25

Project-Based Learning (PBL) to foster employability and develop sustainability values in Tourism studies

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Introduction

Nowadays, the world is suffering tremendously due to the COVID-19 pandemic that has brought about over a million deaths as well as a serious economic recession. The unemployment rate in the EU grew by 0.9% from September 2019 to September 2020, and in terms of youth unemployment (i.e., under 25), the rate saw a rise of 2.6% in the same period (EUROSTAT, 2020a). Concerning Spain, the rate of youth unemployment climbed by 9.2% from October 2019 to September 2020, a trend that boosted in the last 6 months when the increase was of 37.3%.

Regarding graduates' employability, a recent report on Spanish universities (Ivie-Fundación BBVA, 2020) concluded that private institutions achieve better results, however they remain far behind public universities in research. In other words, public means provision of a wide range of knowledge as well as staff interests whereas private means applied studies and labour-market orientation. Moreover, in the study of employability rates according to field of study, it was stated that Tourism graduates have serious problems to find a job: only 19% of the graduates from 2014 had a job in 2018 that required a university degree; the rest were either unemployed or developing jobs far below their level of training and perceiving lower wages. And this is all happening in a country where tourism accounts for 13% of the country's GDP. Although the tourist sector is certainly complex in terms of employability, we believe that the main problem lies in the course programmes of the Tourism Degrees because they do not tackle the sector's needs. This is the reason why our institution opted for upgrading the courses and introducing a methodology that could reflect on the way professionals work, i.e. project-based learning (PBL).

The PBL methodology has been used since the late 1960s due to its many benefits for students (Mathews-Aydinli, 2007; Elizabeth & Zulida, 2012; Ab Rashid *et al*., 2016). Focusing on actual issues, interactions become more authentic and students become more autonomous in their learning process so that the skills acquired in the classroom are

later transferred to their careers. Consequently, there is an increase in students' motivation and communication is enthused. As a result, they become more cooperative and gain confidence in learning. What is more important, there is a rise in the level of critical thinking, and a focus on communicative and argumentative skills (Aznar, 2019). Our students develop their learning process through this methodology from the very first year until they finish their Degree in every single module of the course programme.

Additionally, the PBL methodology contributes to the development and implementation of the competency-based learning model, whose main objective is the achievement by the student of a set of competencies, that is, the acquisition of content (knowledge), skills (know-how) and attitudes (willingness), which lead to success in performance of a professional activity, according to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) framework. It is evident the close relationship between the educational levels of the labour force and the jobs performed by individuals, since a significant number of jobs are defined according to educational requirements, essential to perform the tasks assigned. While this conception is widely accepted by all sectors of society, the interest arises from the evidence in favour of an educational imbalance of the graduates (Pizarro-Barceló & Herrero-Montagud, 2016), that is to say, the lack of correspondence between the contents of the educational curriculum and the demands of the job position.

The PBL methodology intends to increase the employability of our university graduates in Tourism; being employability defined as the set of competencies (knowledge, skills and personal attributes) that make graduates more likely to obtain employment and to succeed in the chosen occupation for the benefit of themselves, other workers, society and the economy.

As far as content is concerned, students are presented with a new concept of Tourism, i.e., a comprehensive view in which tourism is a valuable social tool that can help society in such cases as rural depopulation. And above all, they learn to value residents' point of view in every step of the process to develop a tourism experience.

The social factor as an added value to the learning process[1]

Our institution is a co-operative group of education unique in Spain as it covers all stages in learning, from early childhood to seniors' education (i.e., university programmes for retired people). Therefore, the group's motto is "Co-op learning" in its widest sense. As co-operative enterprises are fully involved in providing their local communities with support at all social levels, students are also taught to develop social and ethical values. For this reason, in the Tourism Degree, the target has been set in helping small rural communities to reverse the trend of depopulation that is threatening a great number of municipalities all over Spain, but also, in the rest of the world.

In Europe, rural depopulation has been rampant since 1850s. According to EUROSTAT (2020b), one in three regions has suffered a decline in population since 2008 particularly so among the Baltic and Nordic countries, ex-Soviet countries, and surely southern

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Europe. Aging population is an added problem in the European Union where the highest old-age dependency ratios were found in rural, sparsely populated regions in 2018 with a ratio of 30.5%; in other words, there were just over 3 people of working-age for every elderly person. Besides, the ratio of young people between 18 and 24 years of age who live in rural areas and do not study or work is 3.7% higher than those living in urban areas. Furthermore, in 2015, 25.5% of rural population were at risk of poverty or social exclusion (it was 24% in cities) and this risk increased to 27.1% in 2016 (24.3% in cities).

