

Project-based Learning for Teaching Transmedia Communication

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ABSTRACT

This case narrates the experience and shows the results of research study conducted at the National University of La Rioja (Argentina) where Project-Based Learning (PBL) strategies were implemented for the making of a transmedia documentary which was central to the students training in a particular class, which is part of the last year of the Social Communication Programme.

KEYWORDS: PBL; Transmedia Communication; Projects; Digital Communication

DESCRIPTION OF THE CONTEXT

The National University of La Rioja (UNLaR) is one of the 55 national universities in Argentina. The university headquarters are located in the capital city of the province but it also owns smaller offices all around the province.

This National University was created in 1972 as a provincial university and eventually turned into a national university in December 1993. It has approximately 25,000 students.

Multimedia Communication Course in Social Communication

In 2009 a new curriculum was enforced in the Social Communication Programme at the UNLaR, these modifications were made in order to face the emergence of new formats in communication such as digital communication. This was something new and no other universities had included it in their study programmes until then.

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With this new curriculum, in the year 2012 the Multimedia Communication course was established. Taking into consideration the new institutional profile, the establishment of this course implied the development of multimedia communication skills in students taking the fourth and last year of the Social Communication Programme (in both specializations: Journalism and Institutional Communication and Advertising).

Just as Mora (2004; 20) states, “the new demands in the system of higher education are not only related to knowledge itself but they also relate to the training of individuals in a more complex whole of competences that includes knowledge and the skills and attitudes that a job position requires”. This is why “learning to learn” was key in the teaching – learning process of digital communication since knowledge in this area is constantly changing and information is rapidly outdated. In this sense, a life-long learning process is a must for the new professionals in the Communication field.

From the very beginning, the course of Digital Communication met two huge challenges: which contents to include and how to teach them. In this sense, having considered the fact that methodologies at universality level are not usually updated and adapted to this new and complex scenario of young students constantly stimulated by technological devices, some changes in methodology were proposed.

THEORETICAL AND PEDAGOGICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to face this local, regional and institutional reality “Project-based Learning offers the opportunity to implement student-centered approaches” (Maldonado, 2008, p. 172). These professional practices in class, help students to have a better understanding of the context and therefore, they can be inserted more easily in the labor market.

In this sense, Aguaded (2011, p. 15) states that: “the processes and results in the teaching-learning process have undergone significant changes because of the introduction of new technologies and media”. The use of these new technologies and resources, responds to an emergent need on students, so they can be give professional answers and solutions, in changing and complex times.

Nowadays, we can find different meanings and modalities of the so-called Problem-Based Learning influenced by constructivism itself, particularly by approaches to information processing, situated cognition and sociocultural psychology. Among these new meanings and modalities, Project-Based Learning (PBL) stands out. This work was based on this approach.

As stated by Fernández et al. (2006, p. 400) “Project Based Learning is part of Problem-Based Learning”, although there are similarities and also some differences, both are part of an approach on the rise which is being widely used at universities.

Using this method is mainly about an integrated approach based on activities that encourage reflection, also about complex thought, cooperation and decision-making.

IMPLEMENTATION AND CONCRETE ACTIONS

How are we supposed to teach the contents that are constantly changing? What should be taught about these contents? How are these contents supposed to be reduced and adapted within the huge field of digital communication? These were the questions that challenged our teaching practice and they were also the starting point for the design, planning and development of this university course that bases its method on PBL.

Teaching the contents that change year after year and considering digital communication as something that is not part of a traditional communication model was our proposal from the very beginning. That is how the new model of project-based work appeared naturally as well as this possibility for students to build their own knowledge and of being active participants of their own learning, among the methodological differences that started to be applied.

In this sense, Bron and Bazán (2015, p. 6) affirm that “experimentation in new forms of teaching becomes a necessity”. It is now when the paradigm of the collaborative culture and the opening for the student to build their own knowledge and be an active participant of their own learning, becomes fundamental.

Transmedia as Part of the Strategy

The Project assigned during 2017 was released during the whole academic year and for all the group of students: “Project Victoria Romero”. In this project, students had to make a transmedia documentary about the life of Victoria Romero, a local heroin. It should be considered that the relevance of the transmedia format as a project was the result of the characteristics of adaptation of the transmedia narrative itself to the pedagogical approach based on PBL, developed by the previously mentioned course.

