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## **Quality of teaching-learning processes in education: three case studies**

### **Qualità nei processi educativi: tre studi di caso**

di

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#### **Abstract:**

Through 3 different case studies, this article reflects on past experiences of teaching and on different interpretations of the meaning of the word evaluation in today's changing educational sphere. Here, evaluation comes to comprise the entire experience in the classroom, from the abilities acquired by the students to the teaching and preparation of the teacher, to the way the teacher relates to the students and interacts with their contribution. Evaluation is also seen as a moment of self-reflection by the teacher on his/her own abilities and on how the interaction with the students contributes to his/her own personal and professional growth.

**Keywords:** Quality of teaching-learning processes in education, Evaluation of learning, Equity issues, Teacher evaluation.

#### **Abstract:**

Attraverso tre esempi diversi questo articolo riflette su passate esperienze di insegnamento e su possibili interpretazioni del significato della parola valutazione nel mondo dell'insegnamento

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contemporaneo. Qui la valutazione viene vista come l'intera esperienza in classe: dalle competenze acquisite dagli studenti, alla qualità dell'insegnamento impartito e alla preparazione dell'insegnante, fino al modo in cui l'insegnante si rapporta con gli studenti, a come valuta ed interagisce con il loro contributo. Valutazione viene invece vista anche come un momento di autoriflessione dell'insegnante sulle proprie competenze ed abilità e su come l'interazione con gli studenti contribuisca alla propria crescita personale e professionale.

**Parole chiave:** Qualità nei processi educativi, Valutazione dell'insegnamento ed apprendimento, Uguaglianze in ambito educativo, Valutazione dell'insegnamento.

Evaluation in teaching has traditionally been seen as a moment of verification of the competences acquired during a formative process. Yet, traditionally, assessment has been a passive rather than active process, allowing the teacher to verify the competences acquired by the students and to adjust his or her teaching accordingly. However, today evaluation must be understood not just as a moment of verification of the students' learning, but also of the teaching process, of the choice of the learning material, of the methodologies of teaching, of the quality of the interaction with the students and their response to the learning process. Evaluation as a global approach to the experience in the classroom where is not only the student to be tested, but also the competences and the level of interaction offered by the teacher. Ultimately, these affect the quality of the student's experience in education and in turn his or her own response to the educational process. The teaching described and analysed in this article is therefore understood as a bidirectional exercise where it is the nature of the interaction created with the students that determines and influences the way the teaching, and thus the learning experience, develops in the classroom.

This article represents a reflection on an experience of teaching languages and history at higher education level in a UK university and describes efforts to understand how to best turn a verification process into a formative and positive moment. In order to do so, it presents three different case studies which focus on different aspects of the evaluation in and of teaching.

### **1. Case study 1, history teaching**

The seminar *Collecting for the Nation, A History of Museum Formation*, offered for a 3 years period at University College London, was based on the concept of the 'connected curriculum' which used resources across the college and beyond. UCL Special Collections is a repository of rare books and manuscripts internal to the college. It allows to order primary sources and hold a class in the Special Collection Room so that students can have the opportunity to see, in person, rare books and publications often theoretically studied in history books. It was felt that it would be a highly educational experience to show students the original texts on which their studies were based, and thus a session of this module used the rare books described in the reading list for the module.

Students visited a number of other UCL sites beyond the Special Collections: the UCL Arts Museum, the Petrie Museum, and were taken to a number of different museums to develop an understanding of different typologies of museum and their function: the British Museum, the Victoria & Albert Museum, the John Soane Museum, they had specialists speakers from the art world, were exposed to the latest development in the field of museum ethics and legislation, and had hands on experience in museums with curators and objects.

This module aimed to give them an historical background on the formation of museums and the tools to understand the problematic ethical issues that stem from the way museum collections were built from the late eighteen up to the twentieth century. At the time (2018), the UK was discussing the ratification of the 1954 Hague Convention on Cultural Heritage, and thus the study of current legislation, as well as of press coverage of this and other related contemporary topics, were integral to the learning, along with the more traditional textbooks and publications. This was a course that was meant to make them understand how the actions of the past result in the way the present is organized, and the connections between past actions and present problems. To encourage higher-order thinking and to stimulate more critical reflection on how historical issues related to contemporary problems, the teaching adopted a flipped learning approach, for which participation and individual insight were crucial. The flipped learning includes: 'mandatory pre-class learning of new material followed by in-depth explanation, practice, and productive use of knowledge in class through active learning techniques, where class attendance is mandatory' (He, 2016) to promote student-led engagement. Each session therefore, promoted dialogue with the students (Pilsworth, 2018), drawing upon research-led approaches (Zamorski, 2002). The teaching thus based an emphasis on student-driven learning (Ashwin et al, 2015: 128) and aimed to inspire the concept of 'intellectual love' (Ashwin et al, 2015: 127-128).

