GUIDE TO ADAPTATION TO THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

4. Learning Activities

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de Girona

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4 Learning Activities

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This document is the fourth in the Guide to Adaptation to the European Higher Education Area *(EHEA). It is based on the discussions of the University of Girona's Committee for the Development of the Pilot Scheme for Adaptation to the EHEA and the working party which was created in summer 2006 for the express purpose of dealing with the subject of learning activities. This group was made up of Alicia Baltasar, Jordi Colomer, Carmen Echazarreta, Rosa Ros and Ferran Viñas, coordinators of the various courses taking part in the Pilot Scheme, and Josep Juandó, Teaching Support delegate.*

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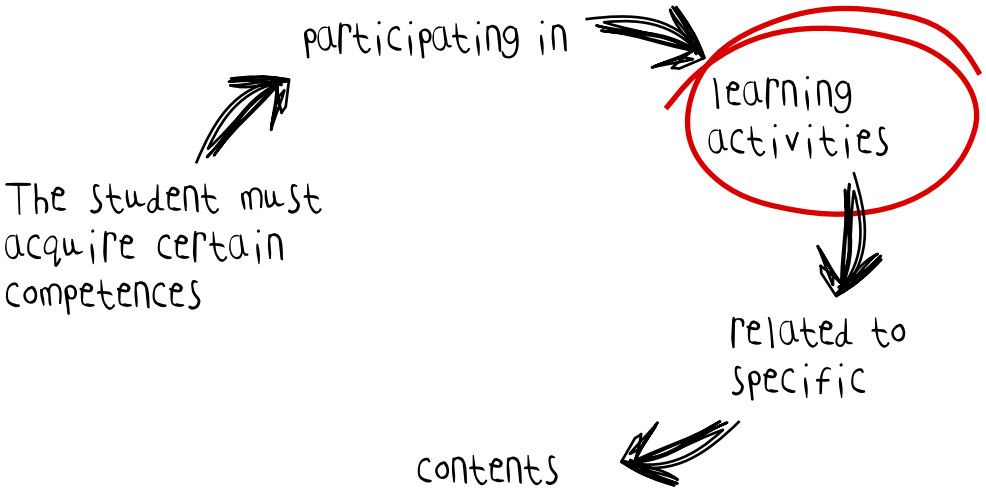


INTRODUCTION

This is the fourth part of the UdG's Guide to Adaptation to the European Higher Education Area. Like the first, which was issued in June 2006 and dealt with competences, it is founded on the discussions of the Committee for the Development of the Pilot Scheme for Adaptation to the EHEA carried out in accordance with the proposals of the working group set up expressly to deal with the subject.

It was suggested in the first document that it would be necessary to deal with the question of learning activities. Indeed, the very fact of building curriculum planning around learning places the emphasis directly on the activity of the learner, the student. In the model within which we are working, it is the students who actively build their own knowledge, connecting new meaning with knowledge that has already been acquired. Thus a wide variety of learning activities can improve both the quantity and quality of learning and anchor it in the relevant academic and professional contexts.

The learning activities are shown in the diagram below, taken from the page on competences.

7. LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Let us begin from the idea that we learn not only by memorising new information, but also by using this new information, finding out where it slots in to our existing knowledge and thus giving it its own sense and meaning. This use, or perhaps manipulation of information must necessarily be carried out by the person who is learning: in this case, the student.

The job of the lecturer in this context is to guide the students through the different types of activity which will lead them to use the new concepts, procedures etc. which they need to acquire in order for their learning to be meaningful and effective.

We therefore need to focus on the students' learning activities. It is thus a good idea if, when describing these activities while we are planning our courses, we look at them in terms of activities carried out by the student. In this way, when our future students come to register, they will be able to see what each course expects of them.

figure 1

La meva UdG

University of Girona **Course design**

Competences

Contents

-Demographics and population growth. Life and fertility tables.
-Population regulating mechanisms.
-Population dynamics and intraspecific competition. Cycles and fluctuations.

Activities

Description	Ass	w/ L	w/o L
Active participation in a seminar analysing a situation involving an invasive species and designing a mathematical model to study its impact. At the end, a report detailing the seminar's contents and conclusions must be written.			
	Total	4	2

Other competences

Using computer programmes to create mathematical models applied to the study of populations.

2. TWO STAGES OF ACTIVITY PLANNING

2.1. In the medium term: before the academic year begins (during May and June). This is when the university asks us to design the course so as to give the students information and so make them aware of their commitments.
At this time the tool which we use is the UdG's course design program: figures 1 and 2 show the activities section of the program. It is a very flexible tool. It enables us to set out activities at many different levels of detail. Here each lecturer's style has plenty of room for manoeuvre. Nevertheless, it is advisable to find a balance between a formulation of activities which is so

figure 2

Description

Active participation in a seminar analysing a situation involving an invasive species and designing a mathematical model to study its impact. At the end, a report detailing the seminar's contents and conclusions must be written.