The concept of transmedia storytelling was first introduced by Henry Jenkins in an article published in *Technology Review* in 2002. In this article, Jenkins stated that “we have entered a new era of media convergence which makes the influx of contents through different channels inevitable.” (Scolari, 2013:23)

Following Jenkins (2013), means of communication do what they know best, and thus “a story can be introduced in a film, expand on TV, novels or comics and this world can later on be explored in a videogame. Each franchise has to be independent enough to allow an independent consumption. That means, one does not have to watch the film in order to understand the videogame and viceversa” (Scolari, 2013:24). This is why, the idea that a story can be told through different media is highlighted, which allows the optimization and maximization of the characteristic of media and their particular possibilities.

Most certainly, transmedia storytelling is a very peculiar narrative that can be expanded through different systems of meaning (verbal, iconic, audiovisual, interactive, etc.) and different media (films, comics, TV, videogames, theatre, etc.). This is not about adaptation from one language to the other: the stories told in different media are not the same story, but they all contribute to the creation of a narrative world that comprises different media and different messages with an extended tale.

As it has been stated already, transmedia storytelling entails a common experience that comprises different media and devices, all of them tied by the same narrative thread.

Transmedia is trending, and, without doubt, as Carlos Scolari (2014: 173) affirms, “the concept of transmedia will be able to go out of fashion, just as it happened with multimedia, but the transmedia narrative logics are here to stay”. Transmedia storytelling offers plenty of possibilities to generate strategies around a narrative world.

Considering this changing reality of format and narrative adapted to the new culture - a tendency that has been growing in the past years - and a number of possibilities that have moved recipients from their passive role, transmedia constitute a great possibility which also has its impact on education.

In this sense, “Project Victoria Romero”, benefited from the transmedia project applied to the teaching and learning processes in which the multiplicity of formats and its immersive feature were key in its development. In this development, the three stages of teaching proposed by Jenkins (1991) take place (precreative, interactive and postactive), and contributes to the university study program in which “a wide variety of significant academic contents from the fields of highly specialized knowledge close to the world of work are concentrated” (Morandi & Ungaro, 2014, p. 99).

The proposal and the experience

The experimental aspect centered in pedagogical innovation has been a feature of the work in the class of Multimedia Communication. In this sense, *Project Victoria Romero* was an explorative program of development, research and educational innovation.

The object of this project was the creation, development, implementation and study of a transmedia story about local hero Victoria Romero collectively told for educational purposes.

The project involves the creation of a non-fictional narrative world built by different elements and contents that gave the audience the possibility of having an active participation in the different media in which the stories were told. These tales were about the most representative heroes and heroines of the local history in connection to the fight for Federalism in Argentina (in 2016, similar projects were carried out about Facundo Quiroga and “Chacho” Peñaloza, another two local heroes).

By means of this project, the different educational uses of transmedia practices in the learning and teaching processes for the development of skills needed for digital communication and the active participation of students in their own professional training have been explored.

Because of the characteristics of this annual activity, the professors decided to base the project on the stories of significant local heroes and heroines. This was so, not only because it would motivate students more but also because it would involve the whole community that generally feels attracted by these types of local stories and personalities. Following Jenkins and his analysis of transmedia storytelling through the study of the activity of participant consumers and their contributions to the main story by creating content that expands the narrative world, the professors proposed an analysis of the transmedia storytelling from a pedagogical viewpoint was inquired in this project. This was based on the interest in new digital skills with the intention of analyzing the student’s digital immersion and the cognitive, social and emotional consequences in the development of a transmedia story; the motivations of the recipients to tell the story of the personalities and their peculiarities were of particular interest.

Furthermore, the complexity of this project and its experimental and exploratory nature entailed a very important interdisciplinary work which allowed the building of a narrative world particularly designed for educational purposes.

The design of this project included three main objectives:

- Designing a narrative storytelling including activities that may provide the opportunity to get to know these historical figures.
- Analyzing the pedagogical benefits of the use of transmedia storytelling in students from high school level and primary level (only students in the last years).
- Describing the impacts of the use of narrative storytelling in the digital immersion of students and its cognitive, social and emotional implications.

The development of this project was modified by the introduction of different contents, which resulted in different experiences and results.

