



The Experience of a New University Teacher: The Participation in a Training Program for Novices

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Abstract

The first teaching experiences at university are known to have a huge impact in the overall performance of the teacher in the future. It is for this reason that a good initial training that specially guides the beginner to the first teaching tasks is remarkably important. Many Spanish universities have implemented programs to train the newly-come teachers. This is the case of the University Jaume I (Castellón). Hence, the aim of this study is to analyse the program of training and mentoring addressed to novice teachers promoted by this university, highlighting my own experience as a novice teacher and recent participant in this initiative. Additionally, and as part of the training program, I explain the teaching improvement developed in my second year at the university. After the analysis, I stress the positive impact that my participation in all the stages of the program has reported me, and the positive effect of the improvements carried out compared with the first year. Finally, I emphasise the great importance of these training programs for beginners, and I encourage them to participate in these initiatives to overcome the limitations that novice university teachers encounter in Spain due to our limited pedagogical training.

1. Introduction

Many studies have focused on the role of the university novice teachers analysing different topics [2, 7]. This growing interest is due to the importance of the implications that the educational work in the early teaching experiences can have on the teaching career of the newly-come teachers, and on the development of their current and future tasks. According to [3], the first teaching experiences influence perceptions and behaviours about teaching, about students, about the environment and about the role as a teacher.

Therefore, the need for a direct supervision of the new teachers has led to the development of programs addressed to this group. The Spanish University Jaume I (Castellón) put into practice a pilot training program in 1998 [4]. Since then, roughly thirty new teachers per year have joined this initiative, getting assistance in their initial teaching tasks for over a period of about two academic years.

Hence, the aim of this study is to analyse the program that has been developed at the University Jaume I that trains its new university teachers. The study is presented from the perspective and personal professional experience of one of these novice teachers. Additionally, the development of the educational improvement carried out in the second year of my university teaching is analysed, presenting a comparison with the first teaching experience. This is indeed an important part of the program developed at University Jaume I.

2. Training program for novice teacher of the University Jaume I

University Jaume I, through the Educational Support Unit, promotes a program of training and mentoring addressed to newly-come teachers. In this section, I will introduce the main points of the program based on the corresponding documentation provided by the Education Support Unit (information available at: <http://ujiapps.uji.es/serveis/use/base/formacioprofessorat/formacionovell/>).

The main objectives of this initiative can be summarized as follows:

- To facilitate the integration of new teachers at the University Jaume I
- To help them in the planning, development and evaluation of their disciplines
- To provide them psycho-pedagogical knowledge to facilitate their teaching tasks
- To promote a culture of permanent learning as a distinctive aspect of the teaching profession



- To report and to disseminate among new teachers, innovation processes of teaching, changes in the teaching methodology, and the teaching-learning process that involves the European Higher Education Area
- To facilitate the relationship, exchange and collaboration between teachers from different departments and centres, and thus promoting processes of reflection and improvement of their teaching

The program is aimed at new teachers of the University Jaume I (less than 3 years contracted in the University). Its duration is planned for two academic years, including classroom-based training, and mentoring and advising. Mentors (teachers with over 5 years of teaching experience) play a decisive role on the novice teachers (papers such as [5] and [6] describe some of the benefits of the mentoring process). As part of this training program, beginners should attend several courses related to basic aspects of teaching activities, such as planning, teaching methodologies, assessment, use of information and communication technologies in the teaching process, ethical and responsible teaching and multilingual teaching. Additionally, the University offers supplementary workshops, seminars and other courses as a complementary training on more specific issues.

The mentoring and advising phase consists of three steps: a) analysis, reflection and review of the teaching process of the novice; b) improvement and innovation of the novice's teaching; c) evaluation of the teaching improvement. In the first step, and with the support of the mentor and technicians from the Educational Support Unit, new teachers analyse their educational tasks, observe mentor's lessons and are also observed. Then, the beginners think about the improvements to develop during the second year of teaching. In the second step, the improvement on teaching or the development of an innovative project is put into practice. In the last step, new teachers begin a process of self-assessment and reflection. By using a teaching portfolio, the novices define their own teaching curriculum. This portfolio describes and reflects the development of the process taken along the two years. After the successful finalisation of the program, new teachers obtain a certificate to validate their training for university teaching.

3. Own experience after the participation in the University Jaume I's program for new teachers

As the uncertainty inherent in each new experience, the beginning of the university teaching implies to assume a task of great responsibility that is usually accessed without a strong basis of teaching education. A primary education teacher requires the specific studies of a degree in which they acquire knowledge about planning, methodological tools, assessment, and etcetera. On a similar basis, a Master degree on teaching is required for secondary education teachers. However, this is not the case for the university teachers in Spain. Thus, it may happen that even with a proper base of knowledge on the specific subject, new teachers can lack the necessary teaching abilities that allow them to develop an adequate educational work. Therefore, and as [1] stated, unfortunately, in Spain, teachers of the higher academic level are the ones with the less pedagogical training. Therefore, the chance of participation in an initiative focused on the support of the beginner teachers is useful for a better development of the teaching activities at university. According to [8], "the need to improve university teachers' teaching skills and pedagogical thinking is now acknowledged to be essential" (p. 29).

Personally, the training program at the University Jaume I ensures the acquisition of useful knowledge for its later application during the development of the teaching. I attended several training courses that introduced me to a wide range of assessment techniques, methodological tools applicable to different types of activities, support resources for the teaching planning, the use of the virtual platform, tools to enhance creativity in teaching, and many more. All the documentation provided, as well as my active participation in the training, has enabled me to construct an important training basis. This has helped me to reduce the uncertainty inherent to this new process and to improve my educational tasks.

