... And in this setting some videos were projected that, in some cases, talked about classrooms of the past (different furniture, different arrangements, yesterday's resources...) and, on the other hand, classrooms of the present (more open, with contemporary furniture, modern technological resources...). What meeting points exist? What were the differences? One video projected diverse musical experiences, another talked about different artistic experiences, collaborative and interdisciplinary. And all this in an atmosphere that made use of darkness and surprise. This situation, understood as a learning environment, hoped to promote reflection about what we lived, about what we experienced and about our own personal history.

Well then, before this strategy students stayed without a reaction, still, in a waiting attitude, in silence, watching the videos, looking between the tables for somewhere to sit down... What does this attitude mean? What do they think? Is it that as students we always wait for someone to tell us what we must do? They were confused, surprised, without knowing what to do and that worried them. We must, as future teachers, with the aim of changing the things that we don't like, reflect about them and discuss them.

#### **4. Following sessions**

A game was suggested: draw a teacher and draw a classroom. What ideas come to our head? What comes up? How do we represent it, how do we visualise it?

The initial purpose was to get to know the previous ideas with which we face these concepts, and discover our own preconceptions and prejudices. A series of drawings were done about these aspects, using quick and spontaneous sketches that, afterwards, were commented on by all of us.

In this game, broadly speaking, more negative than positive aspects emerged. The first, always associated with the teaching staff or their own institution. And the second ones, related to the coexistence with other youngsters. In the first group, with relation to the perception students have with the teaching staff, undesirable features in teachers were highlighted, such as: coldness in their behaviour, strictness and inflexibility in their attitudes, absence of understanding students' points of view, the confirmation of non fluent communication, etc. The adjectives used when talking about them were very clarifying: students focused on features that pointed at an unfavourable perception of the activity. Thus, although in some cases the infinite patience of some teachers was stressed, in general teachers' monotony, couldn't-care-less attitude, their tendency to give lectures and discursive classes and their easy annoyance, stress, boredom, etc. was highlighted. They even mentioned what seemed, at a first glance, as unconnected features with the activity emphasizing the fact that some teachers walk about the classroom with a stoop or

that they often use similar clothes, as in uniform, perhaps wanting to outline the rigidity of their behaviour that also affects the way they present themselves to others. These negative opinions extended, as well, to physical spaces, that were described as ugly places, without personality and aesthetics. With regards to the positive opinions, as we mentioned before, the students related them to friendship in the classroom mentioning various key ideas related to youth, opportunities, entertainment and the need of new challenges.

The game, at first intended only for the students of the subject, grew and they saw the need to know what other students of the postgraduate degree thought, students from other modules and with an initial training in Biology, History, Chemistry, Languages, etc.

To progress in this knowledge, an artistic intervention was proposed in the lobby of the Faculty; it is a busy hall: as an entrance, as an exit, as a place to walk through when going to a classroom... A structure is constructed that invites students to leave their thoughts, their opinions, they are invited to write or draw on a post-it.

The ephemeral installation *What do you think of secondary teachers? How do you see the secondary classroom?* is placed during three days in the hallway and afterwards it is removed so as to gather all the data. This action is open to anyone who wishes to take part and, in consequence, not only students leave their reflections but teaching staff also take part leaving comments about the art installation.

During the following classes students received information about different issues related to innovation and research by means of conferences with various professionals. We thought it would be also very interesting to interview teachers on active service so that they could offer us their point of view. We asked students to interview different teachers. In groups they had to design a protocol for the interviews. An adviser from the *Training and Resources Centre of La Coruña* came one session and shared with us the life-long training for teachers and the different programmes and innovation projects promoted by the Xunta de Galicia (Proxecta Plan, Abalar Project, contract-programme, etc.). During

his presentation a lot of questions arose such as *What do we understand by innovation? Are all the plans/programmes that the Xunta de Galicia organizes and offers innovative?* To complete this overview we proposed students to look into the matter and, as well, we uploaded files to the virtual classroom, documents that offered more information on the subject (Agra Pardiñas, 2005; Eisner, 2004; Oriol de Alarcón, 2004). Ex-students of the postgraduate degree that are now working as secondary teachers also came to one of the sessions to share with us their experiences in the classrooms. The last training session, before commencing another group project, was an approach to research in Arts education and an approach to the process of research.

