

The Sustainability of Regions as a Challenge for Higher Education - The Problem-Solving and Project-Building Methodology in Teaching Cultural Management

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Abstract: Teaching in higher education is a constant challenge, as it requires not only permanent updating, but also the search for and implementation of the most appropriate methodologies that enable the transmission of scientific and technical knowledge to students and their training to apply abstract knowledge to concrete situations in the future profession. The Cultural Management unit of the Tourism, Cultural and Heritage Management degree, due to its multidisciplinary nature, requires the use of teaching methodologies that are capable of involving students in problem-solving and enabling them to intervene in the different areas of cultural management, namely: urban management and rehabilitation; management of built heritage; and management of cultural tourism. This is why this unit was taught (2023-2024) using the problem-solving and project-building methodology, promoting collaborative teaching and action research. The choice of this methodology sought to: increase students' critical thinking; foster creativity; apply scientific knowledge to real-world situations; and build students' confidence in their skills. Therefore, we intend to present not only the learning path taken throughout the semester, but also the results achieved. We also intend to demonstrate how the construction of the cultural management project contributed to consolidating the students' knowledge of the content covered and to increasing their confidence in preparing them for the labour market.

Keywords: higher education, collaborative methodology, problem-solving, project-building

Introduction

The preparation of qualified professionals, in general, and in areas related to tourism and heritage management, in particular, requires methodologies

capable of combining knowing and doing (scientific knowledge and know-how).

Our work analyses how the teaching of the Cultural Management unit (which is part of the 3rd semester of the Tourism, Cultural and Heritage Management degree) was planned, identifying the theoretical and practical path taken. We will therefore try not only to explain this path, but also to understand how the predefined objectives were achieved and contributed to the students' training. Finally, we also want to uncover the limitations identified and define strategies for improvement and further development for the coming academic years.

1. Theoretical Framework

Teaching in higher education, not only in bachelor's degrees but also in master's programmes, has come to demand that any teacher have in-depth systematic and conceptual knowledge (in any area of knowledge), which also requires constant updating of all scientific production, and the insertion of innovative methodologies. In addition, this teaching is also required to be geared towards the demands of the world of work, preparing students for the demands they will face in their professional future.

If before it was enough to impart theoretical knowledge, now this knowledge must be combined with professional practice and with the competitiveness of the market demands. Only in this way, will it be possible to prepare professionals who can add value to the sustainability of the territories and organisations where they work.

To do so, it is also crucial to make the student feel involved in the decision-making process, from choosing the topic to work on to selecting the working group, as well as creating a safe environment to ask questions and share any doubts that arise. To this end, the role of the teacher should be seen as a facilitator/mediator of knowledge [1]. In other words, teaching has changed from the traditional model in which the teacher was only responsible for student learning, to the new approach, in which the student is the main actor of learning and the teacher becomes a cognitive mediator [2], as someone who is available to give feedback during the learning process and to ensure that each student feels free to ask questions and share their concerns throughout the construction of the Project, either with the teacher or with the other students.

Collaborative methodology encourages student participation in the educational process and, when carried out as a group, allows peer feedback to solve problems and achieve the objectives set [3] [6]. It becomes, in fact,

a methodology in which the participants act interactively with the purpose of analysing a problem and exploring alternative solutions. The student participates freely and is the main protagonist of the learning process, with the co-participation of his classmates in a responsible way, with commitment, and in an autonomous manner. Collaborative learning, as a methodological strategy that can be integrated into any teaching program, incorporates a series of important didactic advantages: increase students' critical thinking; foster creativity; apply scientific knowledge to real-world situations; and build students' confidence in their scientific and technical skills [4] [5] [6]. We believe, therefore, that this kind of methodology is the most appropriate for multidisciplinary fields teaching and learning process, such as in cultural management subject.

2. Curricular Unit Presentation

The curricular unit *Cultural Management* of the Tourism, Cultural and Heritage Management degree, due to its multidisciplinary nature, requires the use of teaching methodologies that can involve students in problem-solving and enabling them to intervene in the different areas of cultural management, namely: urban management and rehabilitation; management of built heritage; and management of cultural tourism.

This is why this unit was taught (2023-2024) using the problem-solving and project-building methods, promoting collaborative learning and action research. The choice of this methodology sought to achieve all the defined goals for the unit and to enable the learning process. As we can see on the unit's programme, the main objectives are [7]:

- Introduce students to the fundamental concepts and practices of cultural management,
- Analyse the various types of heritage defined in Portuguese legislation,
- Analyse heritage concepts, highlighting the complexity of their cultural, political and economic implications,
- Know how to apply knowledge and skills relating to heritage and cultural management,
- Acquire skills to help to understand the demands of the professional world in cultural and heritage institutions and companies,
- Train professionals capable of creating and managing organizations in the cultural sector,
- Acquire the skills to design a comprehensive project for the management of a heritage asset,
- Know how to apply knowledge and skills related to cultural management,

- Acquire skills that help them understand the demands of the professional world in cultural and heritage institutions and companies.

