

Collaborative methodologies, education *in* and *towards* responsibility in nurse training

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ABSTRACT:

This multiple case study¹ covers three experiments implemented in University Degrees in Nursing, in which learning processes encouraging responsibility were implemented. Action research was the guiding principle of this task. The stages followed were similar to those of the Nursing Healthcare Process. The three cases were geared towards and impregnated with a cooperative methodology, aimed at achieving significant learning on the real meaning of responsibility. The case study was carried out in a qualitative methodology background. This strategy enables a holistic and significant study to be undertaken of an event or phenomenon, in this case university teaching and learning, within the real context in which it is produced (nursing degree lessons), and requires that several different didactic strategies are put into action and various monitoring and assessment instruments are put in place, which represent consistent sources to contrast with the process and the results obtained.

KEY WORDS:

Collaborative methodologies, Higher education, Case study, Educate in responsibility, Nurse training.

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INTRODUCTION

It is the nursing professional's responsibility to take care of human beings from an integral perspective. The multiculturalism that is today part of our lives, in the most wide-ranging domains, and the diversity this implies, constitutes a great challenge to modern-day nursing. It implies that in training future nurses teaching and learning methods and strategies are adopted that lead to cooperation, consensus, reflection, adaptation to change, diversity and the unforeseen. Therefore, the acquisition of reflective and cooperative skills is clearly indispensable. The work we present is based on these principles, consequently leading to the students gradually accepting responsibility for their own learning. It is undertaken in a university environment and intends to put into practice the principles that preside in the Sphere of European Higher Education, which centres attention on the learning of the student, in which cooperative learning acquires a major role, which implies "education *in* and *towards* responsibility".

The purpose of this research was to establish a dynamic of commitment and responsibility in training the students, which in the future will be reflected in their professional work as nurses. The *aims* that guide the process were: a) applying the spirit of European convergence as regards teaching methodology, driving forward collaborative learning; b) putting into practice the principles of democratic education in the classroom, in certain curricular modules of the Nursing degree; c) reflecting on the

teaching action itself, aimed at improving; c) assessing the process monitoring the results obtained.

AXIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE RESEARCH

The terms "responsibility" and "response" are constant factors in the nursing profession, meaning they are aspects of personal and social development that have to be interiorised by the university students who are preparing themselves to exercise this profession. We are aware that in tackling this aspect of training we are clearly dealing with the field of the intangible. We have found, however, several works that from an axiological perspective have been carried out with the intention of grasping the intangible. They all heavily focus on clarifying the meaning of the term responsibility, as a value and also as a crucial attitude of individuals in Western society, while in the workplace (Jonás, 1995; Rodríguez Borrego, 1999, 2004).

Cortina (2000) states that we organise our lives based on what we value and on what we prefer. In truth, values whether they be aesthetic, intellectual, religious, moral, etc, as qualities of the things, actions and people that attract us, help us to construct an inhabitable world. From our point of view, moral values are those that any person or institution should have, and which any action should be subject to, so that one can call oneself human in the full sense of the word. Given that responsibility is a value, the

theoretical benchmark of the research presented here is the Pedagogy of Values, in its broadest sense, as pointed out by Tierno (1996): “If the world of values can serve as a script for individuals in their aspirations for peace and fraternity, for the same reason they should act as the script for individuals in their desires for self-fulfilment and perfection” (p.19).

Putting ourselves in the shoes of the trainer of future nursing professionals and also trainers of trainers, it is vital that we commit ourselves to preparing students such that, as future professionals, they respond to requests that are put to them in such a way that their responses are grounded on human values. As such, as we mentioned above, our proposal is aimed specifically at the commitment to *educate in responsibility and towards responsibility*.

