Integrating Evaluation as a Componential Element in the Development of the Course: The Case of Two Courses in the Faculty of Education (AUTH) during the Pandemic

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Abstract
Evaluation, as a process, can positively contribute to the formation of better educational experiences for both instructors and students, as well as lay the foundations for the development of an evaluation culture in student participants. This article sets out to present the evaluation process carried out in two online courses at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH) during the pandemic period, how it has constituted an integral component of each course and in what ways it has contributed to the students’ active participation in the development of the courses. To evaluate the courses, communication and collaborative online tools were used, through which students’ views were systematically recorded throughout the semester within the framework of the formative evaluation. The data analysis has been conducted mainly in the light of thematic analysis and according to the findings, students have stated their satisfaction about their active involvement in setting up the course as well as the fact that their voice has been heard and taken into account by the instructor, both in terms of content modulation and the educational process itself.

Keywords: evaluation, participatory formative evaluation, active participation, communication and collaboration tools

1. Introduction

1.1 The Context of the Research

Contextual factors, normative, political, ethical, and organizational are very important to the design of each educational evaluation. Therefore, evaluators must keep in mind the importance of matching the choice of evaluation approach and method for data collection and analysis with the unique purpose of evaluation within a unique evaluation context (Love, 2010).

In Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH) at the end of each semester an institutional evaluation process is carried out by the Quality Assurance Unit of the University which contains comprehensive questions about the course and the instructors. However, students are not used to actively participating in the evaluation of their courses while attending them during the semester and their experience with the formal education system does not suggest that their views are being considered in terms of content modulation and educational process. In the context of two online courses titled “Education and Lifelong Learning” and “Design of Non-Formal Education Programs”, offered by the School of Early Childhood Education at AUTH during the winter semester of academic year 2020-2021, evaluation has been embedded as an integral component of each course aiming to improve educational experiences for both instructors and student, as well as to lay the foundations for the development of an evaluation culture in student participants.

This article presents the process of participatory formative evaluation conducted as an example of good educational practice, implemented on a continuous and systematic basis in the context of the self-evaluation of teaching work by the instructor in the two courses. The evaluation has served as a regulatory instrument for the improvement of content and educational practices, the advancement of the instructor’s skills and the development of an evaluation culture in the students (Scriven, 1967; Noyé & Piveteau, 1997; Rogers, 2007; Mathison, 2010; Bellugi, 2013; Purešević & Krnjaja, 2019).

1.2 Literature Review

Contrary to Bloom’s initial approach on formative evaluation (Bloom, 1968; Bloom, Hastings, & Madaus, 1971), which focuses on learning outcomes and learning difficulties as defined by the formative evaluation, the approaches that
followed (Audibert, 1980; Allal, 1979, 1999; Perrenoud, 1998; Ouellette,1990; Mathison, 2010; Belluigi, 2013; Benson & Brack, 2010) have extended formative evaluation as a beneficial opportunity both for the teacher and the students to raise their awareness and consciously reflect on their educational experience and its improvement (Boston, 2002). According to this extended approach, evaluation takes place day by day through formal and informal processes, with active and substantial engagement of students that involves interaction within the context of the educational relations, allowing the instructor and the student to adapt and regulate their respective actions in the teaching and learning process.

As mentioned by Allal and Mottier Lopez (2005, p. 245) “in the enlarged perspective of formative assessment developed in French-language publications, the idea of remediation of learning difficulties (feedback + correction) is replaced by the broader concept of regulation of learning (feedback + adaptation)”. At this point, it should be noted, that this regulation takes place in present tense, benefiting the current student participants, but it will also be beneficial in future time, as this process entails changes in the instructor’s teaching approach towards the next student participants, who will be influenced by the results of these alterations.

In addition, when the evaluation is carried out in collaboration with students and results in their participation in the setting up of the course, they also gain more control over the learning process or at least share it with the instructor, a very important parameter in adult learning as it contributes to a more effective learning experience (Campbell & Burnaby, 2001; Aspin, Chapman, Hatton, & Sawano, 2001; Purešević & Krnjaja, 2019). As argued by Rogers and Horrocks (2010), the active participation of learners in the evaluation process is part of the overall contribution they should make to teaching and learning. However, they state, “the problem today is that most learning programs for adults do not allow space for such contributions to be made” (p. 315).