The mentor plays an important role in this program. It is especially useful to rely on an expert who offers support and orientation, and who helps you to think about the development of the teaching. During the training period I attended a lesson taught by my selected mentor. An observation guide of the teaching actions, provided by the Educational Support Unit, helped me to analyse and to learn about issues such as the interaction with the students, the use of different teaching resources, the general development of the lesson, etcetera. Additionally, the same task was performed by my mentor, who observed then my teaching skills. It was a grateful experience; the subsequent reflection based on what my mentor observed during my lesson as well as the useful advices given, helped me to change some features of my teaching method such as non-verbal behaviour, interaction with students and the planning of the session.



Additionally, the elaboration of the teaching portfolio enabled me to learn how to configure an educational curriculum which includes those elements that contributed to the development of my teaching tasks during my first years as a teacher. Thus, my teaching portfolio is a synthesis that collects the process developed during the training, helping me to think about it as a whole. Therefore, it incorporates a wide range of materials, documents and personal reflections concerning teaching guides, lesson contents, problems arisen in the classroom, students' feedback, changes experimented in my teaching, and self-assessment reports filled out.

4. Development of a proposed teaching improvement as a part of the program for novices

During the second year of the program for training novice teachers, participants should implement an educational project which develops a teaching innovative tool or a teaching improvement adapted to the corresponding subjects. In my case, during my two first years of university teaching, I taught the practical exercises in the subject of "Introduction to Accounting". This subject is compulsory for all students, and is taught in the first year of "Finance and Accounting", "Economics" and "Business Administration" degrees.

Figures of the academic year 2014/2015 show that there were 12 teachers for a group with more than 500 students. The group was divided in subgroups which used the same evaluation methods, and the same final exam. Therefore, it was difficult to incorporate changes regarding contents or assessment tools in just one subgroup, due to the close coordination among the entire group. For this reason, I proposed a project with the aim of improving specific issues of the methodological development of the lessons. Below, I state a list of objectives or proposals that I endorse, which are a result of my experience and my own feedback of the first year of teaching, the knowledge learned in the training courses, the lessons' observation process and the corresponding reflections:

- To introduce alternative strategies for solving exercises
- To encourage the involvement and motivation of students in their own learning process
- To apply more dynamic and interactive methodological techniques
- To generate a positive classroom environment motivating the learning process and student involvement

During my first year of teaching, my lessons were mostly based in a process in which firstly the exercises were presented, and then the solution was carefully explained to the students using a slides presentation. However, in some cases this caused an excessive passivity among students, who just copied the solutions without any further discussion about them. Thus, I considered that it was necessary to create a more interactive and participatory classroom environment where the resolution of practical exercises was strongly active.

During my second year teaching I had the chance to improve this lack of interaction in the classroom. Therefore, and after the analysis of the situation, I changed the way in which exercises were solved. Accordingly, once the exercise was presented to the students, I usually involved them in the process of resolution in several ways. Either individually, in pairs, or in small groups, students solved firstly the exercises, and only then the solution was explained for a better comprehension. Finally, the doubts they found during the process were collectively solved. Furthermore, in order to obtain maximum attention throughout the session, I randomly asked students during the resolution of the exercises.

The dynamism of the lessons and the involvement of the group were gradually increased and, most importantly, I received a positive feedback from the students. Additionally, after the experience of the first year, I noticed the need to explain some specific calculations or some other issues in much more detail. For this reason I increased the use of the blackboard as an additional tool to the slides, which strongly contributed to a better clarification of some concepts.

Another change that I introduced in my teaching was the encouragement to my students to attend my extra tutorial time, since during my first year of teaching there was a low attendance. Considering the essential role of these tutorials on the students learning process, I specially promoted their use as an alternative mechanism of my teaching. During the lessons I used to indicate which additional exercises they could solve and I encouraged them to attend the tutorial allocated slots in order to discuss the results once the exercises were solved by themselves. Besides, I used to remember them every day that they can use tutorials to solve doubts and to clarify any concept. Therefore, I achieved a higher tutorial attendance, both virtual and face-to-face, in comparison with my first year.

5. Conclusions

To conclude this study and as a final reflection, I would primarily highlight the great value that the participation in an initiative addressed to new teachers has for the novice. All the activities involved in the program, the mentoring process and the chance to develop a proposal of improvement or innovation in the teaching process, give the newly-come teachers a support to guide their initial years. The generalised lack of a teacher training basis of the novices gives an increasing importance to the fact of having basic resources that support us in the development of our educational tasks. Therefore, initiatives such as the program of training and mentoring addressed to new teachers developed at the University Jaume I (Castellón, Spain) guides our development in the early years of academic dedication.

From my own experience, participation in the training courses within the initiative, lessons' observations, self-assessment reports, the role of an experimented teacher in the mentoring process, the reflections and analysis that accompanied every process and the support of the Educational Support Unit, and the other colleagues participants in the program, have importantly affected my teaching practice perceiving a significant improvement over the first year of my university teaching. Additionally, the development and implementation of a teaching improvement - in my case I introduced a more interactive and motivating methodology which promoted participation and students' involvement - has achieved the proposed objectives and I obtained a positive feedback from the students. Besides, it is important to follow a continuous process of teaching improvement, always looking for the best practices to be implemented.

Therefore, and based on my own experience as a recent new teacher, I would like to stress the important role of these initiatives which guide the initial teaching process, and the importance of the promotion of these programs oriented towards the initial training of new university teachers. Thus, I highly recommend to the future novice teachers their participation on them and I would like that this own experience encourages them to enrol these programs.

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