Responsibility is intimately linked to the set of beliefs that guide our everyday social, ethical and moral values which lead to certain beliefs. As a consequence, an education towards and in moral values can only be successful if these values are not left hanging merely as ideas, but rather they embody the beliefs in our day-to-day lives. In the case of university education, one thing is what we read, the ideas and content of a subject; and another is the world of beliefs that we experience every day, i.e. what we do professionally. Translating the much emphasised gap/distortion between theory and practice leads us to balance the need to educate based on and geared towards coherent responses, in accordance with beliefs, i.e. educating based on and geared towards responsible responses.

In this case, the researcher/trainer himself faces a challenge: to identify and assess the existence of lack of responsibility; from all points of view this goal involves a difficult and complex approach, albeit feasible if we invest in carrying out lessons with cooperative methodologies, as we will see below.

Responsibility is a value that can be understood based on different perspectives. This value can be present, materialised, assessed, researched, grasped and, ultimately, one can educate oneself *in and towards* responsibility. In our professional environment it is unquestionable that the practice of nursing should be impregnated with responsible actions. As such, we believe that the university training of future nurses has to incorporate the principle of responsibility, based on democratic and collaborative education.

TRAINING FOCUS: COOPERATIVE LEARNING

Starting from the axiological framework presented above and given that the chief goal of our research project is to educate university students, future Nursing professionals, in responsibility and towards responsibility, it is necessary to outline and explain the pedagogical options that have been taken.

Our option for a methodology which focuses on cooperative learning, while in part deriving from the current trends regarding university policy, in the framework of European convergence it undoubtedly responds to the social, educational and health needs of society, which originate from the values and principles inherent to democracy. Principles such as participation, collaboration, sharing of interests, consensus, decision making, autonomy were the factors underpinning the pedagogical options of this project.

Moreover, this methodology is coherent with the guidelines established in *Tuning* (González & Wagenaar, 2003) insofar as the educational process is geared towards the development of skills that are reflected in giving student the chance *learn how to learn*, preparing themselves for a process of life-long training. In order to put these principles into practice we establish the following relational structure to guide and structure our research: problem based learning, such as didactic foundations; cooperative learning, as a practical tool for implementing the learning process; and significant learning, as the product that is aimed for, with a long-term reflection.

Cooperative learning is a generic term linked to a set of teaching procedures that are based on splitting the class into small mixed and heterogeneous groups, in which the students work together, coordinating among one another, to solve academic tasks and deepen their learning. The cooperative methodology, worked on and contrasted by several authors (Bará & Valero, 2005; Bará *et al.*, 2005; Johnson & Jonhson, 1999, 2006; Ovejero, 1993; Slavin, 1991), allows inter-relation between the actors of the educational process, as part of a commitment in order both to share the knowledge and build new knowledge, and is as such coherent with the democratic values that both govern and underpin it.

According to Cuseo (cited by Bará & Valero, 2005), cooperative learning responds to the following

characteristics: a) encourages the active involvement of the student in the learning process; b) capitalises on the capacity of groups to increase the levels of learning by means of interaction among classmates; c) reduces drop-out rates; d) allows the implementation of education grounded on freedom and responsibility; e) encourages independent and self-directed learning; f) favours the development of ability for critical reasoning; g) facilitates the development of writing skills and oral communication; h) increases the satisfaction and enthusiasm of the students for this learning method, and leads to more positive attitudes in relation to the matters under study; i) allows the different learning styles of the process to be followed; j) develops leadership skills; k) prepares students as citizens, so that they can face up to the challenges of today's society and job market with more maturity.

To implement an effective cooperative initiative, it is crucial that there is a positive interdependence between the members of the group, an individual and shared responsibility and a reflection on the functioning of the activity in each group. These conditions occur when the group members discuss the scope of the goals and value the effectiveness of their work in cooperation.

Problem based learning (PBL), although used for many years, is one of the renewed strategies of the teaching-learning process that has been most consolidated in the Higher Education institutions which have decided to implement ECTS credits (Martínez Ortega *et al.*, 2006). In the opinion of Bará and Valero (2005), PBL is a didactic strategy in which the students, organised into groups, develop projects geared towards the following goals: integrating knowledge and skills of several areas, developing high-level intellectual abilities, encouraging learning on one's own and in a team, favouring self-assessment.