It is therefore of particular importance to address the issue of student participation in the planning of a learning program as it depends directly on the pedagogical approach of the educational institution and instructors. If the goal is liberal education, not an one-way education from the instructor to the students, but a two-way process that takes into consideration learners’ knowledge, experiences and personalized needs by promoting not informing learning but constructing learning (Rogers & Horrocks, 2010), then evaluation becomes a means of redefining attitudes and relationships that develop within an educational environment between content, instructor and students.

In addition, critical reflection and experiential learning are notions and practices included in the content of the two courses referred in this article. Therefore, the connection between them and the evaluation of the course itself enabled students to reflect on the experience they had in the course, as well as to suggest changes and re-reflect their new experiences after the implementation of the changes (Brookfield, 1995; Purešević & Krnjaja, 2019). The reconstruction of experience (Dewey, 1938) through the reflection of both students and instructor has been the main goal of the evaluation process for the courses “Education and Lifelong Learning” and “Design of Non-Formal Education Programs” during the winter semester of the academic year 2020-2021.

2. The Evaluation Process During the Teaching Sessions

It is important to first provide some information about the process followed in the courses, to clarify how the evaluation has constituted an integral component of the course, thus contributing to its development. The time-period of reference has been the winter semester of the academic year 2020-2021 during which the courses were delivered entirely via zoom platform, combined with the asynchronous e-learning platform (Moodle) of AUTH. Each course was completed in 13 synchronous teaching sessions, one per week (duration: 2.30 hours). A number of 60-80 students (in their 1st and 2nd year of studies) participated in the synchronous teaching sessions of the course “Education and Lifelong Learning” and a number of 40-60 students (3rd and 4th year) respectively attended the course “Design of Non-Formal Education Programs”.

Starting from the initial class meetings, in the context of drawing up the learning contract (Knowles, 1991; Noyé & Pivetau, 1997; Rogers, 2007), an attempt was made to look into and address students' anxieties, as well as to identify their expectations both in terms of the course's content and process as well as in terms of their relationship with the instructor and the other students. An agreement was struck on how to conduct the course. The drafting of the learning contract was organized in working groups to ensure that all participants could express and exchange their views with others. According to the agreement, a few enriched introductory talks would be the initial stimulus on the topics negotiated each time. They would, then, be followed by activities during the plenary class sessions, general discussion, questions and answers, polls, group and individual exercises and assignments on working groups of 4-6 students. At the end of the initial meeting, students would write, individually and anonymously on a common desktop (Padlet), about their dominant feelings from their participation in the first online session. The posts uploaded were very encouraging towards the application of the proposed educational process, as the feelings that dominated students in both courses were found to be very positive.

At the end of all the subsequent teaching sessions, students were also invited to record their views and/or emotions from
their participation in the specific lesson they attended, individually with anonymous posts on Padlets or through polls. At the beginning of each teaching session, the instructor discussed with the students what had been recorded at the end of the previous lesson through the Padlet application or the polling process and how what was expressed, could be taken into account in the development of the content, schedule and process of the course. The evaluation was included in the course as an essential participatory process, aiming to allow students to reflect on their behavior and participation (as members of the plenary or working groups) in the course. The evaluation could, in this way, turn into, as noted by Jaques (2000) a creative source of learning, through which both members and the team as a whole are informed about their contribution to teamwork and ways are suggested in the aid of which the needs of the team can be met. Thus, through the evaluation, the instructor and the students learned to make changes and adapt their behavior, and on the other hand, students used the “tool” of evaluation to develop new skills, knowledge, and attitudes in relation with evaluation itself. In both courses it was attempted to apply what was supported by Rogers (2007), that since the evaluation is considered to be a skill at a large extent, instructors should teach students how to assess, not simply through incentives, but through joint practical applications between educator and learners.

