Observatorio de la Calidad de la Información en Televisión. A Research and Teaching Project: 'Cloud' Analysis of Contents. Collaborative and Interactive Learning

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Abstract: The *Observatorio de la Calidad de la Información en Televisión* (Observatory for the Quality of Information on Television) of the School of Media & Communications Science of the Complutense University of Madrid is a project for the innovation and enhancement of teaching quality. The project seeks to use the course titled Information on Television to forge links between research and training, between theory and practice. Using a special-purpose online platform for collaborative and interactive work, students engage in the analysis of the contents of news programs in the five nationwide TV networks active in Spain. Throughout the project, students acquire, in addition to other skills and further knowledge, academic and professional competencies around the topic of television information. Participants recognize this teaching and learning initiative as highly satisfactory and beneficial.

Keywords: Observatorio; Observatory; news programs; television; content analysis; teaching innovation project; journalism.

Introduction

It is well known that University professors devote their time to both teaching and research activities. While both compete for the professors' dedication, they also interact in positive ways. Spanish universities often suffer from a lack of integration between research projects and teaching activities, the latter favoring theory at the expense of practice. The project that we are introducing in this paper aims precisely at establishing links between research and teaching, and between theory and practice. The project stakeholders are, furthermore, convinced that there is a need for platforms for the collaboration and interaction between teachers and students. To this end, a group of professors from the Journalism II Department of the School of Media & Communications Science of the Complutense University of Madrid (UCM) has launched the *Observatorio de la Calidad de la Información en Televisión* during the 2014-2015 academic year with a twofold purpose: 1) to devise a permanent tool for the analysis of the contents of TV news programs, and 2) to develop practical training mechanisms for the Journalism Degree students taking the *Information on Television* course during their fourth year. The project is, therefore, both a research project and an educational one.

The inception of the project goes back to the second term of the 2013-2014 academic year, when initial tests were carried out with just one group of students. In view of the positive results of the pilot, the project was extended to seven groups of students (seven classes). Nine professors are involved in the *Observatorio de la Calidad de la Información en Televisión,* four of which teach the *Information on Television* course. The project was submitted to the 2014 Call for the Recognition and Funding of Projects for the Innovation and Enhancement of Teaching Quality organized by the UCM, and was rated very positively. We are currently waiting for the relevant call to establish a UCM Emerging Research Group.

Throughout the next pages we offer our educational experience with the Observatorio. In order to that first it all we review briefly the theoretical framework to stop right after in

methodological questions to develop the project. Finally we analyze the project results and from them we close our statement with conclusions.

Theoretical framework

As pointed out by M. I. Molina, "teaching and research have coexisted in education as two separate activities due to, among other reasons, the different concepts used by teachers and researchers" (2010, p. 1). As for the theory-practice dichotomy, theory and practice seem at times to shape two independent realities that manage knowledge with various degrees of significance, and seem to breed constant tension between them: they need each other, and one explains the other, but oftentimes they engage in mutual disregard, and this rupture has become one of the major sources of issues in teaching-learning processes (Álvarez, 2012).

Teaching is an interactive, reflective activity (Rajadell, 1993). It is interactive in that it guides learning, which is an educational transformation involving the three dimensions of individuals: the cognitive one (knowing), the effective one (doing) and the affective one (being). And it is reflective because teaching also implies training critical minds, in other words, 'making others think.' Departing from these premises, we decided to develop an educational project related to the teaching of televisual journalism and targeting the development of the aforementioned personal dimensions of our students: the cognitive dimension —through the acquisition of theoretical knowledge—; the effective dimension —by putting theory into practice—, and the affective dimension —by stimulating students in various ways.

Any course that sets out to provide students the required professional skills and competences (González and Wagenaar, 2003) to use the television for informative purposes needs to combine theoretical and practical approaches. Theory: the role of television as an information media in democratic societies; languages; genres and formats; and production practices, including the generation of information and the editing of programs. Practice must deal with analytical and synthetic exercises. The former, to dissect discourses and to reflect on their contents and structure. The latter, to generate information that is suitable for TV. Normally, in this project, these synthetic exercises basically materialize in the creation of a news program by groups of students, including the generation of each piece of news, and the edition and production of a complete news program. Until now, analytical exercises had been developed at the classroom level, following the different guidelines defined by each professor. The *Observatorio de la Calidad de la Información en Televisión* has provided a shared analysis model for all groups, professors and students, and a platform for collaborative and interactive work, which contribute an environment that nurtures student autonomy and accountability with regard to the learning process itself (Marín *et al.*, 2011; Torrelles *et al.*, 2012).