Morin (2002), in his work *The seven Complex Lessons in Education for the Future*, in the chapter on the fifth lesson, points out: "one has to learn how to face uncertainty, given that knowledge supposes navigating an ocean of uncertainties through archipelagos of certainties". Undoubtedly, PBL helps us to learn to face problematic and uncertain situations. In training nurses, PBL is backed up by a well-grounded trajectory of research and reflection, with authors such as Molina *et al.* (2003); Zapico (2004); Juanola (2004); Blanco *et al.* (2005) standing out,

who suggest the target in nurse training is that they are able to develop the different aspects of their professional role in an integrated manner, defined in the form of skills.

The bedrocks of *problem based learning*, according to Font (2004), are as follows: the problem or guiding principle; the student and the teacher, who acts as a tutor; the activity, seen as a cooperative action, and the assessment that is part of the process itself, taking several hues: self-assessment, assessment among peers, hetero-assessment and co-assessment.

Finally, *significant learning* is presented as a consequence of applying the collaborative methodologies, which are indispensable to live, move and evolve within the scope of the knowledge. Significant learning, in the present case, implies a personal exercise of reflection, i.e. a dialogue with the self, through which students elaborate and interiorise knowledge, capacities and skills, based on their own interests and needs, in other words in real and everyday situations in the field of health. Significant learning has special relevance in cognitive and attitude training for "educating in responsibility and towards responsibility".

At this point we want to emphasise the importance of the teacher in this kind of methodology, who is the person who guides, facilitates, helps, shares and plays a decisive role in the whole assessment process, whether dealing with the students' assessment or assessment of his/her own teaching practice. Representing an authority that is simultaneously moral and formal, the teacher is a reference point for the young student, a human, professional and scientific model (German, 2004). In an epoch of substantial change, the teachers' challenge, namely higher education teachers, resides in the ability to innovate, incorporating the people involved in the training process into a future vision.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This case study is part of a qualitative methodology framework. While there is no agreement among the authors regarding whether it is a research method or a strategy, they all agree on its potential to produce information based on and concerning the singulari-

ties and particularities of the actions and situations. Yin (2001) defines the case study as a “research method that allows a holistic and significant study of a contemporary event or phenomenon, within the real context in which it is produced. As such, it is difficult to establish limits between phenomenon and context, leading to the need to use multiple sources of evidence”.

WHAT ARE THE ISSUES AND AIMS OF THE CASE STUDY?

The research project was carried out based on the following starting questions:

1. To what extent do corporative methodologies favour the acquisition of the “being responsible” skill in its two facets: responding and accepting the consequences derived from this response?
2. Could it be that cooperation in learning and acceptance of shared commitments leads to more significant learning and translates into more responsible learning?
3. What kind of influence exercises teaching centred on the students, whereby they actively take part in the different learning situations, including assessment with its self-assessment facet, so as to develop a responsible attitude?
4. What are the processes that cooperative education puts into place in training of nurses, with a view to a critical transformation of the nursing profession?

Based on *Tuning* (González & Wagenaar, 2003), in the curricular modules in question, we attempted to encourage the development of skills in the domain of knowledge, of being and know-how, which includes “wanting to do” (Pereda & Berrocal, 2001, cited by Rodríguez, 2007). All these aspects of the training process are closely linked to education in responsibility, understood as a response in freedom, which demands a voluntary and conscious decision.

The purpose of this research project follows this line of thinking and the educational intentions that govern it are closely linked to the research questions listed above. As the *overall goal* the intention is to establish a dynamic of better commitment in the training of university students that in the future is reflected in the professional work as nurses; this

commitment should be understood in order to educate oneself “in responsibility and towards responsibility”.

