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**DIDACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR AN E-LEARNING COURSE** : **“Group Work with Youth”**

The Collins Dictionary (2018) defines didactics as “the art or science of teaching”. Thus, it makes reference to the choices teachers make in order to promote learning for students. In this paper, the focus will be in the didactical considerations for developing the e-learning course “Group Work with Youth”.

This 8 ECTS credits course is destined for professionals who have experience or are currently working with adolescents and young people considered at risk of social exclusion. It is an on-line course that integrates theory and practice elements in order to increase reflection for improving intervention and group work processes.

Before starting, the general pedagogical approach will be described making reference to the influence of the profession´s values. Then, two main frameworks for didactical choices will be exposed: The Didactical Model of Relations (Hole, Larsen & Hoem 2010). and the Salmon´s Five Stage Model (Johnson 2017). Examples of the actual course will be destined to illustrate these approaches.

*Considerations on learning and teaching: the steering wheel of the curriculum*

Zizec, a very popular philosopher among young people, uses a joke related to the “ideology of toilets”[[1]](#footnote-1) in the different countries to explain that everything humans do has an ideology behind it. Nordkvelle & Olson (2005), based on the ideas of Dewey, states that pedagogy, as well as everything human beings do, is strongly linked to ethics: moral decisions must be made continuously when teaching.

Thus, the manner teachers plan their lessons, the material that is used, the technology involved, the activities proposed, the communication patterns developed and all the decisions made are mediated by the manner the human being and the pedagogical experience are considered. In Social Work courses, the ethical component plays an even more important role: students will face moral debates really often in their daily practice and they will have to base their intervention on values that constitute the ethics of the profession. (Banks, in Adams, Dominelli & Payne 2009).

Thus, even more than in other subjects, it is important to reflect about the manner we consider the teaching and learning experience because it will determine the general characteristics of the course. Besides, the coherence with the theoretical approach for group facilitation is also mandatory.

In this course, the well-known pedagogical approach called constructivism was the base of the curriculum. This approach can be understood as a combination of mental processes of the individual as well as social activities. Knowledge acquisition is a construction individuals make in relation to the environment. Biggs (1999) states that constructivism does not have the goal of changing the person but improving the manner they learn.

In that line, the didactical choices done in the course had the goal of improving the learning experience, so students can reach a higher order thinking knowledge. This theoretical framework allows and encourages a higher order of thinking, making connections to previous knowledge and experiences, encouraging reflection, peer interaction and active learning (Hussain 2012), which is especially relevant for professionals who have the goal of improving standards of practice. Besides, as constructivism promotes interaction and self-reflection, it is in accordance with on line teaching. (Bentley, Secret & Cummings, 2015).

*Theoretical frameworks: a guidance for coherence*

There are two frameworks that were used as a guide to structure and develop the course. The first one is the ¨Didactical model of relations¨, also called the Norwegian Diamond (Hole, Larsen & Hoem 2010). This model is not intended for on line teaching, but helps to integrate and relate the most important elements of the pedagogical experience. Thus, it will be complemented by the Salmon´s five stage model (Johnson 2017) which aims for the integration of the technological aspects.

In the following chart (Fig. 1), the main aspects of each element of the Norwegian diamond are specified. It can be seen that all elements are interrelated and influence each other, affecting the overall learning experience.

Planning a group work projects with adolescents

AIM

**Figure 1. Didactical model for on-line course Social Group Work with Youth**

Based on the Didactical Model of Relations (Hole, Larsen & Hoem 2010)

ASSESSMENT

CONTENT

-Adolescent´s perceptions and developmental needs

-Group work planning process

-Stages of group development

-roles

-skills

METHODS

-Active learning

-Self reflection

-Collaborative methodologies

-Socio economic characteristics of the participants

-Institutional and social context

EXTERNAL CONDITIONS

PARTICIPANT´S KNOWLEDGE

-Attention to previous and current experience

-Theoretical, practical and attitudinal

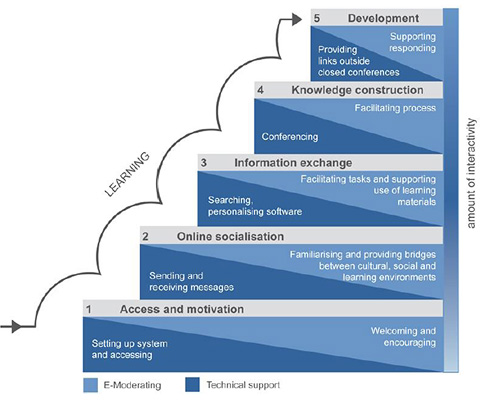
-Emphasis on peer assessment and interaction

-Self reflection

-Formative

ASSESSMENT

The Salmon´s five stage model (Johnson 2017) functions as a tool for helping students to get confidence and skills in the on line environment. In the Fig. 2, the structure of the model is outlined.



**Figure 2. Framework for planning and implementing technological elements of the course**

Salmon´s five stage model (Johnson 2017)

In the following paragraphs the specific didactical choices for the course will be addressed considering both models. In order to organise the information three crucial components of the constructivist theories will be revised: the teacher, social and cognitive presence in the learning process (Bentley, Secret & Cummings 2015)

*Teacher´s role in the e-learning course*

Even though a student centered approach is followed, it is the teacher´s duty to structure and implement processes for enhance learning. Thus, there should be a coherence among the elements exposed in the diamond. For example, as the aim of the course is to create a plan for a group intervention for youth, the contents, activities and assessment must be coherent with the hands on approach. Thus, the tasks proposed promotes higher order thinking processes such as analyzing materials, comparing theories and approaches, establishing relationships or trying to address the complexity of the intervention processes.