Type Seminars

Hours of student commitment

	Previous	During	After	Total		
With lecturer	0	2	0	2		
Without lecturer	4	0	0	4	**TOTAL**	6

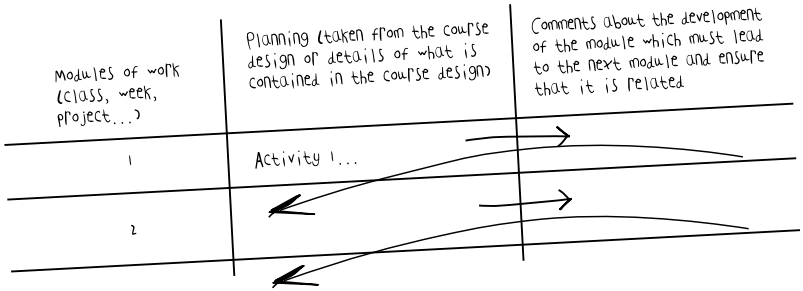
Evaluation criteria

☑ **Is assessable**

Seminar attendance is compulsory. Evaluation is based on student participation and the written report.

generic that it fails to guide either the lecturer or the student and one that is so specific that the timetable is set in stone and it becomes difficult to make any changes that might seem advisable as the course progresses.
This is an appropriate place to link each learning activity carefully with those competences which it addresses. It often turns out that an activity, once designed, can be used for various competences. What is useful is to specify the "primary", most direct links, leaving aside the "secondary" ones. Any other method could lead to confusion rather than to guidance.

figure 3



2.2. Immediate planning: when the academic year begins and the first course session has taken place, we have new information: we have met the students, we have given the class to the best of our ability and we may or may not have covered what we expected to cover. Perhaps new circumstance have come to light which suggest new activities. All this information, along with the course design carried out earlier, guides us for the second session, the contents, etc. When we have provided the second set of contents, or given the second session, we are guided for the third, and so on.

Here we need a teaching plan, a tool which is different from the course design program and which the UdG will shortly incorporate into the intranet. This tool is intended to reproduce the classic teaching plan which all teachers use to some extent. We can illustrate this with a graphic shown in figure 3.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FORMULATING ACTIVITIES

— Using action nouns, such as creating, analysis, reading, design, interpretation, communication, planning ... and short texts which describe the activity to be carried out and the contents to be worked on.

— Suggesting a text for each learning activity, so that each one is clearly distinguished from the others.

— Devising suggestions for activities which will help to develop the competences our courses have to transmit, relating them to specific contents. The procedural model below may serve as a working guide:

a. Decide which specific competence or competences we want to promote with the activity concerned.
b. Choose a particular type of learning activity (the UdG's course design program divides activities into types, which may provide ideas. At the end of this document you will find a brief glossary of these types.)
c. Choose the contents you will be working on.
d. Specify the activity.
e. Consider whether this activity might be an assessment activity, during the course of which the student could demonstrate the acquisition of new learning. The UdG's course design program offers us this option directly when we are designing each activity (see figure 2,page 6).

The document on competences offered us some examples of terms for

competences. Taking these as an example, we could formulate a possible learning activity as follows:

a. We will develop the competence: "Use computer programs to create mathematical models applied to population studies".

b. Among other activities and in view of the content that we have, we think a case study in the form of a seminar could be useful to help us to acquire this competence.

c. The contents we will work on are:
— Demography and population growth. Life tables and fertility tables.
— Mechanisms for regulating the population.
— Population dynamics and intraspecific competition. Cycles and fluctuations.

d. Let us formulate the activity: active participation in a seminar to analyse a situation of invading species and the design of a mathematical model to study its impact. At the end, a record of the content and conclusions of the seminar should be prepared.

e. The characteristics of this activity lead us to decide that this will be an assessment activity.

With this level of detail, and with the help of the course design program, we have defined the terms of the activity: the assessment criteria, approximately how long it will last, with and without the lecturer, etc.

4. DIVERSITY OF LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Each person learns in their own way, according to their aptitudes, abilities and learning strategies. Some learn better by writing than by reading, by debating rather than memorising, and so on.

This fact, together with the need to put knowledge to application and use, makes it advisable to diversify the types of learning activities. As well as expository classes we should add, as far as possible, debates, seminars, presentations, practical work. This is certainly a good way of broadening the routes to learning growth.

This diversity may be related to the evolution of the student's course: a progressive coherence. Perhaps there might be greater diversity during the first year than during the second; perhaps when one type of activity has been introduced, it would be best to continue working on it in later courses, etc.

figure 4

Description

The key activity-a critical reading of the dialogues- will be preceded by introductory explanations and general comprehension criteria as proposed by the lecturer.

Type Expository classes

Hours of student commitment

	Previous	During	After	Total		
With lecturer	0	10	0	10		
Without lecturer	5	0	0	5	**TOTAL**	15

5. EXPOSITORY CLASSES

It must be said that expository classes, often called lectures, are the most classic type of university academic activity. Adaptation to the EHEA has to take this into account. However, some of the time which has traditionally been dedicated to lectures must now be given over to new types of activities, as we have been saying, given the diversification we have described and the work on competences.