The *specific aims* that guided the entire action research process were as follows:

1. Apply the spirit of convergence at the level of the teacher’s methodology:
 - Centre the teaching on the students’ learning.
 - Educate the students *in* and *towards* responsibility.
 - Encourage teamwork.
 - Implement cooperative, collaborative and problem-based learning.
 - Incorporate self-assessment and hetero-assessment, as part of the teaching-learning process.
2. Put into practice the principles of democratic education in the classroom, in certain curricular modules of the Nursing degree.
 - Nurture the development of cooperation with others in each person (Dewey, cited by Romo and Nubiola, 2005).
 - Respect individual initiative, equal opportunities and intellectual freedom (Dewey, cited by Romo and Nubiola, 2005).
 - Foster real and active participation by the students in building their own educational process.
3. Reflect on the teaching action, aimed at improving it.
4. Assess the process implemented and the results obtained.
 - Deepen knowledge about the respective curricular modules.
 - Analyse the responses of the students and the teacher, referring back to what was planned and/or the commitments made.

INSTITUTIONAL AND ACADEMIC CONTEXT

At the moment it is obvious that higher education institutions are undergoing change, and this change constitutes a challenge to any university teacher. In the specific case of Nursing teachers, given that it is a question of training people who will be responsible for the health of others, we are in an extraordinarily complex field in which several perspectives, hues, contexts, forms and approaches intermingle. Both in the field of Nursing practice and in the field of their

training, we are dealing with human beings, with all the aspects this entails. As such, we are dealing with aspects related to health and illness, where each ailment and each sick person has their defined characteristics. Moreover, university teaching is linked to a social and educational context that is deeply rooted in culture, where the teacher is the holder of knowledge and the students are mere receptors of it. Finally, we witness a complex situation where the theoretical training of Nursing students is complemented with practical training in Health Centres and Hospitals, and there is not always articulation between the information and a true training process.

As for the socio-educative context, we situate the multiple case study on two university centres, Spanish Nursing Faculties, located in cities with an average population of 60 000 inhabitants (Ponferrada and Soria), which belong to the campuses of León University and Valladolid University, respectively.

The study was carried out in three different curricular modules (Nursing Diagnoses, Oral Health and Nursing of Surgical-Medical Specialties), with three different groups of students, although in the case of the first two curricular modules, which are optional, a few of the students overlapped both subjects. The fieldwork was carried out over two academic years, 2004/05 and 2005/06, in the aforementioned university centres. The curricular modules in relation to the first and second cases (Ponferrada) are optional, with a credit load of 4.5 credits each and in the third case (Soria) it is compulsory, with a load of 3 credits. The number of students enrolled was 15 in the first case, 44 and 50 in the second and third, respectively.

When the research started, the introduction of innovative experiences in the backdrop of European convergence practically did not exist on Ponferrada Campus, which led to the need for an additional effort to raise awareness among the university students and get them involved; this was not the case at Soria Campus, where there was greater knowledge about the European Higher Education Space and about its repercussions on university teaching, even though there were no experiments comparing innovative methodologies.

Given this complex reality, at the heart of the research, which in part we present here, was the deliberate intention by one of the authors to carry out a pedagogical experiment in the classes so as to

encourage democratic and collaborative education. The option for an action research case study was the ideal medium to obtain knowledge, reflect and intervene.

RESEARCH PROCESS: MULTIPLE CASE STUDY

In the study we are reporting on, the research strategy used was an action research multiple case study, geared towards democratic and collaborative education in the classroom. It is a holistic multiple case study, which increases the chances of contrasting and comparing data, in line with the similarities and/or differences. In analysing the data a content analysis technique was used which allowed us to draw up several categories.