Victoria Romero as content and objective of PBL

In the year 2016, a PBL project named “Caudillos Riojanos” (heroes from La Rioja) was carried out (available at www.proyectocaudillos.com).

In 2017, it was decided to continue with the telling of the stories of local heroes and the focus was put on a local heroin this time: Victoria Romero. Victoria, “Doña Vito”, Romero was a neglected personality in Argentinian history and a particularly crucial heroin for Federalism and our formation as a country” (Bron, 2017, p. 12). The transmedia project about her can be found at www.victoriaromero.com.ar.

The project Victoria Romero was centered in the recovery of the historical memory of “Doña Vito”, the wife of Ángel “Chacho” Peñaloza (another local hero) as a heroin of Argentinian Federalism. As stated in the book that is part of the result of this transmedia work, the project pursue “to go back to the story of Victoria, to bring her back to life in Argentinian society, and to show how certain figures have been neglected in the official Argentinian history” (Bron, 2017, p.12). All of it with the goal of students reached new personal, emotional and professional skills working together, discussing and obtaining mutual feedback further the school and the classroom.

The parts of the product

In order to comply with the transmedia characteristics of the project, different contents were addressed. This can be found in full form in the website www.victoriaromero.com. This also represents the starting point (one of the possible ones) of the universe that contributes to the transmedia storytelling.

During the teaching process, the slogans and objectives to be met were delivered to the students. Afterwards, the students inquired about the story and narrative possibilities, taking into account the different techniques and possibilities of digital and transmedia communication.

As the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (2002) argues, “it is very important that all stakeholders or stakeholders have clarity about the objectives, so that the project is planned and completed effectively.”

In this project, carried out during a full academic year, the teaching team has explained and detailed (at the beginning of the course) all the essential elements and expectations regarding the project.

Initial situation (first month of work):

- Situation or problem: The problem that the project sought to address or solve was described. In this case, it was to make Victoria Romero's life known in an innovative and creative way.
- Description and purpose of the project: The goal of the project was explained and how it addresses this situation: Making the citizenship of La Rioja (particularly children and youth) become actively involved in the recovery of Victoria's historical memory, as the main focus of the narration.
- Performance specifications: A list of historical, aesthetic and communication criteria were assigned, in the form of quality standards that the project had to meet.
- Rules: Guides or instructions to develop the project. Budgeted times (8 months) and different short-term goals were included, such as: content calendars, documentary presentation, school activities, etc.
- List of participants in the project and assigned roles: A basic general team design with predetermined roles such as leader, editor, informant, etc. was included. Next, the working group defined subgroups based on their own needs detected by the students. For example, audiovisual production group, advertising, social media, etc.
- Evaluation: It was explained how the assessment of student performance would be carried out through different instruments: evaluation of the teaching team, self-evaluation of the student and evaluation by peers.

Reviewing the different recommendations for the implementation of an activity based on Collaborative Projects Learning, we worked with the suggestions made by Dr. Lourdes Galeana (2006) from the University of Colima in Mexico and adjusted the process as follows:

A) Starting point:

- The topic related to the narrative of the life story of Victoria Romero was defined. We worked on facilitating a discussion of the topic with the whole class.
- Programs, partial goals and evaluation methods were established.
- Resources were identified. By working within a public university in the interior region of Argentina with insufficient resources, self-financing alternatives were established.
- The objectives of the project are established to fulfill the central objective that consisted in making known the life of Victoria Romero through a transmedia narrative.
- The teams were formed, establishing a frequency of mandatory meetings twice a week (2 hours each), located in the same university class.

B) Initial activities of the teams

- Pre-production or preliminary planning was used to share knowledge on the class and suggest possible tasks for the team (there were students in charge of historical research and to share the information with the rest of the members).
- A tentative calendar was established as well as a list of possible contents and activities for the achievement of the objectives.
- An estimated work plan was developed where the students defined the deadlines, the division of the project into tasks and assigned responsibilities for the 18 team members.
- Feedback from the team of teachers. In each of the weekly meetings, the teachers gave partial feedback about the progress with positive and negative points.