Rural exodus implies overcrowding in urban areas which, in turn, implies problems with transport (traffic congestion and consequently, air pollution), housing (increase in the price of renting and speculation), and an increase in the demand of public services, many times in a short period of time and therefore, generating urban planning problems (García, 2018). Moreover, there is a paradox in many cities in southern Europe where there is a high percentage of youth unemployment whereas villages are in a tremendous need of employing labour to work on the land and thereof, guarantee public services and develop private initiatives. Needless to say that strategies to attract young people and families to these regions are indispensable to bring them back to life not only because of job opportunities but also, because the cost of living is lower than in the cities. Moreover, the fact that most of these areas at risk have rich cultural and natural heritage sites should be enough to reverse this trend if managed adequately through rural tourism. This is the reason why UNWTO is placing especial emphasis on tourism innovation to empower rural communities and also declared 2020 as the *International Year of Agro-Tourism and Rural Tourism*. Unfortunately, the pandemic frustrated all expectations and all actions that could have been implemented. In a nutshell, the situation has worsened in rural areas.

Public authorities are responding very slowly to this problem, although there is a greater awareness at European level through the *European Union's Rural Development Policy*, which has set three overarching objectives: improving the competitiveness of agriculture, achieving sustainable management of natural resources and climate action, and a balanced territorial development of rural areas. These objectives are also shared by the *EU Cohesion Policy* that contributes to help rural regions grow and raise employment and living standards. As a result of this support, there is the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) that serves as a hub to exchange information on how Rural Development policies, programmes, projects and other initiatives are working in practice and how they can be improved to achieve further.

In Spain, the demographic regression and depopulation of the rural environment has become a State problem and as such it must be responded from a multilevel governance perspective that, in practice, entails the involvement of all public administrations in all their fronts of action. But it is not until 2017, thanks to the social mobility of the most affected regions and the Spanish Federation of Municipalities and Provinces, when an agreement is reached at the VI Conference of Presidents, to develop a national strategy against the demographic challenge. This is reflected in the *Agenda for Change*, approved in 2019 and, together with the creation of the Ministry for the Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge, the bases are established to reduce territorial inequalities

and improve well-being in communities with a decreasing population. Currently, the Spanish *Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan* includes a package of measures to address the demographic challenge aiming to improve the country's territorial cohesion, eliminate the urban/rural gap and promote actions in the areas most affected by inequality: small municipalities and rural areas. At the regional level, and in order to address the problems derived from depopulation, the regional government of Valencia launched the *Valencian Anti-Depopulation Agency* (AVANT), whose priority is to respond effectively to the problems related to the rural exodus and depopulation in the Valencian territory. However, these measures have proven to be totally inadequate.

In Spain, over 80% of towns and villages are at risk of extinction and 5% of the population live in 53% of the territory. According to the Statistics Spanish Office, out of the 8,131 towns and villages in Spain now (INE, 2020a), 5,002 have less than 1,000 inhabitants. Consequently, Spain is the most depopulated country in southern Europe, followed by Portugal. However, there are good practice cases where residents, and particularly women, gather together through associations aiming to protect their communities and lifestyle. But certainly, cultural associations are the most relevant ones, since they not only protect their municipalities and historic heritage but promote cultural rural tourism to survive. Examples can be found in Oballo (Asturias in northern Spain), a population of only 26 inhabitants where a group of young entrepreneurs decided to start working towards saving the village; or in a tiny village in Soria (on the Spanish plateau) where thanks to the residents, the demographic trend has been reversed, the number of inhabitants has doubled, SMEs have quadrupled in just over 10 years, and the ageing rate has decreased.

One of the Spanish regions – the Valencian Community on the Mediterranean coast comprising the provinces of Castellón, Valencia and Alicante – stands out since 500 villages have been abandoned in six decades, the trend is still ongoing, and 72,000 people live in under-20 inhabitants/km² communities. Shockingly, most of them are in areas with a rich natural and cultural heritage that could benefit greatly from the development of sustainable natural and cultural tourism. Therefore, our students have focused on one small municipality in the province of Castellón and have started a project aiming to help residents improve the village's image as a tourist destination.

Project Methodology

Our Tourism Degree has a Coordinator for the first, second, and third academic years (the last year focuses on the internship period and the degree thesis) whose role is to ensure that the innovative management of hospitality and leisure that we aim our students to comprehend is accomplished. Likewise, every one of those three academic years has a Coordinator to develop seminars and workshops towards that goal. It is also worth noting that we have been working with the PBL methodology for over 10 years now in all our higher education programmes; this has provided us with great experience and has given us the great opportunity to debug those issues that resulted in flaws over the years, related both to the organization of projects and to students teamwork.

