Quality Criteria in Distance Teaching of Art Subjects

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Any efforts made to achieve a "quality culture" in university education regardless of the body backing them, are laudable and necessary. The purpose of this paper is to reflect on how these measures have influenced, or are influencing, Fine Arts studies, specifically those subjects that are taught virtually. Aside from the different internal and external evaluations courses undergo, a series of criteria need to be established, which enable any tutor who ventures into virtual training to check if a desired quality level is reached.

Keywords: quality; drawing; distance training

1. Introduction

The two basic pillars on which the Process of Convergence with Europe in Higher Education rests are academic quality and professional training. They seem to be two concepts we all agree on, especially the first, which a university should always ensure. Academic quality is understood to be intrinsic to an institution with the highest educational level and for years this has been accepted as fact. As a result, the different bodies responsible for a university have established a series of criteria to standardise the concept of quality.

A basic aspect to bear in mind is the concept of quality in different educational levels. On the one hand, these concepts condition our teaching, but, on the other, they can go beyond our competence if they are part of other aspects of teaching. We must concentrate on those criteria, which, as tutors, we can use to improve our teaching and confirm whether it can be considered "quality". Another of the points that will be taken into account in this paper is adapting these criteria to teaching subjects as particular as art ones, especially when taught in distance courses.

Firstly, we differentiate between quality criteria in the way a subject is structured and criteria that refer to its content.

2. Quality of Structure

A defining characteristic of distance teaching is the use of virtual environments so that the subject can be followed from anywhere. The design of this environment is fundamental for the success of the teaching.

Regardless of the platform we use to teach the subject and relate to the student, it is obvious that we will have to rewrite the contents of our subject and convert our notes into multimedia resources, interactive images, videos, sound… This process is essential for the success of our teaching because we need to provide easy and fast access to the subject's contents for independent learning.

Therefore, the design is fundamental, and it is not always paid enough attention. Reading notes or a book is not the same as reading on a computer screen, which must never become something boring or monotonous. For a start, the resolution of a written text is at least five times more than the text on the screen, and, therefore, reading the latter is not as pleasant. Even if we enlarge the text with other computer resources, we only manage to deform it, or, in the worst scenario, lose the screen's proportion and the context in which the text is placed. Consequently, the format, the resolution, the light… means that

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we read about 25% slower on a computer screen than on paper and it is more difficult for us to understand and remember what we are reading.

From this we can deduce that we need to configure our teaching materials to overcome this first hurdle. Some of the recommendations put forward are as follows:

- Converting the text into hypertext. We change from a text that can only be read in one way to another that offers several alternatives and which helps students to tailor the subject to their interests. We can obtain the first objective by using short texts with clear ideas and links to more detailed texts, images, videos and so on with increasing complexity. The key concept is "interactivity", which cuts through the text's linearity. The recommendation is for there to be links between the contents and to link subject areas in case the student wants to visit the information right immediately.

- Aid reading graphically. After we have configured the text, we have to use the graphic resources that are at our disposal to aid reading. These resources include the font type –the "sans-serif" ones (Verdana, Arial) are more legible than the "serif" ones (Times)-, the size –between 10 and 12 points-, the use of colour –avoiding strident ones and the clash between primary ones (blue, red and yellow)-, etc. The use of boxes to highlight what is most important helps to achieve this objective.

- Making browsing easy with the use of menus and maps that guide students and tell them where they can be found at all times.

- Page design. Information overload has to be avoided, as it does nothing more than obstruct the main idea we want to convey. In addition, the design has to include blank areas so that the eyes can rest and, lastly, the page length has to be controlled, so that the scroll bar does not have to be used.

- Suitability of the graphic elements. The use of photographs, videos and illustrations should be obligatory. If the medium allows, we should use them. But we should bear in mind that these graphic elements must be consistent with the subject or the main idea and avoid anything that is superfluous. We must also tailor the size and resolution to the most usual browsers so that downloading can be fast. 92 ppp is sufficient and we can always provide a link with more resolution if it is to be printed.

In the case of teaching art subjects, the visual part should be more important than the text part. The use of multimedia interactive presentations that show work processes are seen as a priority. There are different exercises in the virtual subject "Scientific Illustration", which can be followed independently. Fig. 1.