C) Implementation of the project

- The work plan was divided into a sequence of tasks, each with its programming and goal.
- With the approval of the teachers, the teams continuously adjusted the definition of the project.
- Throughout the process, team members took part in collaborative learning and cooperative problem solving.
- A self-evaluation and a mutual evaluation were carried out among the members of the teams. Both the teachers and the students did their evaluation and gave feedback.
- The final result of the project was a product, which (following the transmedia logic) had different related parties.

D) Conclusion from the students' perspective

- In the final review stage, the project was completed and the product was polished, it contained an audiovisual documentary as a central axis, as well as a public presentation or the interaction of the characters on social networks.
- For the final evaluation, a constructive feedback session was held where the whole class participated with the teachers.
- As a closure, the students and the teams analyzed their products, presentations or partial activities and concluded with the closing of the teaching team.
- At all times, the discussion and general evaluation of the project were facilitated in class.
- During the 8 months that the project lasted, a record of notes and files was made that facilitated reflection and documentation about the project.

As a result of the work done by the students, among the produced contents the following stand out:

- a) Webisodes: web episodes in capsule format where the character's story is told in chapters of less than 5 minutes.

- b) Documentary: is the centerpiece of the work that integrates the narrative from a traditional documentary format
(available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mIIFiasB6FA>).
- c) Draw my Life: animation motion picture using freehand technique, which allowed to reach the children's audience.
- d) Whatsapp episodes: copies of the webisodes to be shared via WhatsApp, after readapting the format and reducing its duration (1 minute per chapter).
- e) Quizzes in a “trivia” format.
- f) Hip-hop style song.
- g) Interventions in public spaces, means of communication and schools.
- h) Website: www.victoriaromero.com.ar
- i) Social media (Victoria Romero’s profile, fan page of the project, Youtube, Flickr).
- j) Book: The students were authors of this work narrating the different steps taken to carry out the project, its benefits and learnings (available at <http://libro-e.click/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/09.-Victoria-Romero-El-Valor-Riojano.pdf>).
- k) Participation of the audience: channeled through social networks.

* The complete project can be seen at www.victoriaromero.com.ar

FINAL REFLECTIONS

As has been shown, during the whole process of the Victoria Romero project, a series of contents for different media have been developed and actions have been taken. These actions have permitted the contents to promote their peculiarities by their integration to a very complex transmedia project signaled by its educational purposes intended to different audiences.

Furthermore, the interaction of the users made it possible to show the interest on the story and to keep a record of the necessities of each of the audiences. Acquiring knowledge, concerns, motivations and interests on the part of the recipients, made it possible to adapt some contents to the ongoing project.

Most certainly, the objectives of the project have been fully accomplished because the main educational purpose with the students in the Social Communication Programme was fulfilled. They were the developers of the Project Victoria Romero along with the professors of Multimedia Communication and they have proven to execute the PBL modality efficiently and successfully.

Similarly, based on the experience of transmedia education with the final recipients of the product (primary level students and secondary level students in their first years), the project met its goals connected to an educational and cultural activity in the sense that it

contributed enormously to the identity of the culture of La Rioja in the everyday life of its people.

As regards the process of investigation and action, besides the educational research, records of the recipients have permitted to generate new developments for the project. What is more, some broadcasting strategies could be rectified and some media and messages could be reconsidered.

Among the main advantages identified by Coria (2011, p. 5) in relation to the use of projects in educational processes we find that:

After the full year dedicated to the Victoria Romero project, it has been encouraged that students can think and act in the design of a project. Elaborating a plan with defined strategies, to give a solution to a question and not only to fulfill curricular objectives.

In addition, emotional, intellectual and personal growth was stimulated through direct experiences with people and students located in different contexts related to experimentation in digital communication.

In the same way, students learned different techniques for solving problems and working collaboratively, as well as learning to evaluate the work of their peers, and to give constructive feedback to themselves and their peers.

Undoubtedly, the process of developing a project of these characteristics allowed and encouraged students to experiment and obtain learning through their own discoveries and mistakes, facing and overcoming difficult and unexpected challenges.

As a closure, we remember that researchers such as Jenkins (2006) and Scolari (2010) have suggested many times that it may be known where a storytelling begins but it may never be known where it ends. The Victoria Romero Project relies on this statement and moves forward so it does not stop. The narrative record which resulted from the research work, makes it possible to improve the results year after year and to rectify mistakes they may have been committed.

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