

Understanding and facilitating secondary school learning in a school workshop: new orientation for the critical role of didactic

José Manuel Bautista-Vallejo
University of Huelva

In this article the author reflects on the features that have the Spanish School Workshop and its relationship with the role of Didactic. A School Workshop is considered as an employment-formative public programme which has as an end to qualify the unemployed, preferently young people under 25, alternately with employment and professional practice. This favours their job chances in occupations related to the recuperation and promotion of the artistic, historical and cultural or natural heritage, as well as to the restoration of the urban or natural environments and the improvement of the living conditions in our cities.

1. School workshops and occupational formation

It is a sociological fact to be foreseen in future times that groups of young people remain in a situation of sociocultural helplessness after their abandonment of formal studies (with serious economic implications), from which they cannot easily emerge.

In Spain, through the creation of School Workshops, many of these youngsters are rescued for their social insertion by being given a new formative-laboral opportunity. A School Workshop is considered as an employment-formative public programme which has as an end to qualify the unemployed, preferently young people under 25, alternately with employment and professional practice. This favours their job chances in occupations related to the recuperation and promotion of the artistic, historical and cultural or natural heritage, as well as to the restoration of the urban or natural environments and the improvement of the living conditions in our cities.

The School Workshops are promoted by public and private Organisms and Institutions without profit in mind. They are financed by the Ministry of Labour and the European Social Fund (ESF) and have the following activities:

- a) The formation of specialists in professions demanded by the labour market and in different crafts.
- b) The professional integration and insertion of unemployed young people.

- c) The revaluation of crafts.
- d) The typification and implication of the new professions linked with the environment and the quality of life.
- e) The promotion and diffusion of the tasks of restoration and conservation of our heritage.
- f) To work as a support of cultural activities and as a germ of future and stable regional centres for the revitalization of employment, and the defence and conservation of our heritage.
- g) To promote the improvement of teachers and monitors through the permanent teaching of intensive courses which would make possible their technical-pedagogical bringing-up-to-date.

The variety of objectives to be assigned does not reduce the importance of the nature of occupational formation with which these School Workshops are often referred to. Thus, the School Workshops have a triple thorough objective: to recuperate young people, to recuperate crafts, to recuperate the heritage.

The bad quality of initial formation and other problems related to the social reality and to the formation of the individuals who are immersed in it (lack of social involvement, little collective conscience, etc.) have provoked that other obligations, which would have had a sense at the beginning, have been turned towards this field of formation. So, through occupational formation, it has been searched:

- To supply a basic formation of a general kind, improving the previous one which was insufficient.
- To supply basic formation of a technical-labour kind.
- To promote the process of participation in laboral reality.
- To improve civic awareness.

In this line, occupational formation must also: take shape as an element of permanent formation; educate for «change»; train for a society which is complex, democratic and technological; combine planned and emergent curricula; start from prospective approaches and incorporate means of professional orientation.

It is obvious to affirm that, from this approach, the occupational formation which takes place in School Workshops contributes to local development in a decisive way. So, it has to take into account two factors:

- To reinforce the management competence of the own community, making it more autonomous.
- To allow and promote the coordination among all the social and economic agents of the territory.

This kind of formation is related and compromised with the characteristics of future learning: to make a person more autonomous (autonomy), to make it more

creative (creativity), to make it have more initiative (leadership), and to be more responsible, more jointly liable, and with a greater capacity to invent things (responsible, jointly liable, inventive).

Finally, the School Workshop is also pregnant with meaning as an approach to Adult Education because:

- a) There is a respect for the participants' needs and interests.
- b) Experience is incorporated within the formative process.
- c) The concrete matter is constituted at the starting-point.
- d) The participation is imposed in the processes of planification, execution and control, and formative control.

2. Transformation in the labour world and its effects on education

2.1. Technological innovation, social innovation

Social changes are slower than the technological and economical ones. This is in part a consequence of an educational system which falls behind the changes which take place in society, that is, a closed confined standardized educational system. Nowadays, business profiles are defined by the enterprise and the job themselves.

2.2. Integral dimension of occupational formation

The current trend leads us to a strange but real polarity, which edifies with virulence in many occasions. The aforementioned polarity would be the coexistence of overqualification and disqualification.

It is not enough to «know how»; it is important to know how to manipulate and achieve the suitable transferences of knowledges and means. On the other hand, it is also important to promote systems orientated to learn to think and to organize oneself which reaches more importance before today's world's complexity.

What is searched at heart is to link occupational formation with Permanent Education.

All these matters are present in the actions of formation which develop through the School Workshops in a permanent way.

To finish and within this first section, it is interesting to emphasise the valuations which responsible and implied people make of the experience on occupational formation acquired through the School Workshops (as Ferrández & Gairín (1991)'s research). Expressions as the following are gathered within it:

- Positive, effective and innovative.
- Valid alternative for the unqualified «disoccupied».
- It allows high laboral insertion.
- It supplies a cultural basis.
- It facilitates the integration of people and groups.
- It strengthens and develops the community and its environment.
- It favours the initiatives relative to labour societies.
- It makes possible the practical learning of a craft.

It is interesting to highlight in this way how there is a direct compromise as well as it has effects from its hidden diary, given that School Workshops are instruments of occupational formation and Adult Education towards social personal and communitarian change. This is something that, as it is well-known by all those who work in Adult Education, is already a tradition in this field of study from the nineteenth century (19th-c.) at least —although throughout history there have been concrete examples of formation in which knowledge is understood as a mechanism for the liberation of the most oppressed.

