

DEVELOPING PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES OF STUDENTS IN A PLURILINGUAL CONTEXT

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Abstract

This paper provides a picture of the importance of the skills that every student should develop in a plurilingual context, of the satisfactions and challenges of being competent in the labor market in the era of globalization. By presenting an overview of the professional competencies for students, these theoretical approaches give an insight into how to succeed to be a good professional, how to use and develop subject knowledge and how to take charge of the continuing development as a student. Nowadays, apart from knowledge, experience, and competencies, it is important that students bring with them the interpersonal skills paired with decision-making and problem-solving skills. The cooperation between students, the different stages of development of a group of students organizing in intercultural teams, driven by one common target have distinct advantages that are necessary for developing a high-performance of professional competencies. In our society, we have to develop a deep understanding and awareness of the professional competences for students of all countries and cultures and knowledge in developing the ability to adapt to the new labor market.

Key words

labor market, higher education, competencies, pluricultural context, professional

JEL Classification: M53, Z13, I25

1. Introduction

Higher education is involved in the development of both particular competencies and overall competence. Therefore, the key elements to achieve a development of effective teaching and learning of our students are the quality of skills' students in Spain context after graduation, being potentially transferable from academic degree studies to workplaces, to advanced studies, across career sequences and to life in general. The main problem is to create in school environment a climate of learning understanding as the ability to use information after significant periods of disuse and the ability to use information to solve problems that arise in a context different (if only slightly) from the context in which the information was originally learned (Bjork, 1994, p. 187). All the competencies exist only if learning and teaching are interconnected. The students must be engage in a real context of learning in order to be able to transfer the information acquired and apply it to construct new understandings and to solve problems.

2. Teaching style and learning

On one hand, the teachers should use different teaching styles that students achieve the learning outcomes of the class session. Therefore, Nicholls

(2002, p. 10) takes into consideration the following dimensions of teaching styles :

- characteristics of student body;
- size of student group;
- learning outcomes;
- nature of knowledge to be taught;
- professional knowledge;
- extent of lecturer's pedagogic knowledge;
- environment in which teaching is to take place;
- personal preferences.

Barnes (1987) highlights three categories: closed teaching, framed teaching and negotiated teaching.

- *Closed teaching*: In this approach the lecturer is considered to be didactic and formal in his or her teaching, there will be little involvement by the students, and generally material and information is given rather than discussed or shared.
- *Framed teaching*: In this approach the lecturer is considered to provide a structure for the teaching session within which the students are able to contribute their own ideas, views and interpretations to the information being given.
- *Negotiated teaching*: In this approach the lecturer is considered to provide a teaching session where the direction of the session has to a considerable

extent been dependant on the students' ideas and contributions.

On the other hand, the learning must be meaningful. We remember the two distinctions of Ausubel's interpretation of learning, which identifies – reception vs. discovery learning and meaningful vs. rote learning. Meaningful learning has important implications for teaching for understanding. Teaching for understanding emphasises the type of change required in cognitive structure by the student during the teaching/learning process.

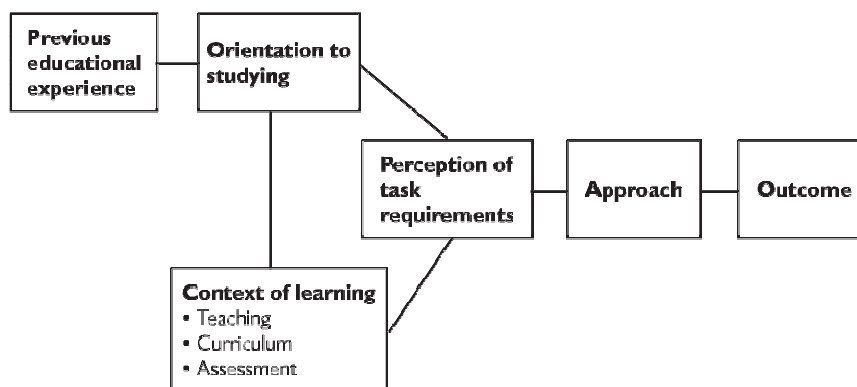
Bruner (1966) constructed a theory of instruction that put information processing by the learner at the heart of the theory. He suggested four basic elements that assist learning:

1. Learning involves a search for patterns, regularities and predictability.
2. Instruction serves to assist students in the formation and discovery of such patterns.
3. The above (2) is necessary if students' activities are transformed into symbolic rational thinking.
4. Action is the starting point for the formation of abstract symbolic thinking.

