

APPLICATION OF AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO TEACHING IN A DISTANCE LEARNING EXPERIENCE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BOLOGNA *

I. Didactics as a research tool

I.1. Comparison of legal systems

The study of law is today one of the sciences for which a comparative approach appears necessary and indispensable. The natural comparison between state, community and international regulations drives the scholar to verify their common points and differences which coexist and influence a country and its citizens, gather and increase the value of their mutual influences, stimulate an evolutionary interpretation of their norms, and restructure in a positive way the methods of approach to the study of the norms which characterize current law. Of particular significance and importance today is the comparison with the law produced by social organizations, for example those put forth by religious organizations, which originally aspired to substitute the laws of the State and when unsuccessful, shaped, oriented and conditioned those same laws. The development of the modern State caused by the transformation of religious organizations into subjects of private law, brought with it the autonomy of state law and in the western world, forced the regression of religious rights into the patterns of private law.

In spite of this, religious organizations have not stopped producing or administering law and so the phenomenon known as normative pluralism developed which in turn gave rise to legal pluralism, an expression of the tensions and drives that exist within the social and religious groups of a complex society. These contributions have become more and more diverse in a society characterized by various cultures, ethnicities and religions.

I.2. An interdisciplinary approach

In order to analyse this phenomenon it is necessary to overcome the classical disciplinary subdivision of the law. By means of a new methodological-structural approach, this classical division between public and private law is broken. In this way, the barrier that traditionally divides national law from international law is broken, thereby stimulating relationships between the two, which can only be reassembled by turning to categories such as ideological pluralism which allow an effective synthesis of communal values. A multicultural and multi-ethnic society, which has become the norm across the globe, demands the use of a research method which allows relationships between various drives and interests, the reconstruction of conflicts and the return to unity of the diverse and often opposing components of a social structure.

I.3. Didactics as a place for empirical testing of research themes

Interdisciplinary didactics, that is, a lesson jointly given by more than one professor, represents the ideal place for the forced and combined contribution of diverse disciplines to the analysis of particular themes. This method causes an integration among disciplines and forces the scholar to take into account aspects outside his/her field which were previously neglected because of the exclusive stimulation from his/her own discipline. Exegetic reflections, which are often repetitive, extremely specious and frequently inconclusive after the exam of diverse themes, which have been completed through the use of rigidly circumscribed categories, become violently and provocatively disrupted by the open-mindedness with which the interdisciplinary approach analyses the institutions, producing a substantial and significant renovation of a legal analysis. Aspects and characteristics, often significant of the phenomenon examined, which eluded the methodological approach of a single discipline, are suddenly revealed thanks to the freshness with which someone who has come from a different disciplinary field looks at the phenomenon never before analysed, by turning to his/her own

categories of analysis. This teaching method therefore becomes a powerful tool for the renewal of the discipline and legal studies. Teaching in this style reawakens interests, overcomes the tired repetition of concepts and notions conveyed through manuals, and returns the opportunity for cultural growth to the professor, and by consequence also to the lessons and the students, since the professor is forced to debate differing viewpoints with others thereby rediscovering the pleasure of study and the in-depth analysis of scientific research.

I.4. Separation of students from university

A crisis among universities definitely exists which has numerous and complex causes including the lack of innovative teaching methods and the substantial uselessness of attending lessons. Political and academic powers identify university reform as its decentralization throughout the country as regards the allocation of teaching services. In reality, academic powers maintain that policy only as a means of finding new positions for professors or greater resources in the local area.

Nevertheless a certain number of students are still inclined to enrol in a university based on whether or not it is in a "university city" in the often unfulfilled hopes of moving to that city. Based on this tendency there are more than likely sociological reasons as well as quality of life issues, above all for young people, which make them prefer the meeting places offered by large universities to life in smaller towns. And yet, the presence of students in the city where the university is located does not necessarily translate into attendance at lessons, a problem also caused by the insufficiency of logistical structures offered by the university. A large number of students who either commute or who live somewhere other than the site of the university have an episodic and marginal relationship with the lessons and professors and relate to the university only when there is an exam.

This problem has been dealt with by creating new universities but these, after an initial growth phase, usually see a reduction in enrolments. Students are decentralized across the country because of economic reasons and in the quest for a renowned certification. Bringing the university closer to the homes of students does not necessarily create the conditions for attendance by students due to the uncertainty of lessons, the irregularity of the presence of professors who are often young and inexperienced, etc.

Let us not forget that a complete education is a combination of life experience and schooling. The utility of creating new universities is understood but in order to be useful they must specialize and transform themselves into an opportunity for osmosis and exchange of experience in consolidated and, dare I say, historical university locations. They must also improve the quality of services offered with a recourse to new and original communication and study techniques by exploiting local resources.

The ultimate aim is to rebuild in every possible way participation in the lessons not only as an individual but also a collective action.

I.5. The new teaching methodology as a remedy to the dispersion of knowledge, as a way to make up for student delay and the fragmentation of students throughout the country

We need a new teaching method which allows the recovery of the dispersion of knowledge and the reintegration of students in a virtuous and aggregate system which ties them to the university structure. It is necessary to defeat the fragmentation of students throughout the country, through the individualization of a forced return to the university premises which would offer the possibility to recover a student dimension and a formative and absorbing education. It is also necessary to create a community of students characterized by exchanges of experience, debates and participation in a collective learning experience. One of the tools to achieve this result can, paradoxically, be the organization and development of a distance learning program which is characterized as a largely innovative and original method of teaching and learning. The enemy to defeat is the individualization of the relationships between professor and student which seems to be part of the foundation of the operation of this tool, reviving the circulation of relationships.