Regarding the unit contents, it was defined the following [7]:

- I. Knowledge in cultural and heritage management: Legislation and normative documents.
- II. The evolution of the concept of cultural heritage versus cultural policies: stages of cultural policies; the place of culture in the organization of governments; the importance of cultural management in the competitiveness of regions.
- III. Professional practices: urban management and rehabilitation; management of built heritage; cultural tourism.
- IV. Project development in the areas of cultural and heritage management: cultural management; heritage management; dissemination of cultural heritage.

Both the objectives and the syllabus of the unit have been duly accredited by the National Higher Education Accreditation Agency (A3ES). As we can see, the syllabus covers the main concepts, methods and techniques involved in cultural management and cultural heritage. In this way, it is considered important to open up various roads of research to increase a taste for bibliographical and general research in the area of culture and to promote and transmit structuring knowledge. Implicit in this pathway are logical and methodical processes that contribute to achieving the various objectives envisaged, by requiring knowledge, understanding and critical analysis to generate information and solutions on the part of the students. It is therefore believed that the contents have been coherently defined and sequentially organized to achieve the objectives set for the course.

Through practical work, the aim is to motivate students towards empirical research in this area. The teaching methodologies adopted reflect the concern to combine knowledge and understanding (theoretical classes) with practical application in the face of exercises that require critical analysis, systematization and the application of techniques and knowledge appropriate to the situation (practical classes). Work carried out in class and outside of contact sessions, in groups of students, contributes to the development of skills related to teamwork, responsibility, tolerance, work management and obligations.

Methodology and methods

According to the collaborative methodology, we opted for the problem-solving method and the project-building method. In other words, these collaborative learning methods can help to achieve complex skills that

cannot be achieved through individualistic and competitive methods. It is based on active task interdependence, in which students work in groups. The problem-solving method, and project method, among others, can be used to teach academic subjects and develop interpersonal skills and behaviours.

Positive task interdependence increases student motivation and fosters collaboration within groups [8].

In short, problem solving is the act of defining a problem; determining the cause of the problem (gathering information); identifying, prioritizing, and selecting alternatives for a solution; evaluating solutions; and implementing a solution [9]. In turn, project-based learning consists of student-centered learning that is organized on the basis of project construction. The acquisition of new skills occurs through a project that students complete in groups to solve complex problems [10].

3. Work Development and Results

In concrete terms, the following path was followed during the unit's practical sessions:

- **presentation of real cases of heritage**, which are abandoned or are not being monetized, risking cultural and economic loss for the region;
- **identification of the problems** that need to be tackled;
- **diagnosis**, by gathering of information (on the regional environment) through the PESTEL and SWOT analysis – the knowledge of the surroundings of any cultural / heritage facility is extremely important. Only in this way will it be possible to identify strengths and weaknesses that will directly affect the project to be proposed; as well as knowing the legal requirements we have to respect, the main obstacles to be overcome, the opportunities for funding and partnerships, and even the tastes and tendencies of possible target audiences.
- identification of the **key issues and objectives** of the proposal - identification of the ideas that will guide the detailed planning of the entire project and the definition of 3 strategic objectives that achieve the project's purpose;
- and **construction of a viable intervention project** (at infrastructures, human resources, and budget level) – the development of project proposal concerning the chosen heritage facility that is able to prove its economic and financial viability in the long term.

To gather and organize all the information, we used the PESTEL and SWOT analysis tools, in order to understand all the obstacles and opportunities that would influence any project proposal that we could develop.

Regarding the construction of the project proposal, we defined the following topics/areas and specifications:

- 1) project summary – in a few words, each group should be able to explain the entire project’s idea;
- 2) goals - the 3 strategic objectives requested should cover: defining an objective for possible construction and/or rehabilitation needs; identifying human resource needs; and ensuring the economic and financial viability of the project;
- 3) project justification - at this point, each group had to demonstrate its ability to use all the information gathered (during the diagnostic stage) to substantiate that the project designed would be the most appropriate solution to achieve the objectives set and solve the problems identified;
- 4) accessibility – nowadays, any application for funding requires to demonstrate that our project is inclusive and respects the rules of accessibility. For this reason, according to the specificities of each project and its main target audiences, each group should identify all the tools and equipment to meet these special needs;
- 5) action plan, technical specifications and milestones - One of the most difficult parts of a project to develop is the action plan, because it requires: being able to detail and explain how and when each measure will be implemented; demonstrating that there is a precise timetable for all the concrete tasks; identifying the human, material and financial needs for each initiative; and, furthermore, proving that all the resources have been thought out in an efficient and sustainable way. It is all this data that allows us to assess the real viability of the project designed;

