GUIDE TO ADAPTATION TO THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

6. Contents

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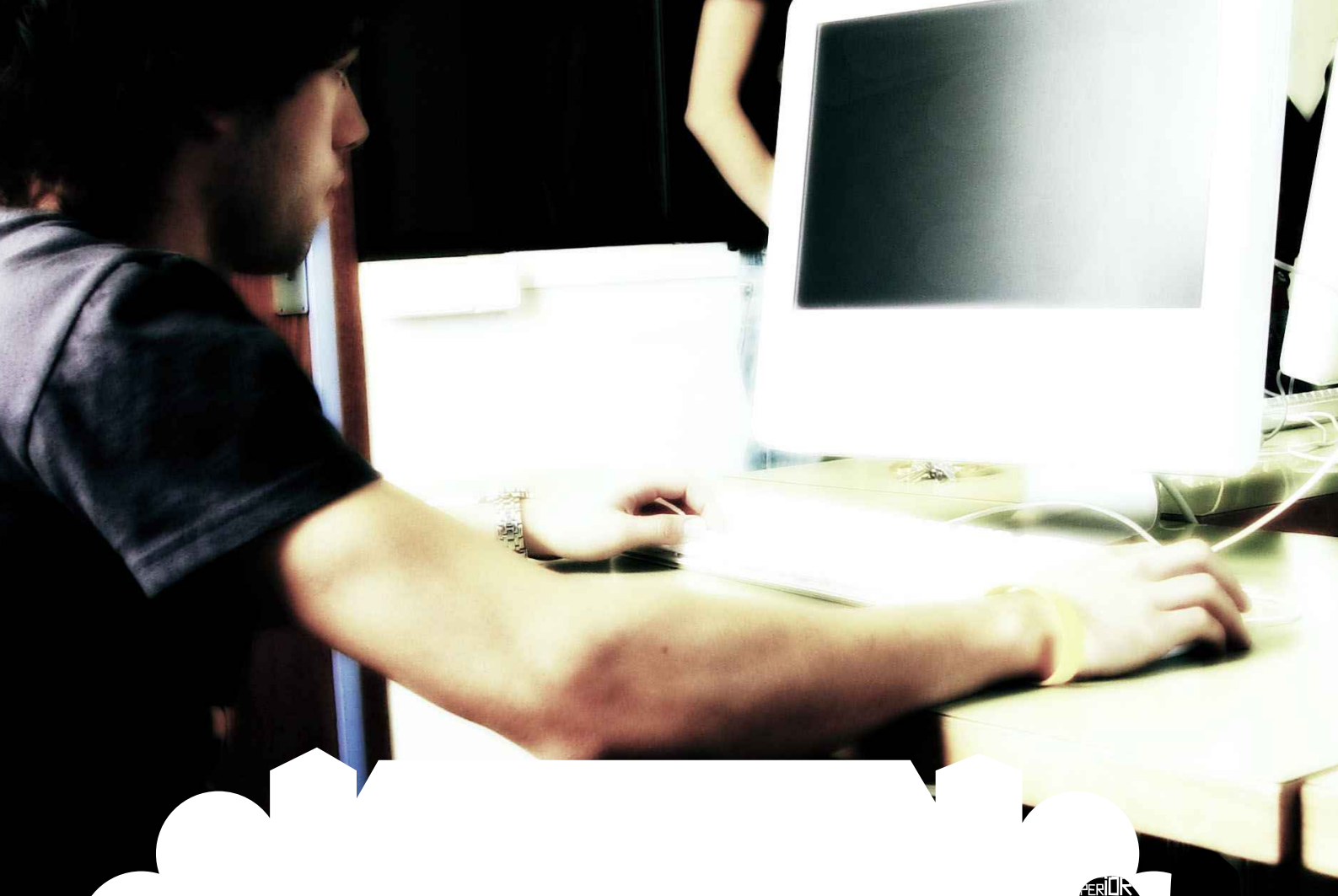
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INTRODUCTION

In the process of reflection on teaching in which we are immersed, a relatively new viewpoint is emerging regarding the relation between education and learning, an unusual viewpoint, up to now, of the planning of university teaching; a terminology which proposes a new analysis of our approach to teaching.