## 5. Work Group

We suggested students work in groups with the aim of going in depth and experiencing through action the different research paradigms. As the total number of students was seventeen, four groups were formed, groups that had to go in depth into the research paradigms: quantitative, qualitative, Action research and Arts-Based Research. Various texts were uploaded to the virtual classroom. Students had to look for examples of research or thesis that could help them understand in a better way the methodology they had to search for. In this way, we could treat the aspects of a same proposal from different and enriching approaches. *What problems or issues could be inquired into from these points of view?* So as to have a real basis and avoid a simple abstract exercise, the artistic intervention we mentioned before *What do you think of secondary teachers?* was used as a starting point.

### 5.1 Quantitative Paradigm

The group that worked from this paradigm took the decision to quantify the information there was of the classroom in all the Post-its that were gathered up during the Art

installation. On the basis of this information, they decided to make the object of the study all the data focused on the classrooms. The material they worked on was eighty one documents, some graphic and others written. Of these, only twelve documents clearly relate to the description of the classrooms. The principal references that students find are thoroughly quantified: references to materials: 2; existence of a platform: 1; masterly aspect of the classrooms: 3; distribution of students in twos: 1; individual tables: 5; austere furniture: 7; lack of ergonomics: 2; etc. As from the total of documents gathered (81) only in twelve references are made to the classrooms, and because the group thinks the educational space is a decisive element in education, they decided to pass a survey with 26 questions about the secondary education classrooms amongst the students of the master's degree, classrooms that had been part of their school training period.

Later on they made a series of diagrams from the results obtained when employing this methodology. There are diagrams about the profile of the interviewed, about the rural or urban location of the centres, about the type of illumination, about the comfort, about the colours used in the classrooms, about the layout of tables, etc. The result of their research is a written paper that contains references to the quantitative paradigm in the theoretical framework, followed by the presentation of the study: data analysis, graphics and statistics were related, reflections, etc.

## 5.2 Qualitative Paradigm

In relation to the group that worked from the qualitative paradigm, they decided to focus on the profile of the secondary teacher. For this reason, following the guidelines set out by different authors, they prepared an open questionnaire for secondary students and an interview with teachers in active service with the aim of obtaining data from which they could extract conclusions. To encourage youngsters and make them feel comfortable when answering the survey they focused the questions on their 'favourite teacher'.

Our students of the Master's degree knew that, with this proposal, they were following a mixed design. The data interpretation was of a qualitative nature due to the open nature of the questions asked. They also took into account the context in which the interviews were undertaken. They were also conscious of the different voices, the shades and the expressiveness present in the answers of the interviewed people.

After the analysis phase students arrived at some conclusions that we summarize as follows: the contemporary teacher possesses quite a high adaptability to the environment, uses his/her creativity when preparing his/her activities and classes and transmits confidence to his/her students. Students support the fact that teachers prepare their sessions very well, explain and resolve the doubts students have with their opinions. This circumstance clearly indicates that secondary school teachers, with regard to knowledge transfer, are responsible before their students. All the data supports the fact that students show interest in the subject of their favourite teacher, and, as well, everybody agrees that they nearly always have tasks to do. Furthermore, the contemporary teacher communicates without any serious problems of authority management with his/her students.

After finishing this research, our students in an act of great responsibility, concluded that the approach of the survey about *the favourite teacher* could have invalidated the answers because these could be influenced by the type of rapport or affective relationship that a priori they had with this teacher and that, at first, it is not comparable to other teachers. This group also presented a written document that gathered all the research that they shared with the rest of the classroom.