The questions posed at the end for the evaluation of each teaching session were not identically repeated each time. They mostly concerned both the lesson’s content and students’ understanding, the learning process followed in the course, or the dominant feelings of the participants in each lesson. Considering that emotion is an integral and essential element in the learning process (Jaques, 2000; Schutt, Allen, & Laumakis, 2009; Claus & Changchit, 2017), the creation of a friendly atmosphere and a “space” for free expression of students’ opinions and emotions (Rogers, 2007), as well as the updates of the course in relation to what was reflected in the evaluations, played a crucial role in students’ effectively participating in the evaluation of each course and in the development of the next semester courses. At the end of the last teaching session of the semester, a questionnaire was completed, which included open and closed questions relating to their overall evaluation for the course and its content as well as the educational process, techniques and the communication and collaborative tools that were used throughout the semester. The data collected from each teaching session and from the final questionnaire were processed mainly in the aid of thematic analysis, but also quantitatively (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000).

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Students’ Emotions at the End of the First Teaching Session

At the end of the initial meeting the students’ individual and anonymous posts on the Padlet in relation to their dominant emotion stemmed from their participation in the first online lesson were very encouraging to carry out the educational process proposed by the instructor, as the feelings experienced by students in both courses were very positive. Indicatively, the following were mentioned: “interest” “joy”, “eagerness to move on to the next sessions”, “familiarity”, “optimism”, “contentment”, “relaxed, I did not understand how the two hours had passed”, “curiosity”, “the lesson is very pleasant and urges us all to participate”. At this point it is worth mentioning that drawings (hearts and flowers) were also found among the posts. Moreover, the representation of students’ emotions via Padlet in the end of the rest of the sessions created the group’s “emotional map” at the end of each lesson, which gave an important feedback to the instructor, as the satisfaction of students directly affects their learning outcomes (Driver, 2002; Hong, 2002; Schutt, Allen, & Laumakis, 2009; Claus & Changchit, 2017; Pavlis Korres, 2021).

3.2 Evaluation as a Componential Element of Each Teaching Session

The reactions of the students about the course, which required their active participation, were very positive regarding the way it was conducted. As a result, the evaluation process at the end of each teaching session, even if it originally seemed strange to them, later in the semester during the classes that followed, it was anticipated as a “natural closure” of each educational meeting. Following a relevant question from the instructor, depending on the mood of the students, the time schedule and their fatigue, the evaluation was carried out by polls or through anonymous posts on the Padlet. Student statements on all subjects had been very important and had often given the opportunity to reflect in plenary on what made it difficult for each student individually and within groups, such as questions about the content, the educational techniques used, the feeling of fatigue due to the continuous duration of the course, the large number of students, the infrequent use of the camera by students, the reluctance of students to participate in team work -especially in the course attended by first-year and second-year students. Solutions were proposed by both the students and the instructor which were tested at subsequent meetings, the structure and content of the courses were rearranged where needed, and there were renegotiations of terms in the original educational contract. The evaluation as a reflection on students’ experience from the courses and the effort to “survive” each experience productively in the experiences of subsequent courses, making adjustments to the subsequent courses resulting from the evaluation of the experience of previous courses, ensured what Dewey (1938) refers to about its “continuous experience” and its educational value. The students’ participation in the course attended by first and second-year students was greater in polls than in Padlet posts.
The polls included Likert scale questions (five points from not at all to very much) about how interesting, useful, tedious, and interactive they found the course, and their overall contentment with it. In some lessons there were multiple-choice questions about the communication and collaborative tools used in the course and which of them they would like to be included or excluded in the next lessons. The voting process was conducted in the aid of the zoom platform and after their completion, the students saw their results, while, as mentioned above at the beginning of the next teaching session, a reference on the previous results was made and a follow-up discussion was held on how to improve the course according to them. Based on these results, polls, chat communication and posts on Padlet during the course were the communication and collaborative tools that gathered most of the student preferences in both courses, while working groups were more popular in Orientation Course (Design of non-formal education programs) and less in the Background Course (Education and Lifelong Learning). Thus, in the Orientation Course involving older students (3rd and 4th year) the working groups were used more frequently, which according to the final evaluation, the students found very useful developing collaboration and communication among their members (Jaques & Salmon, 2007). On the contrary, their use was limited in the Background Course, since not all students felt comfortable with them. During the collaboration in working groups, formed by 4-6 members, students, as stated by them, felt more comfortable as the team was small. They turned on their cameras and several of them continued to keep it turned on afterwards when they participated in the plenary class session.

