



GRUPOS DE *FACEBOOK* ‘OFICIALES’ PARA PROFESORES Y ESTUDIANTES: CONSTRUYENDO REDES DE APRENDIZAJE MUTUAL

“OFFICIAL” *FACEBOOK* GROUPS OF TEACHERS AND STUDENTS: BUILDING UP NETWORKS OF MUTUAL LEARNERS

Giuliano Vosa¹

Fecha de recepción: 21/05/2020; Fecha de revisión: 01/07/2020; Fecha de aceptación: 01/09/2020.

Cómo citar este artículo:

Vosa, G (2020). Grupos de Facebook ‘oficiales’ para profesores y estudiantes: construyendo redes de aprendizaje mutual. *Revista de Innovación y Buenas Prácticas Docentes*, 9(2), 36-45.

Autor de Correspondencia: giuliano.vosa@gmail.com

Resumen:

El trabajo expone los resultados de algunas experiencias de docencia (en Derecho constitucional, comparado y europeo) con arreglo a un experimento concreto: el establecimiento de grupos de *Facebook* “oficiales”, gestionados por el cuerpo docente. El experimento se llevó a cabo en cursos de grado de distinto tamaño (de 15 a 100 y más personas) caracterizados por falta de homogeneidad lingüística y cultural entre los participantes – quienes además se encontraban de norma en distintos momentos de su carrera – y celebrados en Facultades de Derecho de Universidades privadas, lo que implica una serie de circunstancias peculiares relacionadas con el *background* personal, familiar y social de la mayoría de los estudiantes. Los resultados han destacado una simplificación de la comunicación y una mejor interacción tanto entre los estudiantes como de aquellos con el cuerpo docente; algo que se extiende más allá de la conclusión del propio curso, ya que el Grupo no deja de funcionar de plataforma común para los participantes del año siguiente. En definitiva, el medio social, utilizado con un cierto criterio, incentiva la auto-consciencia individual y colectiva de jóvenes, mujeres y varones, que comparten una etapa fundamental de su trayectoria educativa haciéndose ciudadanas y ciudadanos de una democracia pluralista multicultural.

Palabras clave: Grupos, Educación general, Redes, Métodos de clase.

Abstract:

The paper recounts of some teaching experiences (in Constitutional Law, Comparative and European) and accounts for the results of a specific experiment: the establishment of official Facebook Groups managed by the Teaching Staff. The experiment has been carried out in undergraduate courses within classes of variable dimensions (from 15 to a hundred and more students) who lacked linguistic and cultural homogeneity and most often were at different stages of their career. These courses were offered by the Law Faculties of private Universities, which situates the experiment in a peculiar socio-cultural and familiar-personal milieu. The outcome displays a facilitated communication and a simplified interaction among the students, as well as with the Teaching Staff, which ranges beyond the conclusion of the course – as the Group does not cease to function as a common platform for old and new students. Eventually, it may be affirmed that the social facility improves the individual and collective self-awareness of young

¹ Investigador “García Pelayo”, Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales (CEPC) Madrid.

women and men at a fundamental stage of their education, with a view to growing future citizens of a pluralist, multicultural democracy.

Key Words: Classroom Methods; General Education; Groups; Networks.

1. INTRODUCTION

After working as a Teaching Assistant for a few years with mainly national (Italian) students, it is never easy to adapt to international environments; yet, it is a challenging and refreshing activity. Furthermore, it is an opportunity to implement the innovations in teaching experimented while working with senior Professors responsible for the courses.

This work presents an account of the results of one of such experiments: establishing *Facebook* Groups on a voluntary basis encompassing both the Teaching Staff and the students with a view to building up networks of mutual learners. The experiment's theoretical background relies on the growing literature on *Social Media* and University's education (Stoddart, 2014, p. 3; Piotrowski, 2015, p. 7, Davis, 2016; Ranieri & Manca, 2017, p. 15) and took inspiration from the peculiar factual circumstances concerning the Faculties in which the courses took place, as well as the subject to be taught.