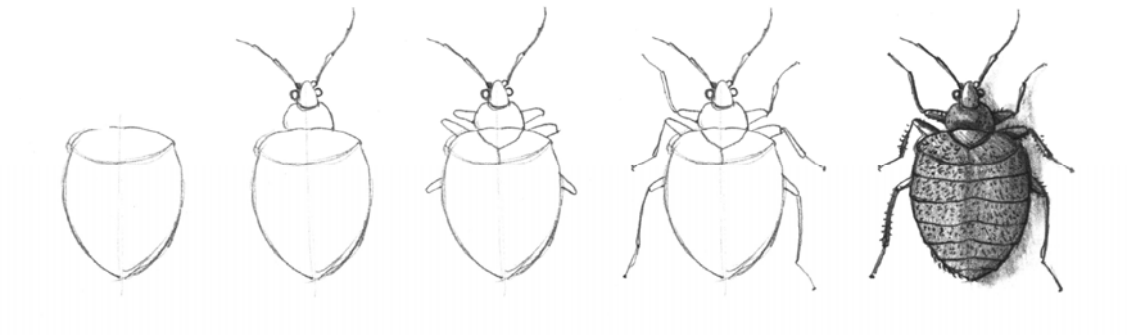

Fig. 1 *Drawing of an insect*. Example of the illustration process of an insect that forms part of an interactive multimedia presentation. Students, with an original insect, follow the work process at the pace they want.

3. Quality in the Contents

It is more complicated to establish the way in which acceptable quality levels can be obtained. Firstly, we will have to establish which sections we will give prominence to in order to obtain the required level. Different institutions (ANECA, AGAE, ENQA...) provide us with some criteria.

3.1 Quality Criteria

- Policy and Procedures to Guarantee Quality

When we create a virtual subject, we need to bear in mind the quality controls it will be subjected to. In this paper, we are taking it for granted that these controls exist, but we want tutors to work independently and to control their quality process at all times. Therefore, tutors should promise their students in the introduction to the course that they will establish a culture that recognises the importance of quality and quality guarantee in their work. They have to explain what their strategy is going to be in order to constantly highlight quality, how this is going to be announced and how students are going to participate in it. We propose carrying out a survey at the beginning and end of the course, which includes sections, such as explanation of the programme, definition and obtainment of objectives, level of satisfaction with the contents…

- Approval, Monitoring and Periodic Assessment of Programmes and Requirements

It is a usual practice to draw up course programmes based on what we believe we should teach. But what we should take into account is what the student must learn. When establishing the objectives of the course we add skills, abilities… which the student exceeds. But in the majority of the cases, they are no more than an adaptation of a previous syllabus. Establishing the contents of the course and then its objectives is not a method that leads to quality, because if the objectives are not reached, it is not our mistake.

Firstly, we have to establish some clear, precise and real objectives in line with the level of the course and its environment (other courses, educational level of the centre…) and only then can be proceed to draw up the syllabus, whose only aim will be to reach the objectives. Next, we must take into account mechanisms to correct any errors detected every year, by modifying the syllabus, not the objectives.

In order to achieve the level of quality required, the programmes cannot be limited to the usual sections (introduction, objectives, syllabus, assessment, activities and references), which are the result of an educational system that is going to change. Instead we have to include new elements that help to understand our teaching. It is especially important to plan different means of participation in virtual teaching so that students can always feel their tutor's presence. Forums, chats and emails make this task easier, but we can also include alternative ways of approaching the course and different structures for the subjects, which adapt them to the students' varying capacities. Because we must not forget that our interest is for objectives to be reached, not for them to know a syllabus.

- Student Assessment

The students should be assessed using public criteria, rules and procedures that are applied consistently. Evaluation processes in Fine Arts are, in many cases, confused, subjective and random. Assessment criteria appear in each programme and these should be announced at the beginning of the course. However, students do not always have a clear idea of this information. We should make an effort to explain the evaluation systems so that students can know how this subject is assessed in this Department.

Nevertheless, the assessment criteria cannot be a list of points with their equivalent in the final grade. They have to be designed to confirm that the objectives have been met and that these can be measured. They have to be clear, public and understood by all the participants in the educational process. The new educational challenge forces us to take into account all possible means of examination, how a student's illness can be made up for, or any other contingency. Furthermore, this assessment system has to be compatible and recognisable in all the EU states.

Some of us tutors have been asking for the assessment in art subjects not to depend on just one tutor's grade. One solution could be the introduction of a board of examiners, a group of tutors teaching contiguous subjects, who can help us to evaluate the students objectively.