Nonetheless, we cannot lose sight of the fact that what has always been teaching's first reference —contents, knowledge, learning— continues to form the basis of higher education. Despite granting the importance they deserve to competencies and procedural matters, the operators are the ones who need the raw material with which to work. It would not make sense to ignore this essential role of contents.

Students must learn to communicate, but their communication must have an object; abstract communication is not possible. They have to learn to work in a team, but in specific matters, projects, subjects and contents; team work cannot be done in a void. They have to be competent speakers of foreign languages, but in order to express interesting subject matters.

Within the framework of the University of Girona's Guide for the Adaptation to the European Higher Education Area, after first dealing with competencies, learning and assessment activities, we take a look at the way to handle, in the new university context, the heart of the matter: the contents that students must learn.

7. GENERAL COMMENTS

Teaching, as presented by the UdG in this guide, already indicates some matters related to the role of contents, which for the sake of coherence, have to be recorded from the very beginning:

— From the guide's first handbook, the idea that contents are the basis of the learning activities which we lecturers have to put forward to students so that they acquire their own competencies appears again and again.

— University teaching contents, far from being set once and forever, are constantly being renewed by new approaches generated by research, so that teaching and research feed off each other.

— Differentiation between competencies, learning activities and contents, understood as the three categories which we have to be able to combine in the planning of teaching, is another aspect which has been dealt with, both in the handbook on competencies and when talking about learning activities. This Guide proposes wording the contents with nouns ("the concept of..."; "the analysis of..."; "the interpretation of..."), and leaves the wording of competencies to the use of verbs of voluntary action in the infinitive ("to communicate...", "to work..."). Learning activities act as a bridge between the two previous categories; their wording must be aimed at competencies and must refer to contents.

An example which may help to clarify this differentiation: a branch of knowledge is characterized by a group of contents, result of the research which has created it; the person who has

new contents

studied this branch and is able to apply the acquired knowledge is distinguished by his/her competencies.

— Reflecting on teaching methods in the light of the creation of the European Higher Education Area, the emphasis placed on focusing the planning of teaching on competencies defines a new role of contents through the relation which is established with competencies: the aim is for the student to become competent in the use of the contents which belong to his/her branch of knowledge.

The pursuit of this aim proposes that we work on the same contents from different viewpoints with different types of learning activities etc., and this may take up more time than study centred solely on committing to memory. In this way, contents are given a more insistent, in-depth treatment, which may lead to having to give priority to dealing with some contents over others, or to

establishing different degrees of intensification in the work on contents.

This idea is based on the fact that when a person has acquired certain specific competencies in the use of some contents in his/her field of knowledge, these very competencies will be used to learn other contents which may appear in the evolution which knowledge makes continuously. Here we can link this to our aim, emphatically set out in the Bologna Process; to prepare people for their life-long education.

Prioritizing or establishing degrees of intensification in the treatment of contents can be settled, for example, by entrusting the work of different contents to different moments, types of activities or settings: some contents can be dealt with more thoroughly in presentation lectures, others in the autonomous, individual or team work of the students.

2. TYPES OF CONTENTS

Along the lines of regarding contents as the object of learning, and with the intention of including the objects of learning which have traditionally been more explicit, and also those which are more implicit, it would be instructive to analyse contents in order to establish a way of classifying them.

We take the example of a possible very specific competency: the application of a company's quality management system. The development of this competency will lead us to talk about and work on contents such as quality

concepts, the components of a company, the relation between them, but also to put into practice procedures such as the observation of processes, data analysis, people's well-being, company profits and the value of products, bearing in mind a code of ethics etc.,… It might become difficult to give priority to some contents or to others; what will be beneficial, in any event, is to bear them all in mind from the very first moment of the planning of teaching. Following on from the example given, and in an attempt to achieve a contents typology which allows us to specify them

clearly, we see that three blocks emerge:

— The quality concept, the components of a company, the relation among them etc. are ideas which define the field of knowledge. These are conceptual contents.