One of the most valuable experiences that can be counted in a professional trajectory related with teaching is to go working abroad as a Lecturer in a country one has never been to and to have the responsibility of student whose cultural, linguistic and educational background is extremely diverse (Levin, 1998, 133) – both with regard to each other and to the lecturer herself.

The subject to be taught is Law; more specifically, Constitutional Law, European and Comparative. A cross-cutting topic, considering the rapid evolution of last ages from a pure State-centred framework to a complex multi-layered scenario (Aparicio Pérez, 2016, p. 139) as the conceptual toolkit fabricated in the last two centuries comes under severe question (Grimm, 2010, p. 5).

Therefore, to teach Constitutional Law has a first and foremost objective: to construe a timeline of the events, an overall landscape in which the student can both feel at ease and absorb the impact of the new reality. This idea entails that the student is to learn about the world by using those conceptual tools that she/he will be experimenting in the relation with the teacher and with her/his fellow mates (Buckingham, 2000, p. 58).

Element of such a landscape come from social sciences other than law – history, anthropology, economics and politics – and are mixed together in the transit from the local dimensions to the national, European and supranational levels (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 239). Legal comparison plays a crucial role, too, as 'models' – *i.e.* the different patterns that States or other communities have subscribed to in response to contemporary challenges – may well vary and/or repeat over time (García Pelayo, 2002, p. 17; p. 99) so that the common features and discrepancies in

the fields concerned are *per se* a matter of study through mutual confrontation (Parker, 2003, p. 33).

Much further than that, Constitutional Law is typically located in the first semester, first year (Basic Course) and in the second semester, second year (Advanced Course). These courses are, consequently, much more than just an occasion to teach and learn 'law' – admitted that one is sure about what Law is. A course of that sort is the gateway between the college and the University: between adolescence and adulthood, between the family's comfortable nest and the unpredictable unfolding of adult life. Moreover, it accompanies the first steps of the students in their new environment, which will be a springboard for them to enter both personal maturity and the working market.

These two characteristics are typical of the Constitutional Law teaching in a manifold, magmatic framework and need to be taken into careful consideration when confronted with the preparation of such a course. Helping the student to develop as a citizen is a core part of Constitutional Law in both educational and substantive matters, as both are centered on individual and collective self-determination (Thornton, 2005, p. 89) of free women and free men.

2. DEVELOPMENT OF THE INNOVATION EXPERIMENT

Against the overall background above depicted, the idea of an additional tool designed to help students overcome the unavoidable difficult moments and to enjoy what is probably the most intense period of their life was elaborated on by the Teaching Staff of a first-year general Constitutional Law course, of which the author was part.

This experiment concerns the involvement of the students in Facebook Groups (FG) to which they may sign up on a voluntary basis. FGs are "official", meaning that they are open to all students, are created and managed directly by the Teaching Staff since the beginning. In case, Members of the Faculty Staff would log in, too, to circulate administrative information and to cooperate with the Teaching Staff in keeping the discussion within the most appropriate boundaries of fair play, consistency and adequateness (Renkl & Eitel, 2019, p. 534).

2.1. Setting the Scene

Prior to recalling the experiment, it is necessary to draw the basic lines of the environment in which it has taken place (Sawyer & Dunlosky, 2019, p. 22). In a certain sense, the experience this work refers to is tailored to a specific scenario: private Universities, medium-high fees and proportionate pressure, rampant mutual competition since tender age. Yet, high competition does not come without a cost. Students are usually placed in small-medium classes ranging from 15 to 100 people; lectures succeed one another at a rapid pace, attendance is often mandatory and always advised. Therefore, the students spend most of their time at the University's premises, either in class or in the studying rooms and at the library.

