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A CO-ASSESSMENT, COMPETENCE-BASED APPROACH IN AN ONLINE BUSINESS COURSE IN THE COVID-19 EMERGENCY CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Case-study-based learning is an essential tool in Management education, especially in decision-making and leadership courses. This is of utmost importance in the context of emergency due to Covid-19, where online training is essential and which does present a challenge in its assessment. This paper presents a summative co-assessment approach to a case-study-based Management course, which involves self-assessment as well as the evaluation of the instructor, with the aim to improve the engagement of the students by involving them in their own assessment. With the aim to measure the acquirement of these competences by the students with the resolution of case-studies, this study was carried out as part of a third year course on the subject of Strategic Business Management in the Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration taught in a Spanish Business School. This work attempts to fill the perceived gap in the literature on approaches that enhance the engagement of the students by using case-studies and co-assessment of not only the work performed but also of the skills acquired. It is our objective to demonstrate the validity of the proposed co-assessment approach.

Keywords: Active Learning, Co-Assessment, Self-Assessment, Case-Study-Based Learning

INTRODUCTION

The concept of competence was first defined and applied by Robert W. White (White, 1959), who explicitly defined a competence as the ability of an individual to interact effectively with the environment, as long as it is learned and not biologically driven. More specifically, competence is closely related to motivation, as learners will focus on areas of ability in which competence is perceived, reinforcing the competence in such areas.

David C. McClelland (McClelland, 1973) highlighted the significance of this concept, questioning the validity of conventional intelligence and ability tests. McClelland stated that these conventional tests do not accurately represent the abilities that are essential in the working world and proposed a test to evaluate competences as an alternative to intelligence tests, providing some instructions on how to perform this evaluation. His work became a seminal study in the field of introducing competences in the human resources area, both for staff selection and management, as well as for performance evaluation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

McClelland's generic proposal was completed with a competency dictionary by Spencer and Spencer (Spencer & Spencer, 1993), which included definitions extracted from interviews on over 200 job positions. The authors also defined competence as "an underlying characteristic of an individual that is causally related to criterion-referenced effective and/or superior performance in a job or situation".

According to Levy-Leboyer (Levy-Leboyer, 1997), competences may be developed in three different ways

1. Before the integration into the labor market through prior training and education
2. During the professional career by means of adult training courses
3. Through the practice of one's professional activity.

It is important to highlight that experience plays an essential role in the acquisition of competences. Competences are developed along with a person's professional experience and can be acquired over the course of one's active life, which makes them very dynamic in nature. Furthermore, competences depend on a person's specific experiences and are directly related to the professional sector, the company, the place and even the time in which they are acquired. For this reason, companies are interested in knowing the specific competences that characterize their human resources.

Acquiring competence is a tiered process that reaches its peak when developing one's professional activity in a specific job position, company and environment. As such, despite any possible prior training, competence can only be fully developed, strictly speaking, when the experience factor is added –through the fulfillment of one's professional activity. Abilities and personality features allow for the characterization of individuals and explain the variations in their behaviors while performing specific tasks. In a similar manner, competences have an integral impact on abilities, personal features and the knowledge acquired in order to suitably fulfill a complex objective.

Dubois, et al., (2004) noted that the concept of competence and its wide range of definitions must be used in order to reliably describe the behavior, motivations and the knowledge related to the success or failure in one's working life. Currently, the understanding of the concept of competence is divided into two main schools of thought: the first one supports the idea of competence implying ability or knowledge; the second one understands competence as any other characteristic that supports a professional activity. In this second school, competence can include knowledge, ability or other characteristics such as the level of motivation or the personality features.

To summarize, competence can be understood as a combination of a worker's attributes, and the correct assimilation and integration of their training, experience and skills. To understand the profile and the optimum level of competence for a specific job and organization, the observable behaviors of high-profile workers must be analyzed, as stated by Blanco (Blanco, 2007). On the other hand, the development of competence seems to require the experience acquired with the performing of the specific professional activity inside the organization, as indicated by (Levy-Leboyer, 1997). However, this must not exclude the role of academic education, as educational activities will foster the development of competence and the awakening of the student's talents.

Education in European Universities is focused on the eventual integration of the students into the labor market; this has prompted the appearance of a growing concern over issues related to the improvement of the quality of education, see (Zabalza, 2004).

Can these competences be acquired during higher education –specifically, during University courses? Can professional competences be taught in a classroom? If professional competence is identified with a specific job position and professional profile, this makes it difficult to evaluate such competence in class: as stated by Oliveros (Oliveros, 2007), “competence cannot be thoroughly evaluated until it is utilized in a specific job position”.