— Techniques of process observation, data analysis, etc. are practices which have to be applied to the concepts or stem from them. These are procedural contents.

— The relation between people's well-being, company profits and the value of products, the code of ethics etc., can be situated in the field of values and attitudes. These are the attitudinal contents. Some of the contents of this block have been mentioned in different handbooks of this Guide (interculturalism, ethics...). It is especially interesting that tools and instruments which permit reflection upon ethical questions, inherent in several disciplines and professional fields, are derived from teaching and contents.

6. Contents

teaching

research

concepts

attitudes

concepts

procedures
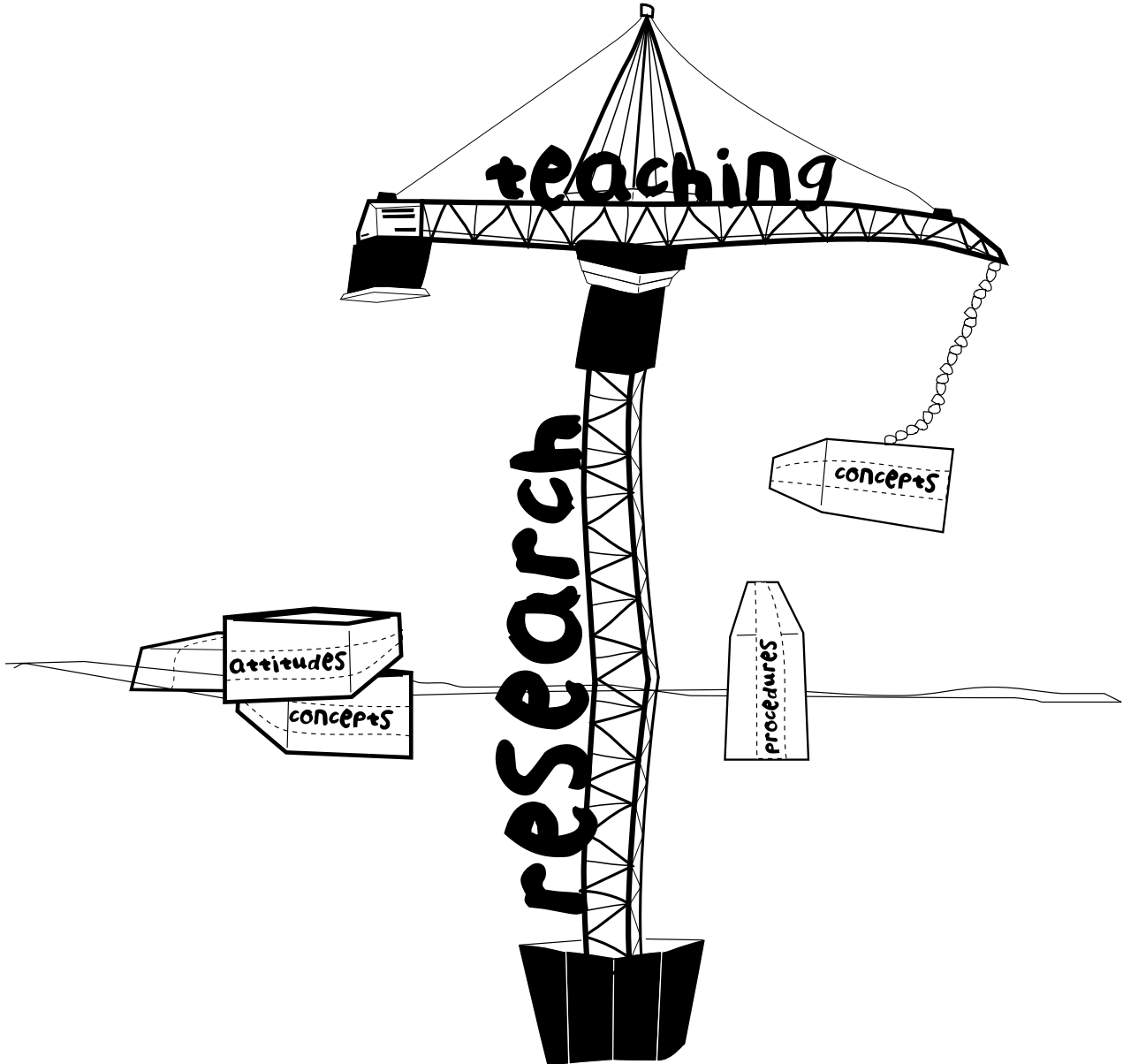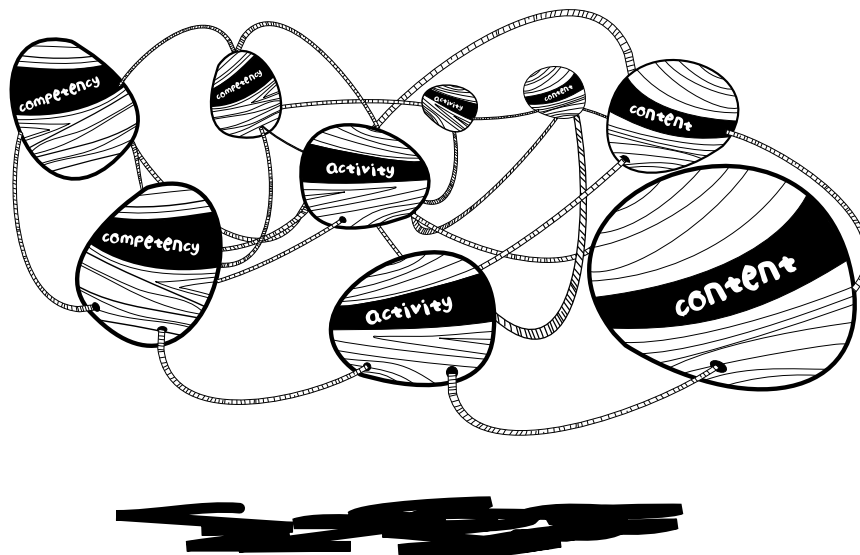
3. ORGANIZATION OF CONTENTS