At this juncture, special attention must be devoted to the personal profile of the people who feature as "students". Aged from 18 to 20 years normally, often displaced from family's comforts to life alone or with mates, faced for their first time with a "big city" reality, they usually experience troubles in settling down and feeling at ease. Most of them used to be counted among the most brilliant students of their classes in colleges, and feel on their shoulders a considerable pressure to which their families –

as fee-payers, too – add remarkably. This has obvious consequences as for their self-esteem when, as confronted with the new reality, they are urged to keep the same level in a much more competitive environment (Bauman, 1999, p. 140).

Another issue to be taken into account is the mix of nationals and exchange students within the same class. That is a magnificent opportunity that projects such as *Erasmus*, *Leonardo*, *Amerigo* and the like create. As young generations come to progress in their professional path – including the Academia – most teachers have been themselves “former” *Erasmus* students; therefore, they have had first-hand experience of the pros and contras of such a mixed class. What is likely to occur is the arising of severe demarcations between the exchange students’ group and the locals, who often spoke a language that foreigners have no clue of – as they barely understand and communicated in English at that time – and do not always show interest or empathy towards a well-defined group of temporary students as exchange students are.

This is somehow natural from a basic social point of view (Davis, 2016) but terribly affects the homogeneity of the class and its cohesion in view of mutual learning, and must be avoided for such a lack of homogeneity to turn from a handicap to an opportunity.

Another trigger for lack of homogeneity refers to the asymmetry in educational background among the participants. Most exchange students choose a course because they need it as a tile of their exchange plan as agreed on with their home University; their level almost never matches the locals’, in either sense. The most common case is the following one: exchange students are at their third-fifth year of graduation – whereas nationals are in their first-second – but have a (much) poorer command of the language (Vez Jeremías, 2004, 26). This will cause a remarkable unbalance between what they do in class – scarce interest, poor interaction, considering also the utterly particular moment they are experiencing – and what they do at home, when they are free to take their time and ask for somebody else’s help in case of doubts.

Another case arises as locals, too, have a poor command of the language when – for instance – English is the language of the course. That would also create a further restraint to active interaction in class and mutual learning (Raymer, 2016, p. 258).

2.2. What to do with the Facebook Groups?

As a *social media* of wide common use, Zuckerberg’s platform is not only a tool for information, but also a way to enter, progressively and under the full respect of each other’s personal control and privacy, in each other’s personal life (Crane & Gardner, 2016, p. 818). As reciprocally surveilled and monitored, to a certain extent, by the Teaching Staff, this instrument reduces to a minimum the side-effects of this closer interaction – such as the chances of harassment, the influence of social-cultural boundaries and the implications of such differences (Sunstein, 2007, p. 25).

In other words, FGs help flatten the barriers between individuals and, with special regard to the topics to be debated in common, even when it comes to the most

controversial issues (Hess, 2009, p. 7). Additionally, it helps blunt the students' reciprocal asymmetries, as well as the frontiers between teachers and learners with a view to establishing networks of mutual learners. Thus, both sides have to gain from a closer confrontation, yet in the awareness of the respective roles (Biskupic, Lackovic & Kresimir, 2015, p. 3660) whereas a sensible use of the media is crucial to a critical unveiling of cultural differences (Kellner, 2009, 19). Eventually, FG prompts to break off the boundaries of a mutual circumspection (Parsi & Elster, 2015, p. 1009) and shyness to delve more quickly into the University's environment.

2.3. How to Manage the Groups? Methodological Tips

Since the beginning of the year, the communicative channels among students tend to establish and consolidate around patterns that are to a certain extent predictable, although much is left to chance and to the random events that take place in everyone's life. Yet, the circumstances summarized above may have an impact on the acclimatization of the individual as well as on the overall performance of the group (Ruiz Bolívar, 2016, p. 232).