In the same line, the assessment will be formative, with a focus on the learning process and group development, the same as it is considered in group work.

The main principle for the teacher´s role in the course has to do with the theoretical framework: the professor will be a facilitator of the learning experience, having a stronger presence and support at the beginning to encourage more independent and effective learning processes through the course. This aspect is especially relevant in on-line courses, where technological aspects can be an obstacle for learning. Being available can help with the sometimes frustrating access to on-line platforms and materials (Larsen, Sanders, Arias Astray & Hole, 2008).

It is important to mention that in group work theory, the role of the group facilitator is considered in a similar manner: the goal is that participants take a more active role while the group processes emerge ( Brandler & Roman, 2015).

The participants of the course will be full time group workers, with a workload that generally exceeds the regular hours. Thus, the course assignments and activities intend to find a balance between structure and flexibility. For that reason, the course is longer than usual for the credits (8) that can be gained.

At the same time, the contents must prove to be useful for their daily work with adolescents. The intention is that participants can take advantage of their practice by making connections with the theoretical content and the practical experience of other members of the course. This leads us to the next element: the social presence.

*Social presence in a virtual environment*

Social presence can be defined as “the extent to which persons are perceived to be real and are available to be authentically known and truly connected to others in mediated communication” (Bentley, Secret & Cummings 2015, p. 494). According to the same authors, social presence is crucial for online social work course, because it can determine the learning experience.

In the same sense, the social aspect of learning highlighted by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000) is considered as an enhancement of the learning process. Social interactions can make learning richer and more relevant. Thus, promoting this interaction in formal and informal parts of the course will be a fundamental element in the planning process. As the Salmon´s model suggest, the socialization aspect of the course is a fundamental element to promote collaborative learning processes.

Though it might sound obvious, in social work, the relationships with people are considered fundamental for any process of change, so they must be considered in social work courses (Carey, 2016). At the same time, the fundamental aspect of self-determination is relevant as well. Thus, the set of tasks and activities promote interrelation in formal and informal tasks allowing room for personal decisions. For example, some activities will require collaboration while others will leave room for the students to choose the degree of involvement and interaction with other participants. A methodology that promotes interaction, the exchange of good practices and tips, the joint problem solving and the collaboration with other professionals can be pertinent for the discipline requirements. (Bentley, Secret & Cummings 2015)

*Increasing knowledge: a cognitive complex process*

Cognitive presence describes how students are led to deeper and higher levels of learning through strategies that help them to construct knowledge. The object of the course, group intervention with adolescents, is a very complex topic with different levels of analysis and relationships. (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer 2000)

In this virtual environment, the facilitator must promote cognitive processes to reach the goals so the concept of scaffolding, very present in the pedagogical literature and mentioned by Johnson (2017) becomes central. The tutor´s role is that of an enabler: he/she supports the learning process giving the protagonist role to the student and enabling more complex levels of thinking.

Assessment is a crucial element in the course development and has a strong relationship with learning outcomes. However, according to the theoretical framework and the models exposed in this paper, it cannot be considered as a simply check for content acquisition. Assessment is also a part of the learning experience, an opportunity for participation and exchanges with other students (Boud & Molloy´s 2013). It also must be realistic with the expectations of the course and the workload for both teachers and students because it influences the predisposition for participating in a determined course (Bezuidenhout, 2015).

Biggs (1999) considers that the manner students structure and organise the content of the course constitutes the real learning experience and that there are some requisites for a conceptual change to occur:

1. The aim of the course and what is expected from students must be clearly explicit to them. At the beginning, a clear presentation and clarification of the expected outcomes, aims for the course, assessment and the amount of workload will be detailed in the simplest manner, so students have the opportunity to know what is expected from them.
2. The structure and content of the course must promote motivation. Students must experience that what they are learning is useful. Tasks, triggers, lectures and readings have the objective of being attractive and interesting for students. At the same time, a great deal of involvement and participation is required, promoting a sense of belonging that encourage active participation.
3. Students must feel that they are not tested all the time but that the main objective is to promote learning. In this case, that aspect is especially relevant because professionals have a practice background that must be acknowledged. Thus assessment is not intended to check the memory of the students but their ability to reflect and think critically.
4. Dialogue and collaborative activities with teachers and peers are crucial to promote higher order thinking, contrast and compare ideas and reflect upon daily practice conflicts.

In this paper, the didactical choices for an e-pedagogy course have been outlined. First, especial consideration has been made regarding constructivism as the main pedagogical approach to guide course design and teaching. Then, two frameworks were presented: the Didactical Model of Relations to address the pedagogical components and The Salmon´s Five Stage Model to address the technological and virtual issues.

To conclude, it is important to highlight the necessity of being conscious of the pedagogical approach adopted in order to be coherent with the courses aims and methods. In this specific course, the pedagogical approach also had to be aligned with the intervention approach for group work. Course design is a complex activity that also requires a great deal of responsibility.

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