The contents typology established in the previous section leads us to deal with contents in an integrated way.

It is indeed certain that in traditional subject syllabuses, contents appear in a specific order, probably mainly in the order determined by the very structure of the specific field of knowledge. Despite this, if we take the specification of procedural and attitudinal contents a step further, as well as the way these are inter-related with concepts, it may be convenient to revise the organization in the contents of our degree courses. This revision will facilitate at the same time:

— the connection of contents with the competencies to be developed
— the overlapping of different contents in the same learning activities
— a greater coherence in studies as a whole
— a greater integration between what have been regarded as theoretical and practical credits, or more theoretical and more practical subjects.

6. Contents

The organization of new studies into contents blocks which are made up of concepts, procedures and attitudes, which guarantee an adequate, methodical treatment, avoiding gaps and overlapping, and which embrace team work among lecturers, brings us to a wider, less fragmentary concept than that of a "subject": the concept of a module.

We understand by module the block of contents in which these are naturally related to each other, in which they are linked to the same competencies, which propose a specific learning activities terminology, which can be subjected to joint assessment, and can be the responsibility of more than one lecturer.

Organizing new studies by modules, on the other hand, allows different combinations of modules to make way for different degree courses; in this way, the map of courses on offer at the University of Girona will be enriched.

4. CONTENTS AND CROSS-CURRICULAR COMPETENCIES

One of the latest issues in the planning of teaching of the European Higher Education Area is the appearance of cross-curricular competencies as an important element in university teaching.

This guide, in its second handbook, defines the cross-curricular competencies of the University of Girona. They are mainly competencies associated with specific contents. Thus, in the design of subjects which have been entrusted with the work of these competencies, it becomes essential for the associated cross-curricular activities to appear. In the same way, when learning activities are formulated, the integration of these contents must be anticipated in order to guarantee a correct treatment of the corresponding competencies.

The way in which contents associated with cross-curricular competencies are treated should be grounds for collective work among the lecturing staff of different fields.

JOINT
ACTION

collective
work

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