Methods

The project proposes the continual monitoring of the quality of information on television in Spain. To that end, a number of quality parameters were defined that, for simplification purposes, can be summarized as two: pluralism and professional treatment. Pluralism: diversity of locations, informative agents, and topics. Professional treatment: sources, balance, genres and formats, 'soft' and 'hard' information.

The driving force behind the project is a permanent technology platform for the analysis of the contents of news programs in the five nationwide TV networks active in Spain. The unit of analysis is the piece of news (format-defined information). Analysis variables are organized around the scope of information, who speaks and about whom, what is being discussed, and how (type of sources, images, rethorical treatment, balance, contextualization, fit with the TV network). The analysis was completed in two waves during fall and spring. 43 news programs were analyzed during the 2014 fall term, or 1.753 pieces of news. Results were basically quantitative. It is well known that Social Sciences quantitative research has limitations and shortcomings that need to be addressed by combining it with qualitative research. Notwithstanding this, quantitative results provide insight for the subsequent development of more specific qualitative studies based on the information collected.

We decided to allocate two students to the analysis of each news program. One of them records or downloads the appropriate program and uploads it to a video repository so that the other member of the team and the supervising professor can watch it. The two students take on the roles of analyst and supervisor in turns. One student completes the analysis of the first half of the news program and the other reviews the analysis, and vice versa for the second half of the news program. Corrections made by each reviewer are inputted in the database, so that a Coding Reliability Index can be derived in the end. A professor verifies the analysis and its compliance with the applicable protocols. The students need to complete and review their analyses within one month from the date of broadcasting of the news program.

This project is voluntary, because it calls for a level of commitment that would not be found in certain students if the project were mandatory. The students who decide not to participate in the project are assigned alternative work involving the overall analysis of news programs. This would be an individual piece of work with little interaction with their professor, apart from the usual problem-solving. On the other hand, the students who participate in the project get to experience an environment in which they collaborate and interact with students and professors from different class groups, thus nurturing cooperation strategies and skills (García *et al.*, 2001). All project participants, both students and professors, interact mostly through a specific forum that has been set up in the Virtual Campus. Students can make questions that professors resolve while they reinforce analysis criteria. In addition, as new hot topics appear, professors provide guidelines for their analysis: general categories to be used, tags and keywords. Lastly, upon conclusion of their work, students put together a report including lessons learned about the course as well as their overall project experience. Those students who sign up for the *Observatorio de la Calidad de la Información en Televisión* and successfully complete all the assignments are awarded two free elective credits.

Participants attend an initial two-hour lesson on the nature of the project, its operation, the fields of analysis, and the values of each specific variable. It must be noted that some significant components of this analysis (sources, formats, genres, treatment) relate directly to the theory that students are exposed to in the course. Coding protocols are previously defined, as in any other content analysis project. In this regard, students have access to all the necessary documents through the Virtual Campus: operations manual, analysis and review protocol, and variable categories charts. This information is also included in the database application associated to each data field that students need to fill out.

The analysis database is powered by *Xolomon*, a data management and analysis application available to UCM faculty and staff. Some research (Gil *et al.*, 2011) suggests

that the use of this type of resources in work groups can further collaborative learning. Following a preliminary pilot completed using Google Forms, the project team developed a more powerful, *Xolomon*-powered database. This database contributes the ability to assign tasks to each team, and to limit group access rights to their own tasks, thus preventing interference between difference groups. The design of the *Xolomon*-powered database was supported by Xolomon professionals. A special acknowledgement should be made of the support provided by Carmen Bravo, of the UCM Research Support Unit, to make sure that the data structure was suitable for subsequent statistical analysis. The database is hosted in the UCM servers and can be accessed by students and professors from any Internet connection. This allows professors to monitor student work, make individual or collective remarks or suggestions, and issue new guidelines as the analysis progresses.