Despite the complexity of the competence development process, Oliveros defines it as a progressive process divided into two stages: firstly, competence is created with some activities carried out during the training phase, in which the individual does not practice the behaviors, but the student can work on some of its components or features in the classroom; and secondly, its development in the workplace, where the technical behaviors are practiced in their corresponding professional context. The author also states that students should start practicing

these technical behaviors in University classrooms, in extra-curricular activities and in internships. The study concludes that the development of cross-curricular competences must be included in higher education curricula, as it should be considered a continuation of the development that started in previous levels of education, and that will later continue to be developed during professional practice.

For these reasons, European Universities make an effort to direct their programs to the labor market through exercises, case-studies and internships, both in person and online, so that students can understand real-life situations and work on behaviors that will create and develop professional competences. (Martínez et al., 2010) noted a growing concern in the Spanish Education System regarding the difference between competences fostered in University and competences required by organizations. Among the results obtained by their study, pronounced differences (deficiencies) could be highlighted between the level of competence acquired by the students and the level required by organizations in competences related to oral communication and comprehension, debating skills, critical and self-critical sense. The students had, however, a higher level than required in regards to initiative, autonomy, applying theoretical concepts and ethical commitment. According to the perception of the students, University education does not prepare adequately in competences such as emotional intelligence, communication, debate and listening skills, as well as time management; whereas, they perceive that their education gives more importance than it is required by the job market to teamwork and application of theoretical concepts. According to the perception of the faculty, University education is deficient in the application of analytical concepts, learning orientation and ethical commitment; while their perception is that more importance than necessary is given to competence on ICT use. The difference in these perceptions is made apparent in Martinez's study.

With this precedent, the objective of this study is to understand the perception of the level of competence that students believe to have acquired when solving case-studies and online class activities in the context of higher education during the Covid-19 pandemic. This is measured after each one of the practical activities proposed for the assessment of the students during a Strategic Business Management course. This perception is measured through a process of co-evaluation.

METHODOLOGY

Competences for which we will study their perceived development are selected from those established by the guide of the Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration program in a Spanish Business School. More specifically, they have been chosen from competences required by the syllabus of "Strategic Business Management", a fourth year core course of the aforementioned program. It should be noted that this course has been carried out online due to the emergency situation caused by Covid-19. The list of competences follows:

- Oral and written communication
- Interdisciplinary teamwork
- Data managing
- Understanding the limitations of knowledge and competence
- Understanding the obstacles and opportunities of the environment
- Social environment
- Problem analysis
- Understanding the organization of a business enterprise

These competences are mandatory and should be assessed throughout the online academic course. The development of these competences is essential to achieve the objectives of this course and they are acquired by means of case-studies and the resolution of real-life problems. The application of online learning tools has also proven (Osorno, 2018) to aid the learning process of such competences.

To foster and assess the acquirement of these competences, a series of online activities are proposed during the course. The activities correspond to six company cases that are studied over the course of Strategic Business Management. These cases include some local companies in the Spain and Barcelona area, as well as some multinational companies. The subject of the cases is also varied, ranging from more general topics such as motivation, corporate social responsibility and organizational culture, to more specific issues such as employer branding and intergenerational integration, among others. The cases chosen reflect the topics discussed in the theory lessons and provide examples of real-life problems that will help not only the consolidation of the concepts seen in class, but also ultimately, improve the employability of the students.

For each activity, the students are asked to make teams of 4 to 6 people and solve a business case-study with the knowledge acquired during the online lectures. To this end, the teams are given a document with the initial information of the case and the instructions to follow. The students then study the situation together using the virtual campus and videoconference rooms, and use the concepts presented throughout the course to eventually propose a suitable strategy that the company could apply, and they present their conclusions to the rest of the class in a videoconference session.

After the resolution, the students are asked to self-assess the level of competence that they believe to have applied and acquired during the resolution of the case in a 10-point scale. This is evaluated by means of an online survey composed of eight questions, each of which relate to one of the competences listed above.

Meanwhile, the professor teaching the course performs a co-evaluation of the level of acquired competences of their students, using the same survey and the same 10-point scale for each student individually. The evaluation of the professor has two components: on the one hand, the observation during the realization of the team activity, in which the oral and written communication competences of each student are evaluated; on the other hand, once the students have solved the case-study, the professor evaluates every other competence according to the solution proposed.

From a methodological point of view, applying a strategy that integrates both the perception of students and the perception of the faculty provides a higher level of objectivity to the study of the development of competences.

RESULTS

To perform this study, an online survey was conducted both to the professor and to a class of 32 students, in which the perception of the level of competences acquired in each one of the six case-studies developed during the course was evaluated.

The results obtained are presented below (Figure 1), corresponding to the average of the grade given by the students and the professor to the perceived level of competences acquired, per case.