With an emphasis on learning techniques and constructivist pedagogies (Cook-Sather, 2002), the initial classes saw a brief introduction from the teacher after which students would be divided in groups, each group reporting on a different question to be discussed that day (Harland, 2012). This technique worked well enough, but not all of the students got to talk: the shy ones would tend to remain silent and it was difficult to get their full participation. It was important therefore, to find a way to get them all to talk and be involved equally. The weekly learning structure was thus modified by providing the students with a set of questions around which they could develop their own thoughts prior to the class (student focus approach, Brew, 2012). They were required to email their thoughts at least 24 hours before to the class teacher. Some students sent 2 or 3 lines, others entire pages of thoughts. These were then composed in a handout subdivided into points for discussion based around themes that emerged from their responses. The handout quoted their thoughts, mentioned the names of the individual students who had written them and was enriched with photographs and pictures of the personalities, objects and events to be discussed on the day. This technique insured that students attended class already well prepared and ready to engage in discussions from the get-go.

At the beginning of the class, the handout was distributed and the discussion began straight away: students received on-the-spot feedback from the seminar leader and their peers, and this embedded the emphasis on dialogue.

In this way, the flipped learning approach enabled deep discussion and critical engagement. Because each student had contributed with questions before hand, the discussions were very engaged, students enjoyed the learning and thrived in the participation in class. The handouts prepared supplemented the session reading lists and provided the students with a useful range of points of view and material for their written essays.

Student feedback (a form of evaluation on the teaching and course material) was enthusiastic, it helped to evaluate their satisfaction and if the mix of practical and theoretical study was well received.

The responses indicated that the course and the teaching technique had succeed, to an extent, also in inspiring ‘intellectual love’: a number of students requested more readings and became interested to explore the issues beyond the remits of the seminar series.

They commented positively on the format and the discussions in class, they also liked the reading material. One student wrote: “...the greatest selling point, however, are the first-hand experiences: the visits to museums and archives. They offer a direct physical connection to the textual content of the seminar”. Feedback helped to adjust the direction of this course, and to understand if the expectations of the students were met. It was also important to establish a continuous dialogue with the students so that their feedback could be reflected in the future shaping of the teaching. Yet, what was most important, was the process of continuous (yet hidden) assessment that was implemented along the way. Having to prepare in advance questions and points for discussion meant that each student had effectively done the preparation and thinking around the readings well before the seminar and this meant that they had had time to reflect and elaborate their thinking. They arrived well prepared and willing to talk and in turn the module leader was able to assess at each stage of the learning how the students were progressing and to stimulate their critical thinking. The seminars became moments of active learning on both sides: the discussion stimulated the students’ critical thinking as much as the teachers’ one.

## **2. Case study 2, equality in the classroom**

This case analyses challenges in leading a Latin postgraduate seminar whose students come from vastly differing circumstances. Some students choose it after their undergraduate studies, whilst others use this as an opportunity to re-train at a later stage in life. There is also a mix of home and international students, and, given the college large international student population, it often attracts students from very different cultures. It is important therefore to be aware of the need to tailor the teaching to take into account differences in cultural, religious and socio-economic background, which ultimately result also in differences of behaviour and attitude to the learning. The main aim is, however, to ensure that the seminar is enjoyable to all, that all acquire the same skills and become equally competent in Latin by the end of the series of seminars (Kraal, 2017; Lustbader, 1998).

For this reason, it is essential to strike a balance between entry level material for students with no previous understanding of Latin, or indeed of any linguistic grammar, and more advanced material for those with previous knowledge and a sound knowledge of grammar. Observation in the classroom during this teaching has proven that the simpler the teaching, the most effective the learning. When students find a topic particularly difficult, material designed for schools and younger audiences is easier to memorize and helps to overcome blockages. It is then important to guide the individual students through their learning until they feel confident. Only then, it is advisable to move onto the next stage of the learning. Sometimes the issue is that English is not the students’ first language. This can be particularly evident with Asian students, who bring the additional complexity of a different writing system and a very different cultural background. When translating Latin texts, which often rely on knowledge of the Greek myths and Roman history, their background knowledge is lacking. The teaching therefore, needs to encourage dialogue and participation so to make them feel that their diverse background is an asset to the class.

Complexities in the classroom also include different ways for students of relating themselves to the teachers and their peers in a university context. Some students are culturally much more deferential, others are more direct and informal and this can sometimes create conflict in the classroom both with their peers and in the way they manifest their expectations in relation to the learning. To understand how to better react, specific literature on ‘how students learn’ (Fry et al, 2009), on teaching students from different cultural backgrounds and how these can impact on learner behaviour, interpretation and understanding (Charlesworth, 2008), is helpful. Interestingly, the literature notes how language and culture are embedded in each other, and how learning beyond their native tongue can impact on student engagement (Gunduz and Ozcan, 2010). This confirms that for oversea students learning in a foreign language is more challenging, as it is to reach the same level of skills of their British colleagues, and that the teacher should give them extra encouragement.