### 5.3 Action-Research

Another of the groups based their work on the Action-Research methodology. They also started their proposal from the profile of the secondary school teacher as seen from the students of the master's degree although, in this case, they added all the information each

one of them had written in their classroom diaries during their stay at schools (*Practicum I*). All the schools had very similar idiosyncrasies: public schools in an urban location. To limit the subject, they based the proposal on the motivation or lack of motivation that exists in the secondary school classrooms and how to deal with it.

The initial idea was to raise a series of strategies that can help improve the motivational situation in the classroom through a hypothesis of action generating a self-reflective spiral that allows, if necessary, to begin the process again. As future teachers, it worried them how to establish the dynamics to facilitate a reflective practice in their profession.

The temporary limitations of the research made it impossible for a complete implementation of the whole process: observation, planning, action and reflection (always as a spiral process). For this reason, the project, at this specific point, was not completed. It was a theoretical proposal that must be completed with the next phases of reflection, conclusion and, if necessary, the preparation of new proposals to continue the action-research process.

The part that was undertaken comprised the following actions: a) the establishment of the common problems related to motivation in secondary school classroom that could be inferred from the data collected from the diaries; b) the description and analysis of these problems to discover the possible causes; c) the construction of a theoretical framework that explains the psychological process of motivation in learning; d) the reflection about how, when and why we must motivate; and e) the preparation of a series of proposals that promote motivation in the learning process of students.

Amongst the proposals that were established we can mention that they found essential the implementation of creative activities adapted to the students' interests, because in this way it is possible to improve the teaching-learning process and, thus, keep a high level of intrinsic motivation in the classroom. They also found important the preparation of a participative and collaborative project that could help a continuous exchange of information and experiences between the teachers of the school. As a summary, the aim

was to apply the concept of teacher-researcher that reflects about his/her own practice. As happened in the other groups, a detailed paper was written in which the two paradigms, Action-Research and a case study were presented.

#### 5.4 Arts Based Research

The group that worked with this approach greatly enjoyed the experience during the development of the proposal because, due to their background in Fine Arts and Music, they felt very comfortable working with an *artistic product*.

Starting from the same initial proposal, they decided to undertake an artistic intervention in a school similar to the one they had done at the beginning of the course. The first difficulty they came across was to find a school that would allow them to use a busy location in the school grounds. The nature of the question beneath the artistic action (*How do you see your teacher?*) complicated the matter. Against all prediction, one of the members of the group obtained the authorization of a secondary school in Ferrol (A Coruña) where she had stayed during her training period (*Practicum I*).

The following phase consisted in creating an artistic device that made possible the obtaining of active answers from the secondary school students that took part in the enquiry. After some deliberations an idea arose to make a kind of ballot box covered with paintings, cinema images, music scores, CDs. It had to function as a ballot box and for this reason an opening was designed on the top of the box where students could leave their ideas and answers to the question *How do you see your teacher?* This question was arranged in big letters on top of a comic strip.

The ballot box, the sign with the question, together with some papers and pencils, were deposited on a table in the hall of the school for one week. This school is a public school located in one of the neighbourhood of the built-up area of the city. Teachers and students were told the nature of the project, and they were invited to take part in a voluntarily and

anonymous manner. The first day some photos were taken of the reaction of students when finding the ballot-box. During this time a superficial visual follow-up was undertaken from which the following data was obtained: the appearance of the installation in the hall of the school did not cause a lot of expectation and the lack of interest was most notorious; the involvement of students was very reduced, very few students took part in the proposed game and gave their opinion. All in all, during the follow-up, our students counted between 20 and 30 paper slips.

On the day arranged for the installation collection with the opinions of the teenagers our students are warned by the director that there are only 5 paper slips. This circumstance makes our students ask themselves *What has happened?* Simply that one part of the teaching staff felt attacked by the opinions of the secondary students and practised a kind of censorship, eliminating the paper slips that were not favourable to them. Although they didn't see these paper slips, according to the director, these were insults and disqualifications towards the teachers.