In this perspective:

- Distance learning can be a remedy for student expulsion from university and can allow a "return to the origins" of a university, intended as a community for study, comparison and research;
- Distance learning can create an opportunity for a student to re-connect with a university. The natural consequence of this higher student attendance level is the concentration of knowledge in a university setting;
- Distance learning can introduce a student to an ideal environment, albeit virtual, where he/she can find a community made up of students and professors to work, socialize, compare, dialogue and debate with;
- Due to its flexible nature, distance learning allows for greater compatibility between work and study, facilitates time management, and streamlines the bureaucratic procedures involved in attending a university;

In order to achieve these objectives it is necessary that the adopted teaching method be characterized by a renewal of the relationship between students and the way in which instruction is organized.

I.6. New evaluation methods and the function of instruction

In order to achieve these objectives it is necessary to defeat the logic that until now has presided over the organization of university life. This logic essentially centres on the final exam as a sanction which comes at the end of a bureaucratic route towards learning, often distinguished by the useless as well as tiring repetition of lessons learned by rote and quickly forgotten after the exam. This same system, of false as well as useless learning, is substituted by ongoing assessment which becomes the instrument functional to learning and teaching. The assessment of competence is intended as one phase of learning, to be verified after each and every lesson so that the student can demonstrate having had a positive and conclusive approach to the content of the lesson which has produced a growth in his/her knowledge which is not so much factual as methodological. In other words, we can without hesitation permit a lack of knowledge of normative data as long as the methodological method for the recovery of this lack has been acquired.

In this logic, above all in the law department, what is important is not the final exam as a sanction or a prize, as it is often seen by students, or even a verification of a student's knowledge of the subject matter but the assessment on the part of the examining professor in collaboration with the student, of the student's possession of the methodological tools for learning which will allow him/her to find data on an as needed basis.

II. The interdisciplinary seminar of ecclesiastical institutions in the interactive distance learning experiment according to the plan prepared by the law faculty of Bologna University

II.1. Use of a computer network for teaching

A computer network is a quick and flexible tool which allows anyone to gain access to information regardless of their location. The information can be taken in passively or actively by means of interactive screens with diagrams and conveniently arranged examples throughout the lesson. The lessons would always be available on the network, giving students the opportunity to follow them at their own convenience. Students would also be able to interrupt the lesson with questions and observations and verify their comprehension.

II.2. The interdisciplinary lesson

The interdisciplinary lesson, through the simultaneous presence of several professors, would liven up a lesson with planned interruptions by professors during their colleagues' lectures, dramatize and produce "events" , and create debates if necessary to capture more of the students' attention. In this way the students' interest is maintained as they are watching a real-time lecture and not listening passively to a pre-recorded lesson. The rhetorical devices sometimes used during the presentation of the lesson give it freshness and make it less rigid and more flexible.

II.3. Preparation of the lesson and task distribution

Contrary to what happens in a traditional university lesson, the interdisciplinary one is not improvised and requires close examination, precautionary coordination between professors, identification of a common theme, task and homework distribution and the creation of an outline which must guarantee adequate time for everyone's participation and for each aspect of the problem being analysed. An improvement over a traditional university lesson entrusted to the spontaneity of a professor is automatically achieved because of the not always easy relationship with the other interlocutors.

II.4. Tutoring and a method for keeping students in contact with the university

A teaching method that requires assessments and the creation of more than one examination paper needs a tutoring presence that will take responsibility for following a certain number of students. In the experience at the University of Bologna, at the end of each lesson three open and six multiple choice questions are given to the students. The students are required to answer the open questions with no more than 3,000 characters to get them used to being concise. The questions are automatically sent to the students at the end of the week. The answers have to be sent back before the end of the following week and are corrected by the tutors who are required to take an interdisciplinary approach thereby contributing to their training as future professors. If necessary, tutors will call a student who has made mistakes in his/her answers and will help fill in his/her gaps. In this way the students returns to university no longer silent listeners during a lesson but as actors in a living and human teaching relationship.

II.5. Continual assessment and the final exam

The assessment takes place as the course develops so that the function of the exam as a disciplinary measure is now played down. The final exam, taken with a board of examiners made up by colleagues who have carried out the lessons, becomes an open field discussion covering all the subjects dealt with throughout the course and allows reciprocal verification between students and professors. The cultural and didactic value of this method of checking a student's preparation represents one of the most significant innovations from a didactic point of view. It characterizes the whole experience and launches a serious reflection on the meaning and content of the student's method of learning.

II.6. The construction of bibliographical and research tools- returning to the library. The virtual library as an additional function of the network.

One of the basic aims of university teaching is by far to provide every student with a research and study method that will allow him/her the use of bibliographic tools and a return to the library. The need to answer weekly questions about the lessons leads students to the library in order to prepare appropriate answers. With the support of the library staff, guided visits have been made available to make students aware of the facilities available at the library of the Department of Legal Sciences, "A. Cicu" (which is only utilized by 3% of enrolled students until it is time to write their final thesis, when the percentage increases). During the visit information is provided about the library's bibliography and all the materials available which can be used in any other library. The goal is to prevent students using only the virtual library provided by the internet, often unreliable from a scientific point of view, and also provide students with the opportunity to use CD ROMs which are often too expensive to buy but nevertheless available for consultation in the library. News and information available on the internet therefore becomes supplementary rather than a substitute for scientific works as a result of the themes addressed during the lessons and the innovative approach given to the subject in question.