Feedback on the teaching is important, helps the students to put across their point of view and create a dialogue. Asking students to give feedback after each session is therefore important, because students in this course learn at very different paces. One of the skills required here is to pace the teaching and assessment to stimulate all the students at the same time, to allow them to learn gradually and confidently and to arrive at the end of the year with an equal amount of skills, knowledge and confidence. This requires the ability to understand the students’ thinking, guide their learning and teach them to translate.

Another recurrent complexity is how to best help dyslexic students. Every course has students with some level of dyslexia. However, students are very often reluctant to disclose this condition, as they think that they will be judged. It is therefore important that the teacher becomes skilled in recognising students with dyslexia or other learning disabilities and helps them to pace the learning accordingly. In most cases, all they need is a little more attention and more time for their tests. The UK [28] Special Education Needs and Disability Act (2001) (SENDA, 2001) sections 26, 27 and 28 attempt to ensure that UK higher education providers make reasonable adjustments to their delivery so as to cater for students with disabilities (McAulay, 2005). Students often are not aware of this and it is therefore the job of the teacher to tell them that they can get additional time for tests, and that they should reach out if they need additional help.

To encourage exchange in class (Cook-Sather, 2002), to act as a facilitator of learning, to give the basis to understand the content in a way that is simple and easy to memorise, and to create dialogue within the classroom are important aspects of classroom teaching (Pilsworth, 2018). Moreover, a relaxed and convivial atmosphere is a fundamental element of a good learning environment which becomes essential when dealing with dyslexic students. As higher education becomes increasingly internationalised, with ever larger cohorts of international students, it is important to factor this into teaching (Meng, 2016) and to look at how to best support international students and their teaching needs (Kettle, 2017).

### **3. Case study 3, assessment during Covid**

This final case study focuses on changes made to teaching and summative assessment during the Covid pandemic. The introduction of remote teaching imposed the use of online platforms and the

necessity of continued assessment to monitor student learning. Because this typology of assessment took away teaching time, the assessment had to be transformed from a point of verification into an element of student learning.

‘Learning is an active process of mental construction and sense-making ’(Sweetney et al, 2017), monitoring progress is therefore very important as students from different backgrounds have different learning abilities, and progress each at their own pace. The necessity of monitoring their progress and making sure that by the end of the year all students attain the same level of ability, is therefore fundamental. The Covid pandemic forced teaching to move online and presented two different challenges.

The first challenge was how to make sure that all the students would be able to follow the classes. Equitable access to technology and internet connectivity had to be taken into account, and those students with internet connectivity problems, or sharing accommodation with multiple occupants and thus unable to have quiet study time, had to be helped in other ways.

The second was related to assessment. The Latin seminars had always been assessed with in person exams and in class tests. On this circumstance, the library acquired an online version of the textbook so that students could access this from wherever they were.

Slides were prepared to be shared during the online meetings which represented a reference tool for the students, and meetings were led much as if the students were in the classroom: they were asked questions and invited to give answers and openly share their doubts. Cameras had to be switched on and all had to be virtually ‘present’ unless they had previously asked and obtained permission to have their cameras switched off. The assessment however, was more complicated. Short monthly assessments and a less complex final exam seemed a possible way forward to evaluate the students’ progress, identify areas where they struggled and help them. This also allowed to give them high quality and constructive feedback, and to help them with their learning (Nicol, 2009).

There was however still the issue that a monthly test would reduce the amount of teaching time the students would get. Therefore the testing had to be factored as part of the learning itself: from assessment *of* learning to assessment *for* learning. This required careful preparation of the seminars and teaching material so that the tests would act both as learning exercises and assessment points.

Reflecting upon the assessment approaches has enabled in this case to ensure that assessment would be used as a tool for learning, rather than just to assess learning. A particular issue however, was the need to avoid over-assessing, as well as striking a balance between different forms of assessment. As Saliyeva (2018: 180) emphasises: ‘A greater emphasis on assessment for learning, rather than an assessment of learning, is required to achieve an holistic sense of learning’. Thus, as the teaching returned to normality, the assessment was changed back to normal patterns.

Had this brief experience improved the students learning or are traditional methods better? Whist Oldfield et al. (2012) suggest that ‘digital technologies could significantly change assessment through strategies such as employing multiple types of assessment’, it is difficult

to state that technologies on their own are enough without the personal impact of the teacher. The teacher-student relationship is ultimately the element that most contributes to the response of students and impacts on their learning.

### Conclusions:

This article presented three different cases in which assessment was seen as a point of verification of both the actions and teachings of the teacher as much as the behaviour, attitude and results of the students. The learning is seen as the result of a combined number of elements that together concur to the outcome of the learning experience. Here, the action of the teacher is seen as fundamental in guiding the students also through the online learning process and the evaluation as the result of a concurrent number of factors that together determine the success of the student experience. The teacher's guidance remains a fundamental element of this learning experience, but his or her attitude can fundamentally change the quality of the experience and ultimately impact on the evaluation results.

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