Bruner's theory gives us useful information of what learning involves, of the process of producing effective and independent learners, a process which vary from student to student. For Bruner, learning

involves the discovery of rules with the aim of enhancing and expanding the student's knowledge. The quality of the learning process is determined by the relation and interactions between teacher and student. The teaching process leads to understanding when students are involved in learning activities. Biggs (1999, p. 13) suggests that 'what people construct from a learning encounter depends on their motives and intentions, on what they know already and how they use their prior knowledge. Meaning is therefore personal'. This approach of learning of interacting with the world has a constructivist perspective. It is not a way of imparting or transmitting knowledge, but a way of facilitating students to build up structures of new knowledge relative to their pre-existing knowledge. The new knowledge depends on the information transmitted by the teachers and on how the students make sense of a particular learning assignment or activity. In order to achieve this aim, the learners must be intrinsically motivated and extrinsically motivated to learn. The motivation has clear implications for teaching sessions. The two types of motivation respond to learning that can influence student achievement. It is about how students experience and organise the subject matter or learning task; it is about 'what' and 'how' they learn, rather than how much they remember (Ramsden, 1992) (see Figures, 1, 2).

Fig. 1. Approaches to learning



Source : Ramsden, 1992

Fig. 2. Student learning in context

Study orientation	Approach	Style	Stereotypic personality	Processes	Probable outcomes
Meaning orientation	Deep active	Versatile	Integrated and balanced personality	Uses evidence critically, argues logically and interprets imaginatively	Describing, justifying and criticising what was learned. High grades with understanding

Meaning orientation	Deep passive	Comprehension learning	Impulsive introvert with a theoretical orientation	Intuitive imaginative, thriving on personal interpretation and integrative overview but neglecting evidence	Mentioning overall argument, laced with illustration and anecdote. (Fairly high grades in arts)
Reproducing orientation	Surface active	Operation learning	Converger with strong economic And vocational interests	Attention to detail, cautious and limited interpretation, syllabus bound and anxiously aware of assessment demands	Accurately describing fact and components of arguments, but not related to any clear overview
Non-academic orientation	Surface passive	Improvidence combined with globe-trotting	Social extrovert with few academic interests or vocational aspirations	Little attention to detail, over readiness to generalise, superficial treatment and casual interpretation	Mentioning often irrelevant facts within a disordered haphazard overview. (Low grades)
Strategic orientation	Deep or surface approach as necessary	Strategic	Stability and confidence combined with competitive aggressiveness	Detail or meaning as perceived to be required by lecturer	High grades, with or without understanding

Source : Ramsden, 1992

3. Strategies and learning styles

Students have particular strategies for learning and different learning styles which emphasise preference for a certain mode of learning. Wolf and Kolb (1984) describe four categories of learning style.

1. Convergent learning. This style is characterized by practical application of ideas, where the dominant learning ability is considered to be active experimentation and abstract conceptualisation.
2. Divergent learning allows the imaginative ability to be developed. The dominant learning ability is considered to be concrete experience and reflective observation.
3. Assimilative learning focuses on the creation of theoretical models and making sense of disparate observations. The dominant learning ability is considered to be abstract conceptualisation and reflective observation.
4. Accommodative learning allows students to carry out plans and tasks that involve them in new experiences. The dominant learning style is

considered to be a concrete experience and active participation.