On the other hand, there are many different styles of lecture, with a broad range of levels of activity for the students. Lectures can, for example,

figure 5

Description

The oretical class related with Boolean algebra presented by the lecturer. Function simplification.

Type

Expository classes

Hours of student commitment

	Previous	During	After	Total		
With lecturer	0	4	0	4		
Without lecturer	0	0	6	6	**TOTAL**	10

lead to other types of activities and promote coordination and cooperation among activities from different courses, providing greater coherence in the joint results.

As for the planning of expository classes, when we are using the course design program during the first phase of activity planning, we again have to seek the balance we have mentioned. We should neither aim to plan every class (this will be done in the teaching plan) nor leave matters in such a generalised state that there is no guidance. Figures 4 and 5 show a couple of examples.

6. GLOSSARY. THE TYPES OF LEARNING ACTIVITIES WHICH APPEAR IN THE UDG COURSE DESIGN PROGRAM.

Different forms of learning activities are very often given the same name. This glossary is intended to steer us towards a consensus.

Analysis/case studies
Using information gathered in real situations, depending on the subject of the course, analysis of the situation or case using knowledge specific to the course. This type of activity tends to favour the students working as a team, with or without the lecturer.

Assessment
Learning can be enriched if we use various different types of assessment which involve different knowledge and abilities, from the more classical written examinations through to problem solving. In fact any form of activity can be considered an assessment activity.

Debate
Using the word in its purest sense, in the classroom we may set up debating roles as seen in the media: moderator, secretary, speakers, etc., who prepare their contributions previously. This develops a variety of competences at the same time.

Expository classes
These are understood as lectures: the lecturer is the most active participant as opposed to the role of the student. However, this type of class can use resources which are valid for learning, such as the exchange of ideas or questioning, among others.

Field trips
These are an activity which needs advance preparation and which has subsequent benefits. In order to obtain maximum benefit, they need to be run according to guidelines which have been previously analysed and discussed, and accompanied by the lecturer.

Information search
All types of information: in the library, specialist searches, using the Internet. This often forms part of other, broader activities.

Internships in companies and institutions
This can vary considerably in duration and take a number of different forms, with the student being tutored, helped and assessed by both the course teachers and their external equivalents.

Looking at/listening to documents
This is usually understood as a group activity, with the lecturer present, with a script to be read and subsequently worked on. Nevertheless, it can also be carried out without the lecturer, particularly if the subject has previously been worked on and there are very specific tasks to be carried out.

Participation in external events
This is understood as participation encouraged by the course itself, with the aim of integrating events taking place in a social context as a source of learning. Afterwards it is a good idea to profit from them by means of comment, debate or, sometimes, using the information acquired.

Participatory classes
During lectures there are no questions from the students. Participatory classes are those in which the lecturer explicitly encourages student participation in the structure of the discourse.

Practical classes
The lecturer acts as a guide to the students' practical work, providing a situation which has to be resolved, and the students, jointly or working in groups, attempt a solution. This can be related to case analysis.

Problem based learning (PBL)
This can be considered to be related to case studies and tends to involve a broad set of different forms of contents. It involves not so much applying prior knowledge as discovering the need for new knowledge which is required in the framework of problem solving. This can be useful in encouraging collaboration between courses, and combining time spent with and without the lecturer.

Reading/commenting texts
We can either ask the students to read texts without the lecturer being present, or we can read them in class, depending on the nature and length of the texts. The lecturer can lead the discussion, or the students themselves can do so, in small groups or with the whole group.

Seminars
This word contains a broad range of meanings. Seminars are generally made up of small groups (approximately 25 students) in which a speaker presents information to be argued, confirmed and debated with all the students taking part. The speaker may be the course teacher or an external collaborator.

Simulations
This term belongs to the scientific and technical field, in which there are many simulation machines or programs. The idea is to see real processes in the professional world simulated in an interactive environment. Role-playing can be included in this category, regardless of its differences.

Solving exercises
We are generally speaking of short exercises in which the students apply the knowledge they have previously worked on.

Student presentations
By this we mean the students' own work. If planned in good time, presentations by the students of their own work can play a part in building both specific and generic competences. They can work on effective oral communication and the correct use of vocabulary specific to the material. This can be used as a tool for co-evaluation.

Team work
Teams of 3-5 students. This activity is included in many of the others (case analyses, commenting on texts, exercises, practical classes, etc.). In order to promote working as a team, the lecturer needs to take care that all students profit from it as far as they can, that each person develops, being corrected and involved, etc.

Tutorials
In the presence of the tutor or virtual; individual or group. In the EHEA context, at least in the initial phase, it is advisable to attend tutorials with a plan of work, whether prepared by the teacher or by the student, and also take part in the complementary virtual tutorial.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Aquest quadern, i els que el precedeixen, de la *Guia per a l'adaptació a l'espai europeu d'educació superior* han estat finançats amb l'ajut concedit pel Departament d'Universitats, Recerca i Societat de la Informació, convocatòria de 2005, per a l'adaptació al sistema de crèdits europeus.

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