Concerning the project being developed by the Tourism Degree students, and bearing in mind the serious demographic situation that many of our villages have, the Degree Coordinator therefore opted for the development of a project in which the three years would work together to reach the same objective. Hence, all the coordinators started to work together in order to develop its rather complex organization, since all the students had to contribute to it on a compulsory basis. First of all, the municipality was chosen, i.e., a small village called Caudiel, in the province of Castellón, which has been losing population steadily since 2000 and has an aging population (INE, 2020b); actually, about 27% are over 65 years old, which shows a rise of 7.1% in 5 years. And the trend is ongoing.

Once the project was presented to – and approved by – the subject of study, a schedule was established for the students' work consisting of 5 stages, as can be seen in table 1:

Table 1. Project schedule

1. October 2020	Students visit Caudiel_Preliminary analysis
2. February 2021	Students spend a weekend in Caudiel_Co-working space
3. April 2021	Students spend a weekend in a rural hotel_Co-working space
4. May 2021	Students present their findings to the municipality's representatives
5. June 2021	Students present their findings in the campus

This schedule aims to implement a methodology in which analysis, field work, teamwork, and discussion among students become the pillars of the project. These necessarily lead to critical thinking, problem-solving and decision-making which are indispensable soft skills for any employer nowadays.

Before starting stage 1, a meeting was held with Caudiel's representatives and the degree coordination in order to explain the project objectives as well as the schedule and also, to exchange points of view on how to develop it. Soon after that, students were welcome in Caudiel: they were taken on a guided tour around the village in order to show them the tourist resources that the municipality had to offer; and finally gathered together to exchange information, commentaries and questions. Before the visit, students had already been working on making an analysis of Caudiel from a touristic perspective.

After stage 1, students started to develop their own tasks towards the project, which are directly related to their level of content knowledge:

- First year students: analysing the problems they envisage in this destination and providing them with tourist ideas on local regeneration.
- Second year students: creating an innovative tourist pack based on experience and emotion.
- Third year students: developing, managing and selling the tourist pack.

However, the COVID-19 stroke fiercely again at the beginning of the year and unfortunately, changes had to be made. During stage 2, all the students had to spend a weekend in Caudiel in order to carry on developing their work and being able to meet the residents and other stakeholders involved in the project to help them in their tasks. But this

was implemented as an online experience through videoconferences with specific targets so as to have a session as interactive as possible. At the same time, the three groups of students had the chance to get together and exchange the progress of their activities.

During stage 3, all the students should have spent some time together in a small rural hotel in an isolated location, just surrounded by the hotel's own olive groves. This hotel had been chosen because of its policy on sustainability, innovation, and value for quality, natural products. And yet, the stage had to be carried out on a single day because of the pandemic. Anyhow, it became the perfect co-working place so that the students had the last chance to work together towards the final completion of the project.

Stage 4 will be crucial, since it is then when students will visit Caudiel for the last time to present the mayor and representatives of the mayor's office the outcomes of their respective project work.

Undoubtedly, tourist specialized knowledge is required to develop these tasks. Therefore, a number of seminars and workshops have been also arranged already from the initial stages to help students throughout the project, ranging from becoming aware of the design thinking methodology (which is key to starting stage 1) to tourist intelligence (where digitalization is a key factor) or gastronomy (essential in experiential tourism and indispensable in rural destinations), among others. These specialization programmes are being carried out by professionals from the tourist sector so that students can also start their own networking even from their first year. At the end of the project, students will have achieved valuable hand-on learning and so, they will have been capable to apply the classroom contents in a practical project for an actual customer.

Finally, an event has been scheduled at the end of the academic year in an exhibition format that will be carried out outdoors. In this way these Tourism students will be able to present their project to the rest of the students in the campus as well as to companies and the media, thus becoming the protagonists of their own learning process once again. Likewise, prospective employers will have the opportunity to see the potential of these students for future employment.

Surely, the pandemic has considerably complicated the optimal development of the project, as originally planned. However, the original objective is expected to be achieved, i.e. the enhancement of students' values of sustainability and professional ethics and their training for a competitive career. In addition, the effects of the pandemic have also forced them to reflect and consider their objectives throughout the project, and this is something very valuable as they need to work on the management of uncertainty, something in which all companies must excel at this time.