Table 1. Action plan general model

	<i>Activities</i>	<i>Initiatives</i>	<i>Milestone / timetable</i>
<i>Measure 1 – ...</i>			
<i>Measure 2 – ...</i>			

- 6) human resources - each group had to present the constitution of the project team, identifying the legally required functions in each situation;
- 7) budget - according to the table below, each project should not only present a budget proposal for the first year of the project, regarding infrastructure needs, construction work, material and human resources, and external services;

Table 2. Budget model

<i>Description</i>	<i>Quantity</i>	<i>Cost</i>	<i>Subtotal</i>
<i>Human Resources</i>			
<i>Equipment</i>			
<i>External services Supply</i>			
<i>Construction works</i>			
			<i>Total</i>

- 8) communication and dissemination – knowing how to communicate is the key to the success of any project and, for this reason, not only should the main communication channels (online, TV, press, etc.) be identified, but also the target audiences to which this communication would be directed, proving that these tools would have the desired disseminating and multiplying effect;
- 9) impact and evaluation - while in the initial budget, the concern was to know how much it would cost to start the project, at this point the main concern would be to explain how this project would be viable in the long term, after the end of the initial funding. Thus, the main sources of future income should be identified (e.g. own income, sponsorship, patronage, etc.). In addition, each group would also have to identify all forms of monitoring, follow-up and evaluation of the project (e.g. accounting records, customer satisfaction assessment, reports, etc.)

The groups of students, according to the work programme defined by the teacher, carried out their research in two main phases. Firstly, they collected and processed all the information needed to develop the diagnosis, using the tools mentioned above. Secondly, in accordance with the project structure

presented, they developed a cultural management project proposal, where they were able to demonstrate the preservation of cultural heritage and, at the same time, the economic viability of the proposal. After developing the entire proposal, the same students presented their proposal orally, with this public presentation also counting towards their final assessment. Finally, we would like to emphasize that students were divided in 5 different work groups, and developed the following studies:

Table 3. Developed projects

<i>Group</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Number of students</i>	<i>Type of project</i>
1	Eçamires - revitalization and preservation of cultural heritage and the memory of people	4	built heritage and cultural tourism management
2	Porto Comercial de Cambres - project to revitalize the commercial port by building infrastructure and providing services	3	urban and cultural/natural tourism management
3	O Bairro do Castelo - project to revitalize Lamego's historic city center	3	urban and rehabilitation management and cultural tourism
4	Igreja de Santa Cruz - tourist revitalization of religious heritage	2	cultural tourism management
5	Sé Catedral de Lamego - tourist revitalization of religious heritage	3	cultural tourism management

Conclusions

The chosen methodology for the Cultural Management unit was able to help to achieve the objectives set in the unit in a fruitful way. In the last face-to-face session, the teacher asked all the students to evaluate the teaching and work methodology, and the feedback was extremely positive. The students felt that, despite all the effort they had to put in to complete the tasks and assignments requested, they had managed to: improve their ability to communicate in groups; negotiate the proposals presented and reach consensus; realise the challenges they could face in the real world in the area of heritage and cultural facilities management; and learn about the difficulties each territory/country has to face in order to differentiate itself in the tourism sector and heritage safeguard.

Despite this positive feedback, we believe that there are some points that could be improved in the future, in order to deepen the students' qualification. We therefore intend to implement the following initiatives. First, contribute to strengthening the students' foreign languages skills and,

to this end, we will work together with the teacher responsible for the English II unit. This collaboration will involve not only formative assessment activities (mid-term oral presentations, where the main purpose of each student will be to propose an initiative and defend its advantages), but also summative assessment activities (each group will prepare an oral presentation, taking on the role of proponents of a cultural management project who are trying to convince potential investors to support the project). Secondly, motivate students to be more proactive in their search for sources of funding, by researching calls that are available to finance projects in the tourism and/or heritage sectors. Thirdly, to reinforce the analysis of the results achieved by drawing up a diagnosis and a final survey. The diagnosis, to be completed by the students in the first week of the semester, aims to gather information on their expectations of the cultural management contents. The survey, which will be collected at the end of the semester, aims to analyse the students' perception of the results achieved and to obtain more specific data on how they evaluate the unit and the methodology applied.

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