In the evaluation process through Padlet, students’ posts were very targeted and substantial with suggestions to improve the course, both in terms of content as well as the process followed, as the questions, apart from their predominant feelings regarding the lesson, have also been related to the difficulties they might have experienced and their suggestions for overcoming them.

Table 1 shows the evaluation methods used during the semester in each course and their frequency. Students who participated in the Orientation Course, more than Background Course students, preferred to reflect their views on the Padlet and during several times, the polling and Padlet were both used to evaluate the same teaching session.

Table 1. Evaluation Method and its adoption frequency throughout the semester in both courses

| Evaluation Method | Background Course | Orientation Course |
|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| Discussion on the evaluation results in the beginning of each teaching session | At the beginning of each teaching session | At the beginning of each teaching session |
| Polling about the lesson evaluation in terms of its overall interactivity, its content-related interest, its tediousness, its usefulness, and the students’ overall contentment from the lesson | 5 times at the end of the teaching session | 6 times at the end of the teaching session |
| Padlet posts to evaluate the lesson’s content and process | 4 times at the end of the teaching session | 6 times at the end of the teaching session |
| Recording dominant emotions during the lesson: Creating the emotional map of the class | 6 times at the end of the teaching session | 8 times at the end of the teaching session |
| Polling to assess the content comprehension | In 10 teaching sessions during the course delivery | In 10 teaching sessions during the course delivery |
| Polling about their preference on communication and collaborative tools | 2 times | 2 times |
| Questionnaire including open and closed questions | In the final teaching session of the semester | In the final teaching session of the semester |

Table 2 shows how the evaluation was included in the 13 teaching sessions of each semester and the benefit that has been gained for the students who participated in the course and the instructor, as well as for the future students of the course through the adjustments that will be further incorporated to the content and teaching methods and practices.
Table 2. Ways to include evaluation in the courses and beneficiaries from the evaluation

| Teaching sessions of the semester (1-13) | Integrating evaluation as a componential part of the course | Beneficiaries |
|------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|---------------|
| 1st Teaching Session                     | Setting up an agreement on a learning contract, regarding the teaching approach and the course’s content. Looking into the students educational needs and expectations | Individual and anonymous evaluation at the end of the teaching session, through the dominant feeling created in class → creating a group emotional map | Students of the current semester and the instructor |
| 2nd-12th Teaching Sessions               | Presenting the evaluation results of the previous teaching session in the beginning of the next. Overall discussion on the results and suggestions on adjustments of the course | A) Assessing content comprehension and preferences on communication and collaborative tools during the course B) Individual and anonymous evaluation on the course’s content and process and their feelings at the end of the teaching session, through Padlet posts and polls | Students of the current semester and the instructor |
| 13th Teaching Session                    | Presenting the evaluation results of the previous teaching session in the beginning of the next. Overall discussion on the results and suggestions on updates of the course | Individual anonymous evaluation through questionnaires including open and closed questions on the course’s content and process and their feelings throughout the semester | Students of the current and future semesters, and the instructor |