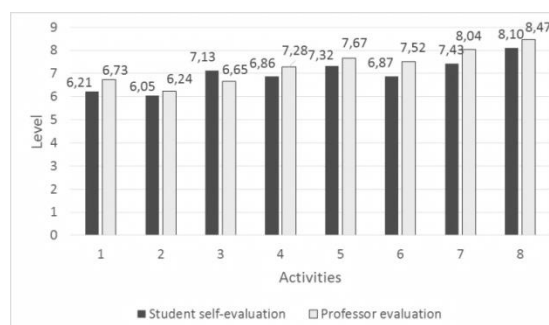


FIGURE 1
PERCEPTION OF THE LEVEL OF COMPETENCES ACQUIRED BY THE STUDENTS, ON A 10-POINT SCALE (0 TO 10), ON THE 6 CASE STUDIES

Similarities between both evaluations become apparent: both the students' and the professor's evaluation oscillate between a similar range of values, with the professor's perceived level being slightly higher than the one perceived by the students (with the exception of Activity 3, which will be explained in detail later in this section). This shows a homogenous perception in the level of competences acquired for both parts of this study, and provides credibility for the results obtained. Obtaining the same information simultaneously through two sources, auto-evaluation and co-evaluation in this case, allows us to ensure the objectivity of the information gathered.

A test was performed to determine the existing degree of correlation between both samples and evaluation agents (students and professor). The Pearson correlation coefficient obtained is 0.88, which indicates a very intense correlation between both measures. The correlation is significant in each one of the learning activities, and an upward trend becomes apparent as the course progresses.

More specifically, if the differences between the levels perceived *via* self-evaluation and by co-evaluation are analyzed (see Figure 2), the only negative difference is found in Activity 3. This may be because students perceived it as an easy task, since the focus of the case was the integration of generations of digital natives into the workforce. However, the instructor expected a higher level of maturity in the answers provided and the strategies established for the activity.

On the other hand, very high differences are observed in activities 6 and 7. This may be due to the fact that the students perceived that these activities as more complex, since they included several different topics seen in class, and the instructor positively valued the progress and work made by students.

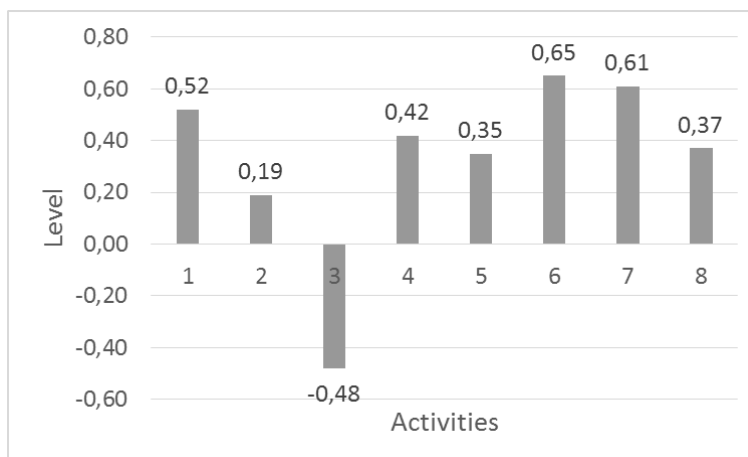


FIGURE 2
ANALYSIS OF THE AVERAGE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE PERCEIVED
LEVEL OF THE ACQUIRED COMPETENCES BY THE CO-EVALUATION
(FACULTY) AND SELF-EVALUATION (STUDENTS)

More generally, taking the average value of the differences –this average having a value of 0.33 points– as a reference, this indicates that, in average, the professor perceived the level of competence acquired by the student was a third of a point higher than the student's self-evaluation. This indicates that the perception of the professor is positive, while the student presents some lack of self-confidence, which is clearly reflected in their self-evaluation, and which is closely related to the student's self-diagnostic and self-knowledge skills.

CONCLUSIONS

In the emergency situation of the Covid-19 pandemic, an online fourth year course during a Bachelor's degree is an essential moment to motivate the consolidation of competences, and the application of real-life cases during the academic year allows the student to practice differential abilities that resemble those needed in a business environment.

Self-evaluation of the level of competence acquired by the students helps them know themselves, which factors positively in their employability. The results of the students' self-evaluation clearly show that they perceive that their capabilities and skills have improved with each one of the activities along the course, which grants them the confidence to answer the survey positively. The co-evaluation carried out by the professor ratifies the perception of the students, and makes the self-evaluation results more reliable.

The methodology described in this study can be used to establish a continuous improvement cycle in the development of the students' competences during the online courses implemented during the Covid-19 lockdowns. Given the practical nature of the studied subject, new activities can be designed to go one step further from solving real-life business case-studies and develop role-playing games that imitate the business and management environment.

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