Such impact may be roughly understood along the line of a dichotomy. Professionally, students hardly practice team-working and may develop low social skills; they tend to swallow as many notions as possible but ripen few capacities of critical judgment. On the personal side, a distressing effect may take shape, namely the identification of the self with one's own professional profile. This will definitely affect their self-esteem and likely make them more fragile in the impact with the working market (Mc Inerney, 2007, p. 260). They will struggle to be successful self-entrepreneurs, on one hand, and to mark a clear divide between themselves and their work, on the other hand. Therefore, they may be more prone to suffer from emotional distress as for the relationships with their future bosses, as well as with their fellow colleagues and their subordinates (Eysenck & Keane, 2006, p. 187).

All things considered, when it comes for a teacher to fine-tune his/her relationship with the class and to make it a suitable, pleasant environment for mutual learning to thrive, a somewhat common ground of predictable issues emerges (Grion & Bianco, 2016, p. 141). At individual level, the emergence of group leaders must be balanced with the aim of reaching a common level of participation and interaction in the class' activity. On a general level, the background of the university is crucial to the understanding of one's attitude. Symptoms are, to a certain extent, comparable (Lévy, 2018). Emotional distress and anguish for mutual competition arise among students who feel as isolated monads. Colleagues are tough rivals, the University a demanding boss; energies are fully devoted to reading and working, yet this not always leads to a performance that meet the expectations of the student and her/his family. By reaction, this may also entail the lack of interest of students who "give up" and do not commit themselves neither to learning, nor to mutual social interaction (Jaques & Salmon 2007, p. 23). Not only will such consequences affect their learning performance, but are likely to have a major impact on the student's self-esteem and self-perception in the future professional trajectory, as well as in their future personal life. It is crucial for a teacher to consider such intertwining among personal and professional sides of a person-student, as this will have consequences as for the unfolding of the course and beyond for which he/she bears a temporary, yet decisive responsibility: even small expedients may have a great impact for the benefit of the students.

Therefore, the Teaching Staff must be well coordinated and act with a view to improving the sense of belonging to a group – and the very same idea that through the group students can achieve better results, even on a merely individual plane, than just counting on one's own energies solely.

To sum up, the experiment puts a shared responsibility on the shoulders of both students and teachers, as involved in a common network of mutual learners; it is the natural consequence of a communicative action that establishes a common language across different systems (Baraldi & Corsi, 2016, p. 61) with a view to facilitating mutual understanding and dialogue (Ewert, 1991, p. 351; Miedema, 1994, p. 196).

3. RELEVANT OUTCOMES

On a practical side, FGs have proved useful for many purposes. Among the most common ones, several can be enumerated: sharing materials of relevance for the course; circulating copies of articles and essays of interest; posting links to comment on events occurred during the course itself.

The social activity unfolded as a result of FGs fosters mutual learning through digital means (Gee, 2013, p. 155; Stoddart, 2014, p. 3; González Martínez, Lleixà Fortuño & Espuny Vidal, 2016, p. 27; Fiorella & Pilegard, 2020) and locates itself in a multicultural, pluralistic democracy (Parker, 2003, 32; p. 54; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 240; Thornton, 2005, p. 90; Sunstein, 2007, p. 87). On one hand, every issue that receives attention has the potential to ignite a debate, to which the renowned features of the *social media* concerned allow a wide, intense and rapid participation and a smart mutual exchange of opinions. On the other hand, the tool facilitates the interaction with the Teaching Staff (de León Huertas, I. González López & Eslava Suanes, 2019, p. 23): it is impossible to deny that FGs allow an immediate interaction in view of solving the questions that normally arise in the teaching activity (Bozanta & Mardikyan, 2017, p. 99).