The UCM Virtual Campus (*Moodle 2.6*) acts as a meeting point for all project participants. It is used to assign news programs, upload work documents, share preliminary data reporting and, most importantly, to channel interaction through its forum (or, at an individual level, through the Virtual Campus email or instant messenger application). The Virtual Campus is also used by students to upload their project summary report, and by professors to post the lists of students who have successfully completed each assignment and who have been granted the appropriate credits.

The *Observatorio de la Calidad de la Información en Televisión* has its own NAS (Network Attached Storage) drive, which was acquired with the funds awarded following the aforementioned Call for Recognition and Funding of Projects for the Innovation and Enhancement of Teaching Quality organized by the UCM. Following analysis, videos are stored in the NAS drive for verification and use in subsequent qualitative research projects. Lastly, data are subject to statistical analysis using IBM SPSS Statistics version 19 and SAS 9.4 software, although students are not involved in this final analysis.

Results and Discussion

By participating in the *Observatorio de la Calidad de la Información en Televisión*, students:

- dissect news programs to study their contents, observe their degree of pluralism, and understand the processes used to edit pieces of news in different formats and genres. These are fundamental competencies for their training as future television information professionals;

- input information in a database, which allows them to learn the use of these information sorting and classification tools. In addition to this, while performing these tasks, students categorize information events according to general labels. These skills are useful for information management purposes;

- get exposed for the first time to one of the most widely used research techniques in the communication field, content analysis, which they can later on harness to complete their Graduation Dissertations and during a subsequent academic career.

In their project summary reports, students rate this teaching-learning experience as being positive or very positive. Virtually all of them stress the fact that, although they are close to graduation, they had never approached TV news programs from such professional and academic perspectives. They admit to being, until now, passive spectators uneducated to appreciate content diversity, sequencing and editorial treatment. Several students are

surprised that they have not been exposed to similar exercises until now, and they acknowledge that this project has helped them to find a purpose for previously acquired knowledge. The following three quotes taken from project summaries reports are testament to these views:

"I have learned, first of all, how to put four years of theory on journalism genres into practice. This has allowed me to see what goes into creating a headline, to look for the use of the 5 W's, to tell a piece of news apart from a feature story, and to analyze what information should news anchors provide not to overlap the information provided by reporters, and vice versa. I have also learned how to structure a news program, the types of pieces of news included in them, and how they work."

"The Observatorio has allowed be to build a mental picture of the running order of a news program, of the production process behind the program, and of the elements that shape up the program."

"We get to practice everything that we have learned, thus helping us to single out our weaknesses and areas for improvement, while allowing us to see the reality behind news programs and appreciate the amount of work that goes into them. I feel it would be beneficial to develop similar projects for other course dealing with other media such as the radio or written press."

Only 3 of the project's 86 participants (from a potential participant base of 240) failed to complete their assignments, while two others left the project after the first week and were replaced.

A number of students confess their initial reservations towards group work. While some studies analyze student profiles in order to build ideal groups and improve group performance (Durán, 2006), and others issue recommendations based on different variables (Haller *et al.*, 2000), our project decided to charge professors with assembling work pairs rather randomly, instead of having students deciding who they would like to work with. In general, participants report good group coordination and a good experience in this regard too.

Based on project results, it can be said that the predefined analysis rules are clear, and that the category definitions included in the database facilitate work. The students appreciate the guidance received through the (Virtual Campus) forum, despite some complaints about people disrupting the forum operation by making personal queries (e.g., questions about lost access credentials). For some students, the project was 'enjoyable', while for others it was overly thorough.

Most complaints are related to the use of the *Xolomon* platform. Although users find it to be intuitive, they (rightfully) complain about the platform freezing every time there was a mistake while inputting dates or durations, which made it impossible to continue working on the affected record. In addition, they find it inconvenient to have to save their work before the application automatically logs them off after twenty minutes.

Conclusions

The project proves that a direct link can be successfully established between teaching and research, also along the lines of using "research as a form of teaching", to trigger students research appetite. The provision of a scenario for collaboration and interaction beyond the classroom makes practical training and skills acquisition more homogeneous and coherent (Fleury & Fleury, 2001). The students experience an instance of team work using

various technology platforms; they rate the activity very positively, and regret not having been exposed to similar opportunities earlier during their degree.

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