Assessment criteria

As an integral part of the Degree, every subject allocates between 15% and 20% of the assessment towards objectives, meeting deadlines and outcomes. Indeed, students must be also assessed on the level of acquisition of several competencies depending on their course. In broad terms students must be able to use ICT tools effectively; use effective

oral and written communication skills; work in teams in a collaborative way; manage problem solving in all those cases where decisions must be made; show initiative, innovation and creativity as well as leadership; and develop lifelong learning abilities. These are the soft skills that form the basis of the educational model of our institution as can be seen in the following image:

Competencies for

Future

Project and People **L**eadership

Co**O**peration **Teamwork**

c**R**eativity **Generating ideas**

Generating change **I**nnovation

Becoming entrepreneurial & proactive **Attitu**D**e**

Acquiring *knowledge throughout life*

Figure 1. Competencies of the educational model

These skills are career-crossing, i.e. any worker should have them and therefore, they will be very valuable for students in terms of increasing their chances of being selected in a recruitment process. An iCIMS Hiring Insights report (2017) highlighted that 94% of recruiters believe that an employee with good, strong soft skills has a better chance of being promoted to leadership positions than an employee with more years of experience but less strong soft skills. The study also featured that 58% of recruitment professionals believe that soft skills are more important for leadership and managerial positions. Employers want to hire people who know how to behave professionally, but who also have the technical skills for the job. In fact, the report showed that 75% of recruiters have cut short an interview because a candidate did not demonstrate the soft skills needed for the position they were applying for. It is therefore not surprising to state categorically that learning these skills is essential for the students who will be the adults of tomorrow.

Regarding the assessment criteria, four main tools are used so that both soft and hard skills can be evaluated. These are:

- A final report with a description of the project and its outcomes by which the following are assessed: quality of information, content organization, analysis, and outcomes.
- An oral presentation at the end of the course in order to assess fluency, clarity, and eloquence; besides, the audio-visual support is evaluated concerning design, content, graphs, and images.
- Students' assessment reflecting their work process on an individual basis. Therefore, teachers and coordinators must carry out a follow-up and monitoring of the student's work during the whole project.

- Peer assessment, which becomes an extremely valuable evaluation tool since students are asked to provide feedback on four main aspects of the project:
  » Completion of tasks within the required deadlines.
  » Active participation in the working teams, sharing information, knowledge and experience.
  » Collaboration in defining, organising and distributing the tasks of the team.
  » Consideration of other people's points of view and constructive feedback.

What's more, students must justify why they make these appraisals. In other words, students themselves are assessing what their managers will value in the course of their careers.

On the other hand, social and ethical values are a fundamental pillar of our educational model, which in turn is based on the cooperative or social economy model. Therefore, and in this project in particular, the students will have to demonstrate to Caudiel's town council and local dynamisation group that their proposals are going to value not only the economic sustainability of the town but also, its social and environmental sustainability. Likewise, the preservation of their culture, traditions and way of life is also part of the ethical approach that students must demonstrate. And obviously, all this will be also evaluated by the municipal representatives of this town.

In sum, this is a project in an academic environment which is carried out in a real environment for a real client, and which will have both an academic and a professional assessment. Therefore, students will be aware that they must provide value and not simply pass an exam, as has been the case in traditional teaching methodologies which, on the other side, in no case provided the qualifications that the business world has always required.

Conclusions

The objective of this project is to prove that PBL surely prepares students for academic, personal, and career success. Teachers turn the learning process into a living thing for students and bring authenticity into the classroom; they simply become facilitators in the learning process. As a result, students develop expert content knowledge as well as critical thinking, creativity, and communication skills. Furthermore, they learn to work as a team, which is crucial in a professional career nowadays, and also, develop the required skills to work on an autonomous way and become proactive in their own learning process. In addition, they are able to understand the importance of lifelong learning as a fundamental pillar of their future career.

However, this is not possible if the academic planning and programming takes place only in the higher education institution. Therefore, getting closer to the society as well as companies and their needs is a must, and consequently, fostering the practical side of acquiring knowledge is vital.

As far as students are concerned, they become highly motivated with their work and more willing to show initiative and proactivity throughout the learning process because they see a clear target to achieve. Hopefully, at the end of this project, they will also feel satisfied with the validity and quality of their work. Besides, this project will be a valuable point of information to introduce in their CVs and later explain to their potential employers once they have completed their Degree, on the one hand. And on the other, it offers an invaluable visibility to the academic institution, thus aiding towards finding their niche in the public and private alignment. Last but not least, we hope this project will be a boost to Caudiel's economic development and also, capable to reverse the depopulation trend of the last decades.

This project is in a pilot phase and its advantages and drawbacks will have to be analysed once it has been completed. Obviously, there will be room for improvement that will result from the analysis and evaluation of the outcomes of the project. But we hope that the positive aspects in terms of results and assessment by the students will far outweigh the negative ones.

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