Amongst the conclusions that this group draw from this action after the analysis of what had happened we can mention the following:

- Why don't the students take part in a proposal of this kind? The reasons can be various, such as: they are not used to being asked their opinion; they don't think it will be possible (as it happened in part); they don't see reasons to justify their participation; even being anonymous, they are afraid of reprisals.
- It would have been understood if the teaching staff of the school had not given their approval to the artistic intervention but, once approved, it would have been responsible to have admitted the criticism with an open spirit. All teachers know that working with teenagers she/he is exposed to the fiercest criticism; these exist even if there is no feasible possibility of making them explicit. The coherent attitude is to get to know them and reflect on them: have they a real basis? Do all my students have this opinion or only a few? What can I do to improve? Etc.

- Although the project was not completed, it did reflect the existence of students that are not happy with their teachers. The image of the teacher is damaged and ignoring this is not a solution to the problem that this brief intervention has shown.
- The development of similar projects in which the students' voices can be made visible can allow a lot of information to an open teacher, ready to reflect about her/his educational practice. It can also promote a critical spirit in students, a critical spirit that goes beyond the discrediting and that favours the interpersonal relationships that take place in an educational centre.

In view of this experience, we can affirm that, despite the difficulties mentioned above regarding the implementation of the proposal, this research approach provides very interesting results. This group also wrote their reflections.

Each group worked in an autonomous way. For this reason a global presentation in the classroom was necessary so that we could all participate in the results of the research. Students were in charge of the presentations of the different paradigms and the different experiences were narrated in first person. The time spent on the different tasks went by in the classroom of the subject excepting those detailed moments mentioned before (artistic installation, questionnaires, etc.). The last week of class before the students went to the training at schools (*Practicum*), each group presented their research to the rest of the class and we uploaded them to the virtual classroom of the subject.

## 6. Final conclusions

In general, we think the experience was very positive as can be seen by the reasons we set out below:

- The methodological approach to the subject has been liberating inside a system that not always awards freedom of expression and development to students as we

can see from the following comments: “Sincerely, at first I found the subject a bit chaotic, but the fact of learning by doing has been a very satisfactory experience, and in my case, much more meaningful. To overcome the fear of liberty of proposing our own tasks, and undertaking them correctly and in a respectable way, has also improved our self-esteem” (D.V., 2012) or “...it has awakened a great interest in me, both by the tasks proposed as well as the treatment given by teachers and classmates, and I would have liked this experience to have been longer...” (D.V., 2012).

- The introduction of changes in education as the ones discussed in the theoretical background, are beneficial both for students and for teachers as observed in the case we present. Reflection, not only of students but of teachers as well, lets us confirm the importance of providing spaces of reflection and discussion.
- The approach of the subject (performance-related activities, reflection spaces, opportunity to express oneself, undertaking of research) allows us to confirm that our students, as future teachers, would not like to reproduce the teachers’ image they keep in their memory. Thus, the fact of reflecting on the secondary school teachers’ figure helps them make up the teacher they would like to be.
- The practical approach to the subject, with the direct participation of students in the construction of ideas and the undertaking of research, promoted the motivation of the students of the master’s degree who expected lectures.
- The use of artistic strategies, such as the intervention in the hall of the Faculty or the situation created at the beginning of the subject, predisposes students to work in a relaxed, cooperative and united manner, as would be done by an artistic group who share a common goal.

- If students' voices are heard, students take a leading role in their own learning. This idea can be implemented in any subject because it breaks with school traditions and routine.

Finally we would like to thank all our students of the subject Teaching Innovation and Introduction to Educational Research in Arts during the academic year 2012/2013 that made this experience possible. And our special thanks to our colleague M.J.Agra for sharing with us her ideas.

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