The following steps during the undertaking of each case were gradually adjusted to the following intervention scheme, through the establishment of democratic and cooperative education in the classroom, expressed in the following terms:

- a) Negotiation, between the teacher and the pupils, of the aims to be achieved, content to be tackled, methodology, activities to carry out, organisational aspects concerning space, time, resources and assessment system: self-assessment, hetero-assessment and objective proof.
- b) Definition of how the cooperative methodology and Problem Based Learning will be applied, so as to lead to significant learning.
- c) Schedule for undertaking the programme of the respective curricular modules: in the case of Nursing Diagnoses and Oral Health, during the second third of the 2004/05 academic year, and in the case of Nursing of Surgical-Medical Specialties, during the academic year of 2005/06.
- d) Monitoring of the data collection process through the use of wide-ranging tools, devised for this purpose:
 - Student presentation forms at the start of the experiment.
 - Negotiations in writing of an individual nature.
 - Fieldwork folder/portfolio.
 - Records of individual interviews.

- Records of participant observation.
- Records of the assessment.

RESULTS OBTAINED

The information gathered was so abundant and wide-ranging that it is difficult to systematise it in this short space. The triangulation of the data obtained in three cases, based on the use of different strategies and tools throughout the training process, allows us to organise the results around these aspects:

- *Initial assessment and written commitment of the pupils.* On the first day of lessons the students answered a questionnaire, which provided us with valuable information about their expectations, interests, professional expectations, etc. As well as the presentation of the curricular module, it was indispensable to carry out an initial negotiation on the methodology, activities and means of assessment. The commitments made essentially revolved around assiduity and also participation, the undertaking of tasks and drawing up of the *fieldwork folder*.
- *Drawing up the portfolios.* Through analysis we can observe that, over time, there has been a positive evolution of the products drawn up. In the first case it is easy to see the importance the students attach to the contents; in contrast, in the second and third cases other aspects begin to emerge, such as opinions and conclusions on the work carried out. Also the formal aspects are more carefully worked on. As well as the endogenous factors of the situation itself, namely the teachers' learning from reflecting on their practices, this may also be due to the fact the convergence process is gradually taking hold in the university environment, and as such, it is becoming increasingly accepted that the learning process must revolve around the student (Boronat, 2006).
- *Role played by the teacher.* The teacher's records increased in quantity and in depth, deriving from greater perspicacity and involvement in the observation, as the experiment progressed. The teachers/researchers recognise they are protagonists to a certain extent through their words, however there are also indications of change; as

a consequence, we can state that the incorporation of an innovative methodology is possible and based on it you can engender significant changes in the teacher's action, especially when the process takes place through real involvement of the teacher in the change, in the research and in the reflection about and during this change (Caetano, 2004; Freire, 2001).

- *Monitoring through tutorials.* The evolution in the tutorials was obvious, with the students in the first two cases attending them and complying. As for the tutorials of the third case, in groups, there was a considerable advance, in that the students did not only come to the tutorial, but they also reflected on and valued its dynamics and registered these thoughts in their *fieldwork folder*. In both cases the tutorial is an aspect that is highly valued by the students.
- *Assessment system.* The assessment was not uniform, given that different procedures were used. In the first case, self-assessment was given priority, which was very focussed on assiduity; in the second hetero-assessment was used, of a more conventional nature, even though the criteria was agreed beforehand with the students; in the third case, the assessment was rich and diversified, using different procedures. In this case, the application of a questionnaire of critical incidents revealed the positive and negative aspects of the process implemented and the corresponding improvement ideas.

Overall, we positively view the good uptake in the implementation of this methodological *focus* by the students, and the evolution of many of them with regard to greater acceptance of their responsibilities as students and incorporation of a critical attitude and thinking about themselves. We therefore believe that these experiments resulted to a certain degree in laying the foundations of *know-how-to-be* and *know-how*, which led to the sense of responsibility which is where we ultimately wanted to get to.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

In the three case studies, the intention was to encourage cooperative action in the training process,

although this was not fully achieved. The cooperative activity demands more time, more work and a greater sense of responsibility. Managing to get a team to function with an independent conscience is a complex process, which many factors contribute to, ranging from the convictions of the students themselves (it is easier to achieve them when they are convinced of their benefits and assiduously apply them in their learning), to the convictions and pedagogical and educational values of the teacher; but the climate and culture of the educational organisation are also at play and in the final analysis the system as a whole.