- Guarantee of Teaching Staff Quality

Institutions should have a means of ensuring that the staff involved in teaching the students is suitable and competent to do so. We must be prepared to accept external evaluations and comments on our activities. But what we are proposing is for students to be part of this quality guarantee of their tutor. We can

include a curriculum in the presentation that allows students to evaluate their tutor's capacity to teach this subject. This would not only gain us respect, but it would also allow us to keep on updating it with our ongoing training.

- Teaching Resources and Student Support

Institutions must ensure that the resources available for supporting student learning are sufficient and suitable for each programme offered. We could talk about the connection between the material available and the programme offered, because we cannot offer a programme that cannot be taught because of material impossibility. There has to be a balance between what we offer and the material we have or hope to have and one must not serve as an excuse for the other.

- Public Information Systems

We must obtain those mechanisms that guarantee the analysis of our activity, what is being done well, what needs more attention or how to update practical work. To do that we have to consider data connected with the type of students that follow our course, their development in the Faculty, their level of satisfaction with the programme and finding employment after they have graduated.

When students connect with the platform chosen and discover that it has these six criteria, they will realise, at least, that this is a course and a tutor that are concerned about achieving an acceptable level of quality.

3.2 Future Challenges in the EHEA

The different directives for the European Higher Education Area have raised a series of challenges that every University must accept in order to adapt its studies and we are going to see whether art subject teaching in a virtual format complies with them.

- Increase in Demand for Higher Education

With virtual courses the number of students can be significantly increased, and thus absorb the possible demand that occurs in the subject. Fundamentally theoretical courses fare better than those where practical work is fundamental. When we started to teach "Scientific Illustration" in the classroom, we had to impose a limit of 25 students because it was impossible to deal with more during class time and to solve their problems at the same time. Now, virtually, we can accept 50.

- Internationalisation of Education and Research

As a result of its exchange programme, the University of Granada attracts a good number of Europeans who come to complete their education. One of the changes that we have observed in going from classroom to virtual teaching is the increase in the number of foreigners who matriculate. We believe it is easier for them to follow a course over the Internet at their own pace, with time and tools to translate what they do not understand, than a traditional course, where, as we have seen, they get lost in the labyrinth of the language and end up dropping out.

- Developing Close and Effective Cooperation between Universities and Industry

This section is difficult to comply with in Fine Arts because our work does not have a direct application with industry. At the moment there is virtually none and we have not noticed any sign of this changing.

- The Multiplication of Places for Knowledge Production

It is evident that virtuality allows us to break through the classroom's four walls and take knowledge anywhere in the world.

- Reorganisation of Knowledge

We must be prepared for society's new challenges and configure our studies in a flexible way to be able to adapt to new subjects, focuses or lines of research. Virtual platforms enable this updating to be ongoing.

- The Appearance of New Expectations

We expect constant teaching to be a trend that is continuously on the rise. Continuing education will force us to diversify our teaching and offer knowledge updating courses or courses for those that cannot go to university. We can establish two means of accessing our virtual environment: one for matriculated students and another only for those interested. In our case, we establish lines of specialisation for those that want to know some more about a subject or to fill in the gaps they start off with. Fig. 2.

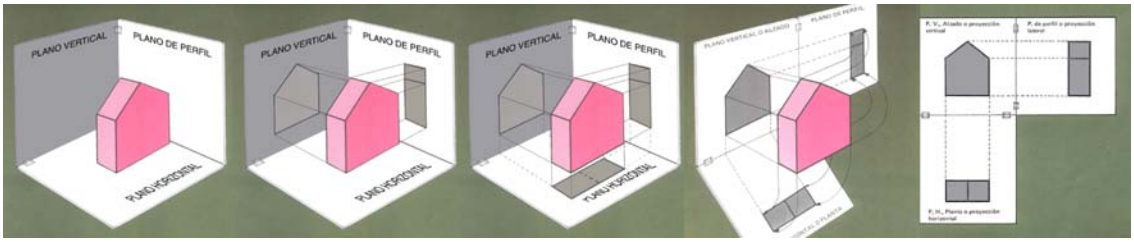

Fig. 2 *Dihedral Perspective. Example of an interactive multimedia presentation for learning the fundamentals of perspective. Although this is not part of the "Scientific Illustration" syllabus, it is included for those students that do not have this basic knowledge.*

We have seen that out of the six challenges raised by the EHEA, we comply with five with our distance art subject teaching, and, with well-organised and rigorous work, we can convert traditional "academy" education into something live, up-to-date and effective and we can teach drawing to all those interested.

Acknowledgements. This information has been prepared as a result of the University Staff Training Programme of the UCUA (Unit for the Quality of Andalusian Universities)

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