

Chapter 14

Problem-Based Learning Methodology

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this chapter is to present the EcosSPORTech project, a cross-faculty project based in Vic (Spain) where the University of Vic has a central role in developing an enterprise with young people in order to develop sports and leisure activities in the natural environment, integrating Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). This project, which has the participation of students from different faculties (Business and Communication, Health and Wellness, and Education) using a Problem-Based Learning (PBL) method, reinforces the idea of an entrepreneurial university that can create innovative solutions in order to promote social benefits; this is a university with a clear commitment to educating both professionals and citizens. The chapter also presents the project's communication policy, based on the UVic's corporate media: blog, magazine, and radio station. This project has the financial support of La Caixa Foundation (Obra Social La Caixa) and Vic's City Council.

INTRODUCTION

Since 2008 Europe has been affected by an economic recession that has endangered the welfare state and threatens the viability of economic integration. In response to the austerity policy driven by the German chancellor as a reaction to the crisis, some countries have lost a large degree of sovereignty (Greece, Portugal, Ireland, Italy and Spain) in the process of supporting the stability of the common market. The increase of unemploy-

ment rates in the Eurozone reflects this market instability: in May 2012 it reached a record 11%. In Spain, the total unemployed registered at the time of starting the project EcoSPORTech (June, 2012) exceeded 4.5 million people (4,615,269), while the unemployment rate for the first quarter of 2012 was 24.4%; among youth (20-24 years) it was 48.1%. Bauman (2005a, b) complains that in this liquid modernity the concept of un-employment has changed from describing a temporary situation to a permanent condition for

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large sectors of the population, who are unable to adapt to the new economy. Those who have a job experience a steady increase in insecurity (Beck, 2000) while a lack of ethics in the socioeconomic climate may have a corrosive effect on character (Sennett, 2006).

The European partners most affected by the crisis (especially Greece, Spain and Italy) claim that their economic policies must combine austerity with growth. At this point, the University, a millennial institution, must be sensitive to challenges of society, and must become one of the basic foundations of the knowledge society (Casas, 2005; Simó, 2011). The University is one of the players expected to boost growth through its role in promoting the concept of “social entrepreneurship”, as part of its commitment to economic development and social welfare.

OBJECTIVES

The EcoSPORTech project has been developed at University of Vic (UVic). It is a social entrepreneurship project which aims to create business for young people to carry out sports and leisure activities in the natural environment, integrating these with new technologies (ICT). Obra Social La Caixa has co-funded this project, through its call for job inclusion projects 2012 (23.000 euros), with the City of Vic.

At academic level, this project is an interdisciplinary collaboration between the faculties of Business and Communication (FEC), Health Sciences and Wellness (FCSB) and Education (FE), involving a team of professionals coming from the fields of business, marketing, journalism, sports and occupational therapy. These lecturers are training youths with the aim of creating the company. This company will be part of the enterprise incubator being created at Vic, in a collaboration between the university and Vic's City Council.

The purpose of EcoSPORTech is to position the university as a key player in civil society, in

the spirit of John Dewey (1968) who called for the development of an intelligent action in society, towards which we must train our students in the skills necessary to understand complex contemporary problems, but the skills to transform and create a more competitive but fairer and caring society.

METHODOLOGY

Although the project is based on Problem Based Learning (PBL), in this chapter we are going to present it through a case study methodology, which is understood as an “empirical investigation of a contemporary phenomenon, taking [into account] its context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not evident” (Yin, 1994, p. 13). As pointed out by Escudero, Delfín, & Gutierrez (2008, p. 7), “the case study as research strategy has been used in many situations that have helped to generate awareness of a phenomenon that is an individual, group, political and/or complex phenomena”.

EcoSPORTech project is an example of the mission that a 21st century university has in relation to society: to integrate teaching with research, with a solid commitment to the region, and specifically with the promotion of youth employment.

For years, the University has been seen as an ivory tower (Simó, 2010), as a result of its Platonic heritage. We need to develop a teaching practice in which students come into contact with the contemporary reality characterized by complexity in order to acquire the necessary skills for modernity. Using PBL teaching methodology (ENOTHE, 2004), students integrate theoretical knowledge and apply it to understand a concrete reality, in this case represented through the formation of a social enterprise to employ young people in social exclusion. Significantly, they will do so through an interdisciplinary work, and learn to overcome through collaboration the struggle between the different disciplines that so often afflicts universities.

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