Despite the “winds of change” in higher education in the different countries of the European Union, the universities are largely very deep-rooted in the culture of working in traditional groups, where in general one can observe an obvious imbalance in forces, as some make more effort than others and often the teachers encourage individuality and competition more than cooperation. In this case, the introduction of a methodological change, at times, led to a response that we classify as corporativist, which were observed in the hetero-assessment processes. It seemed obvious that the group protected itself from a kind of external threat — the methodological change, without fully accepting a responsible and shared assessment.

We start with the assumption that reflective learning that encourages dialogue and collaboration favours significant learning about what it means “to be responsible”. Even though in our project, the concept of the cooperative group did not garner the full agreement of the students, reflection was the dominant note. The students, through their words, reflected this change:

- “You discover the things you have to focus on, you think for yourself”
- “You learn how to value things through our knowledge, we are learning to be critical and to act logically and not through memory”
- “I learn to reflect on what is around me, above all in relation to the patients and to relate the pathological with the psychological which is very important and which we sometimes don’t attach much importance to.”

One of the apriorisms of the so-called Higher Education European Space revolves around education centred on the student. It is directed at the individual, who, in essence, is free (Fromm, 1983), which presupposes being responsible. Freedom and responsibility are intimately linked, and as such accepting our freedom presupposes accepting responsibility for what we do, including what we try to do or at times the undesired consequences of our acts (Savater, 1999).

Processes centred on the students and the interactions among them, in an environment that is intended to be cooperative, seems to have fostered the development of a responsible attitude. The indicators are positive concerning not only the pedagogy experienced during the experiment, but also raise expectations that this attitude can be incorporated into a future profession. In the whole process and in the self-assessment, the students experienced the methodological innovation, in which they felt responsible for themselves and in relation to themselves.

According to Fromm (1983), exercising freedom is not an easy task, hence “the urge of the modern man to restrict it” (p. 46), or, in Savater’s opinion (1999), “the connection between freedom and responsibility becomes more obvious inasmuch as we want the former but the latter frightens us” (p. 157). As with the intellectuals, also the students who took part in our project recognise the presence of these tensions when they have freedom to assess themselves: “the personal assessment is difficult and it is complicated for somebody to assess themselves”; “everything in this curricular module, or almost everything, supposes a new reference for each one of us.”

The gap between theory and practice, between beliefs and ideas, in our point of view, can only be overcome through a reflective, critical and responsible attitude. We believe that designing the initial training in order to educate the future nursing professionals, based on collaborative learning processes that encourage responsibility and, in the long run, the development of reflective communities, is certainly the first step towards the critical transformation of the nursing profession, as acknowledged by one student: “It has helped me a lot to be more critical about what I read and what I see, and therefore, with what I do in my practicals and how I will act in the future as a nurse”.

To sum up, we have to end by stating that the methodological change process remains open. We estimate that, in general, the aims that at a certain point were established, have been attained. However, we also detected difficulties, mistakes and inconveniences, which far from constituting impassable hurdles represent a good opportunity for change and for action, or, as Veiga Simão puts it (2002), for

self-regulation, given that responsibility is a self-regulated response.

The history I am part of along with the others is a time of possibilities and not determinism; the know-how of critical self-reflection and the know-how-to-be of cultivated wisdom (Freire, 1997, pp. 13 and 20).

ENDNOTES

1. This article was written based on the research, carried out as part of a PhD, by Maria Aurora Rodríguez Borrego, under the supervision of Julia Boronat Mundina, in Spain, and Isabel Freire, in Portugal.

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