3.3 Evaluation at the end of the Semester

The overall assessment of the course that took place in the last teaching session was very encouraging regarding the implementation of the evaluation project in both semesters of the two courses since all 94 student participants stated that they would recommend attending these courses to new students. It is worth noting that the open question, about why the course would be recommended, was answered by all students and the thematic analysis indicated the agreement of their views with the relevant literature on effective adult learning as the main reasons mentioned were content selection, instructor, and educational process (Brookfield, 1995; Rogers & Horrocks, 2010; Pavlis Korres, Karalis, Leftheriotou, & García Barriocanal, 2009; Jaques & Salmon, 2007). The students stressed their satisfaction with their active participation and the freedom to interact within the course, as well as the fact that they could freely express their views without fear of making a mistake. They have also stated their contentment regarding the role of the instructor in the course, especially since she displayed respect for their needs, taking their opinions into account, and adapting the course accordingly. The following answers are indicative: “I would recommend it because it is very interactive and the instructor adapts it according to our needs and preferences (S5), “because it leaves room for discussion, especially during this time period, when interaction was mostly needed” (S16), “it is a useful lesson, very well designed and conducted in a very collaborative and participatory way since the instructor is very accessible and interested in us” (S23), “it was very interesting and useful, there was extensive interaction and in general it was a pleasant course” (S87), “the professor shows understanding and respect towards her students” (S17), “because I appreciate the teacher... I feel safe and comfortable to express myself freely” (S27), “we want more similar courses at the University that improve our critical reflection skills” (S9), “you are given the opportunity to speak and state your opinion, to make your voice heard and be taken into account by the professor” (S91), “it’s not a course that you just listen to what the instructor lectures” (S44), “we all expressed our opinion and the instructor cared about our views” (S53), “the course was not conducted for us, but with us” (S37), “the course is pleasant and escapes typical lecture centered classes” (S85), “a reason to recommend this course is that the instructor stands very close to her students, helps them understand the content, using questions to provoke their interest on a series of topics including the way the course conduct itself” (S22), “the course content is very important for our School. The instructor managed to advance interactive participation and as a result we
shared the feeling that we attended a ‘regular’ class and not an online zoom lesson” (S19), “I liked the way of teaching and the way the course has been structured. I liked how we, as students, received the instructor’s respect. At last, an instructor that asked us whether we like their course and took our responses into consideration making the relevant adjustments and improvements” (S27). From the students’ comments it is obvious that the pedagogical approach for the implementation of participatory formative evaluation provides answers to the questions of what works best in a given educational environment and leading to a better future within a certain context (Purešević & Krnjaja, 2019). The learning process is interrelated with the evaluation process as, through participatory evaluation, students and instructor co-create a better learning environment.

In the open question on what advice would they give to future students regarding the attendance of these courses, three topics were raised: a) “not to skip classes” b) “to participate actively” c) “to study the presentation material in the E-learning platform”. The students, apparently, appreciate the significance of active participation in the classes held synchronously, as well as the advantages and the benefits of studying the material uploaded on e-learning in their own time and pace, in the form of asynchronous learning.

The qualitative data received at the end of the semester were further supported by the quantitative data analysis, according to which there was a high level of overall student satisfaction for both courses. As shown in Chart 1, the question “How satisfied are you with the course, in general?” the option “Very Much” receives the highest percentage (73.4%) followed by the option “Much” (23.4). Just a very small percentage (3.2%) of students opted for “Quite Satisfied”, while there were no students that chose the options “Little” or “Not at all”. As the levels of students’ satisfaction with the course directly affects their learning outcomes, the students’ responses in the end of the semester are deemed very satisfactory and display the course’s effectiveness (Driver, 2002; Hong, 2002; Schutt, Allen, & Laumakis, 2009; Claus & Changchit, 2017; Pavlis Korres, 2021).

4. Conclusions

To conclude, it can be noted that the findings of this case study have been very encouraging. They presuppose a pedagogical approach towards evaluation, as it has been expressed through the students’ responses. During this approach, the instructor is open to shape, jointly with his/her students, what the course content will be, how it will be taught, why it will be taught, to whom and by whom it will be taught (Freire, 1970). All these are put into action through both the pedagogical practice itself as well as its evaluation.

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The decision to include evaluations as an integral and structural element in university courses throughout their six-month duration, can potentially be rendered as “a reservoir of knowledge about effectiveness that we are consulted about how to design, plan, and implement new interventions, not just evaluate them once implemented” (Patton, 2018, p.187). Readjusting the content and the educational process based on the evaluation results can lead to students’ active participation in the process, increase their level of satisfaction from the course and contribute to the development of an
evaluation culture. Making use of the evaluation results can contribute to the courses’ improvement both synchronously during the current period of teaching conduct as well as subsequently during the following academic semesters, since the findings will lead to instructor’s redefining and readjusting certain course elements. Consequently, students, attending the classes during the current and future time period, can benefit by the evaluation process. Similarly, the instructor is also benefited since the evaluation contributes to his/her self-improvement and effectiveness. Within the context of online courses, evaluation can be achieved through taking advantage of communication and collaborative tools that facilitate the anonymous and free expression of students’ opinions and feelings, during the teaching sessions, regarding the content and the educational process. The decision to integrate evaluation as a componential part of the course offers the possibility to students to advance their critical reflection on the educational experience and can positively further trigger students’ in-class participation, as they turn from passive recipients to active co-creators.

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