Keefe and Ferrell (1990, p. 16) suggest that a learning style is:

A complexus of related characteristics in which the whole is greater than its parts. Learning style is a gestalt combining internal and external operations derived from the individual's neurobiology, personality and development, and reflected in learner behaviour.

Each teaching and learning class needs to be planned in such a way that maximises all potential learning styles. We have to bear in mind that not all students in the class group may adopt the style the teachers wish to put forward. Therefore, the teachers must plan teaching sessions according to student group and involve the learners in the mechanisms of the learning process.

The students develop different learning strategies and demonstrate the ability to select an appropriate learning style from a range, according to the demands of the situation and their own learning (Robotham, 1999, p. 6).

In the workplace the students must know how to express their ideas with others or how to listen carefully to their needs. If they cannot learn to work well with others, their professional success will be in jeopardy. Thus, it is important to realize that the real world is an active learning environment. Doyle (2008, p. 89) suggests that 'being able to offer one's views in clear and concise ways and listen carefully and attentively when working with others are among the most important and valued skills of any professional'. One of the most important aspects of working with others is learn how to give constructive criticism and meaningful feedback to one another. However, many students lack this skill. Doyle (2008, p. 87) presents the benefits of working with others :

- Improves students intellectually
- Stimulates interest in learning
- Increases confidence in intellectual and social abilities
- Improves understanding of group dynamics
- Helps students learn to express feelings
- Can help build assertiveness skills
- Enhances awareness of diverse views and ideas
- Exposes students to different ways of thinking
- Validation of already held ideas and beliefs

Teachers must help students to acquire this essential skill in order to be effective as a member of a group in working together to reach a goal. Therefore, if teachers will support students in this process, they will be able to take risks and learn from their mistakes.

4. Professional competences for students in the labor market

The higher education institutions have an important role in preparing students for the labour market and also be able to carry on their education throughout their lives, for their personal development and to help them to adapt to changing professional circumstances. Nowadays, after graduation, students need to insert in the labor market and be able to practice their profession. We are asking if there are some conflict between curricular validity, job requirements and the dynamics of changing labor markets in a globalized world.

- What does the relationship between competencies and educational credentials look like?

- Which competencies are decisive for educational and labor market success? To what extent do labor market outcomes depend on acquired competencies, credentials, social origins, social and cultural capital and personality traits?

Van der Velden (2013, pp. 212-213) had identified five relevant areas of competence for graduates: professional expertise; functional flexibility; innovation and knowledge management; mobilization of human resources; and international experience.

Items per area of competence

Professional expertise

Mastery of one's own field or discipline
Analytical thinking
Ability to assert authority

Functional flexibility

Knowledge of other fields or disciplines
Ability to acquire new knowledge rapidly
Ability to negotiate effectively

Innovation and knowledge management

Ability to use computers and the Internet
Ability to generate new ideas and solutions
Willingness to question one's own and others' ideas
Alertness to new opportunities

Mobilization of human resources

Ability to perform well under pressure
Ability to use time efficiently
Ability to work productively with others
Ability to mobilize the capacities of others
Ability to make one's meaning clear to others
Ability to coordinate activities

International orientation

Graduates are expected to have strong competencies in all areas of generic skills. However, it seems that the competency of *international orientation* is very important in the world in which graduates are working. In a plurilingual context such Valencia (Spain), students must have a good command of two languages Valencian and Spanish and other languages, but also understand and

empathize with other cultures and reflect on the limitations of one's own culture.

5. Conclusions

In this paper we gave a description and overview of the role and implications of the students and teachers with respect to teaching, learning, strategies and learning styles. We examined also the role of professional competences for students in the labor market. Higher education concentrates on teaching and learning. The main premise is that professional

development of every student is closely allied to the learning cycle.

Students, especially students in a pluricultural context have their own identities, learning styles and approaches to learning. Planning and preparing teaching and learning environments that complement such diversity are a constant challenge to the teacher in higher education. The graduate students should be able to develop generic competencies and acquire different types of knowledge in order to ensure their social inclusion in the labor market.

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