

Innovations, passing fads and serious questions to consider (Editorial)

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The University of Seville recently published a new version of the Experimental System for the Evaluation of the Teaching Activity. Reading the dimensions evaluated, I found that, for the University, any hint of stability seems to be negative *per se*. In the development of excellent teaching projects, the rating is only achieved if things are changed. The wording is not geared toward a calm analysis of what aspects of the process need to be improved (and subsequently, changed), but rather to *change* it. This reminded me of the content of a speech I gave at an AECA conference (Arquero, 2012). I think it is more than relevant to bring back some of the ideas that we discussed there and that from my role as reviewer in many journals and editor in this one, I see that they are not clear enough for many.

Innovations and changes in education must provide an answer to a problem, and above all, if they are successful, their end is no longer be an innovation. That is, good innovation is the one that ceases to be an innovation and becomes the next normal way of doing things (it becomes *institutionalised*). If the problem is solved, then no further changes are required! Change for the sake of change is absurd, and, unfortunately, the literature on teaching innovations is full of happy ideas that lead nowhere, at least in a sustainable way.

Changes in processes must obey a utilitarian objective and must respond to a process of rigorous analysis and reflection that, at least, contemplates the following questions:

1. Which is the problem that I want to solve?
2. What are the causes of this problem, and can they be solved by our field of action?
3. What proven solutions or alternatives are there?
4. Are they applicable (efficiently) in the context of our problem?
5. Are they sustainable over time and capable of surviving a generalised application?

While there is often a reflection on what the problem is, very often there is no serious analysis of the second question (causes). Without a correct diagnosis of the causes, it is extremely difficult to find an adequate solution.

Assuming that there is a proper diagnosis, the next step (3) is to find a solution. This requires a process of critical analysis of the literature to consider the best alternatives. The literature on innovations is useful for the possible transferability of its results. This is why we insist that these papers should always include an analysis of the key aspects that have influenced the positive results, especially if there are contextual factors that cannot be reproduced in other areas, and a reflection on the limitations and factors that prevent their generalisation. This allows a proper assessment of the usability by other teachers in other subjects and contexts (transferability).

My perception, having reviewed dozens of papers and participated in countless conversations on the subject, is that, very often, the innovation process starts with an attempt to implement the "solutions" to which one has access. That is to say, someone attends to a course on innovation in which they talk about, e.g., scape rooms or flipped learning, and the idea of applying it in the classroom comes up, without any further reflection on whether it is necessary, the best option, or under what conditions it is efficient.

The fourth question is about suitability. Subjects are different, students enrolling in different degrees have substantially different characteristics, motivations, etc. (e.g., Arquero, Fernández, Hassall, and Joyce, 2015; Arquero, Fernández and Valladares, 2017), so the ways of approaching teaching cannot be the same. Focusing on innovations, what works perfectly well for the subject "Open

creation in drawing" in the Fine Arts Degree, may not work at all for "Short-term finance" in Business Administration and Management. The objectives of the degrees, the competences to be developed, the characteristics of the contents to be taught, and the personal characteristics and profiles of the students are completely different. Even with similar degrees and students, personal, contextual, and cultural factors are decisive in assessing the chances of long-term successful implementation. In this respect, Elias et al. (2003) point to the following groups of causes for the failure of institutionalisation and transfer of innovations:

- lack of identification and recognition of persistent institutional characteristics,
- the attempt to reproduce decontextualised "packages of measures",
- inadequate management of resources, mainly time, and
- inadequate attention to the personal characteristics of the actors in the process.

When assessing sustainability, resources (especially time) are, in my experience, one of the most constraining aspects for the institutionalisation of innovations and one of the most frequently cited among the limitations found in any paper (e.g. Monclús, 2010; Carrasco et al., 2018, etc.). There is a basic premise that cannot be ignored: The time available (for both students and teachers) is limited. If a given innovation requires more time than is considered reasonable by the actors involved, it will not be feasible. Unfortunately, most active and innovative methodologies are much more time-consuming than traditional ones: time, for the learner, class time and teachers' time. Either there are corrective mechanisms (weighting in assessment, reduced coverage in the syllabus, etc.), or they are doomed to failure in the long run.

Finally, it is necessary to consider whether the innovation is able to survive a generalised application. This aspect can have a devastating effect on institutionalisation, as evidenced by González et al. (2014), who showed that the simultaneous application of innovations (intensive in the consumption of resources) in many subjects at the same time led to a serious limitation in the consolidation of competence-based training and a return to traditional pedagogy, aggravated by the lack of adaptation of infrastructures and the persistence of very large groups of students (60-80 students per class). In other innovations, the failure of their generalisation may derive from the simple loss of novelty, which eliminates the Hawthorne effect (when everyone else does it, it ceases to attract attention).

In conclusion, innovation is a very serious business that requires a lot of previous thinking, clam reading, and reflection and only when the lines of action are very clearly defined, then, action. "Trial and error" approaches are something that simply cannot be afforded.

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