More specifically, three main outcomes can be listed:

- a) Excellent circulation of materials prior to classes. After posting them on the FG's wall, it is virtually impossible that any of the students is unaware of the relevant documents to be considered.
- b) Enhanced forum for discussion. Even prior to the class, people can ask questions by simply posting a comment to a document, as well as to a link to an event which is deemed of interest; the Teaching Staff would reply and the discussion unfolds as a thread. It is definitely reader-friendly, as well as very stimulating and challenging for the whole group. In addition, taking notes of the debate is simply unnecessary.
- c) Real-time communication between the students and the Teaching Staff, as well as among the students themselves. This is of huge practical use as for the formation of working groups, the related interactions among them and the interchange of questions and answers – even in private among the students, who are anyway encouraged to message each other; by the simple fact that a communicative bridge has already been established.

Eventually, FGs prove very successful in curtailing distances among students as well as between teachers and students, with a view to building up networks of mutual learning. The real time update to the last developments of the most hotly debated topics captures the interest of the students, who can directly experience the link between theory and practice.

4. PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

A few practical examples that have repeatedly come up in class may help clarify the potential of the FB instrument in this respect.

The EU Constitutional Law class – around 30 students – must divide into 6 groups and choose a Judgment of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) to discuss within the class. The Teaching Staff posts 6 judgments relating to different areas of the topic.

At this point, those who maintain a specific interest in one of those areas sign in first, and pick up the judgment concerned. Others will rather focus on the people to work with – e.g. a group of three friends that choose to work together – and will rather pick up the judgment(s) for which more posts are available.

The Teaching staff may intervene to impose certain requirements to the groups; for instance, in a mixed class with nationals and exchange students, it is crucial to have at least one member from each side, so as to ensure that English is the working language.

Any question will be raised and answered in real time, be it pertinent for the Teaching Staff or just for the students among themselves. For instance: where to meet, when and in which room (if an Administrative Staff Member is signed in, she/he can also communicate the room and the locations with ease); or, else, which parts of the judgment need to be highlighted first, how long the presentation should last, etc.

The whole operation takes no longer than a couple of hours and no misunderstandings occur.

A second example may be briefly recounted. During a class, a crucial meeting took place at the European Council level. This was anticipated in class, and a link with the information was posted. The students themselves followed the news and posted further links and comments, which basically made the following lecture a simple deepening of a debate whose foundations had already been laid.

A last example arose in a course of Legal Traditions and Systems. During such course, the question of the judiciary's independence was raised by students from diverse nationalities. As a foreword to the debate, the Teaching Staff posted a few newspapers' articles presenting different views on that issue. This worked as a forum for previous confrontation and, under the teachers' direction, worked as a guideline for a thorough confrontation occurred in class a few days afterwards.

Furthermore, FGs maintain a role after the course. They remain active for all the participants, and former students are not invited to disconnect – although they can certainly do so. Experience has told that they most often remain, and keep an interest in the activities carried out by the subsequent classes. Quite often, they post and/or respond to links that are posted. Among the most popular posts, one can list those concerning internships, traineeships and other job offers; events, scholarship opportunities and the like; additionally, it is not rare to see them engaged in the mutual debates that unfold as threads. This is crucial in building-up prospective inter-

generation networks and in keeping alive the attention on current topics of mutual interest.

5. CONCLUSIONS

FG proves helpful to connect students among themselves and with teachers to create networks of mutual learners. They foster communication, simplify circulation of materials and stimulate team-working; they help students dealing with complex and highly controversial topics, as well as daring to formulate and maintain personal opinions and not to escape confrontation; they serve to the improvement of social skills and personal awareness as young women and men at a fundamental stage of their education.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & DETAILS

The experiment has taken place in the following contexts:

Since 2011/'12 in the Constitutional Law (I Semester, 1st Year; and II Semester, 2nd Year) held in Italian (at LUISS Guido Carli University, Department of Law, Rome: Professor Gino Scaccia). The author worked as a collaborator of the Main Teacher – Professor;

From 2016 to 2019 in the EU Constitutional Law (I semester, 2nd Year) and Legal Traditions and Systems (I Semester, 1st Year) held in English at Kozminski, Warsaw. The author worked as the Main Teacher.

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