Equally, the positive aspects of the experience in School Workshops, which are the most outstanding, are valued according to the following order of preference as surveys suggest (Ferrández & Gairín, 1991):

- 1) Environmental development.
- 2) Professionalism.
- 3) Integration in the teaching and non-teaching groups.
- 4) Training for the labour world.
- 5) Teamwork.
- 6) Motivation for the students.
- 7) Achievement of educational objectives.
- 8) Social/cultural awareness.
- 9) Optimum team of professionals.
- 10) Knowledge of new structures.
- 11) Integration of marginal groups.
- 12) Promotion of «work spirit».

- 13) Theoretical-practical integration.
- 14) Readiness of formation resources.
- 15) Achievement of behaviour habits.
- 16) Learning of a craft with future job perspectives.
- 17) Craft recovery.
- 18) A mind for business.

3. A case study: school workshop «palacio house»

The School Workshop, of which we are going to describe some experiences, has its direct objective in the formation of student-workers in the different modules which compose it: carpentry, bricklaying, gardening and painting.

Each module has carried out a service of restoration of the Palacio House, which is placed in the Sevillian village Mairena del Alcor. The antiquity of this house is reckoned in five centuries. The project is directed by the technician Eva Domínguez.

The restoration started on the 27th October of 1993 and goes on nowadays. The current staff is formed by 34 student-workers distributed in the following way:

MODULES: bricklaying, carpentry, painting, gardening.

Throughout this period of time, the student-workers have received theoretical and practical lessons of the specific subject matter of the respective specialities, and of the themes common to all modules, such as compensatory formation in the area of Science and Arts, as well as a monographic course on «Business Management and Techniques for Job Search». In the same way, other complementary activities have been carried out like work visits to other School Workshops (School Workshop of the village La Campana), to the trade fair «FICON 97» (trade fair of business initiatives) in Don Benito (Badajoz) and to the «First Trade Fair of the Professions and Employment in Andalusia», in Seville.

There are many questions that deserve to be dealt with in relation to the different modules, but we are going to focus more specifically on one of the most significant modules in this School Workshop: carpentry.

What we have already mentioned in some way in relation to the concrete formation in each one of the modules is that there is a special content adapted to each student, having to do with a particular profession or craft. But besides, there is another wider formation, visible and organized, which occurs at the same time that a formation which is invisible, hidden, unorganized and unplanned. The latter can be inferred from the explicit curriculum formation, but is not programmed. These last two concrete aspects of the more general and less specialized formation contribute to create cohesive elements within the whole formation of professional content.

3.1. Formation and profession: the carpentry module

By one hand, the specific professional contents of the carpentry module have been developed taking into account the particular needs of the house to be restored, Palacio House. After a theoretical part, the student-workers have begun to put into practice what they have learned, carrying out tasks as: windows, doors, partitions, wooden covers, ceiling lines, elaboration of a wooden stage, etc.

Completion has also been applied to these works, practising the formative module of «endings of wood», etc.

In the same way and as a wider extension of the student-workers' works of the School Workshop, these ones have carried out other works such as:

- Erection and dismantling of the municipal sideshow.
- Erection and dismantling of the stage of the «Festival of Cante Jondo» (traditional Andalusian music).
- Building and completion of furniture.
- Fitting-up and placement of school furniture.
- Repairs of slatted shutters, doors, windows, locks, etc.

3.2. The previous states in relation to theoretical-practical lessons on carpentry

Another section of the programme planned contents for a proper personal development and, obviously and as a contribution, a satisfactory local development came true through the student-workers' involvement in their respective communities. This is something which is considered very important and which can be noticed when observing each of the students, overall when they become aware of the changes that take place in their lives and the transformations of their personal and communitarian development.

This second type of formation, to which we have previously made reference, has to do with the lessons which were received by the student-workers and which concerned some of the school deficitarian areas as mathematics or Spanish language, business management and self-employment. A student says that: «such lessons have helped us to make our culture become wider and in a next future it will give us the chance to make up our own enterprise or to search for a job, learning also to write curriculums and application letters».

It is as well to stand out something which has been considered by the participants of this formation and employment programme. Another student-worker expresses that: «it has served us particularly to learn the profession, to involve ourselves in society and to know how to live together with our partners». Yet, from this student-worker's point of view, there are other negative aspects apart from the positive ones. We point out both of them:

Positive aspects:

«From the beginning, we have used the tools (it is interpreted as a criticism towards the much more theoretical formation that is conveyed by regularised and formal studies), with which one acquires much more practice and we carry out works as a professional worker, what we wouldn't have realised through another way of learning».

Negative aspects:

(A unique point stands out, but it is important enough)

«The short duration of the programme; therefore we haven't been able to widen our theoretical and practical formation, as we would have liked to».

We can interpret that these students' passing by the School Workshop has been a time of formation in many fields, which has made possible these young people's integration in society; not in vain and as Alberto Elordi —the former National Director of INEM (National Institute of Employment)— believes, until a 60 percent of the youngsters (boys and girls) who have made use of the formation and employment programmes of the School Workshops has found a job.

It is very laudable that this occurs and overall that it takes place within the margin of management of the local communities; the effort realised by the units of the local government comes to be their own benefit when the self-formation operations are the proper ones.

We finish this article with an anonymous student-worker's testimony who expresses his experiences through a gratefully enlightening letter:

«If you ask me how my stance in this school has been, I could answer like most of those who have stayed on it during these 365 days would do:

- That I have acquired a very valuable experience.
- That I have learnt many things I didn't know before.
- That I have improved the things I already knew.
- That the possibilities of finding a job have been increased.

To take into account the critical role of Didactic, we have to consider some very appreciated features of the learning in the process of teaching, when the teacher or the educator must be the facilitator of the group. The educator must (Suanmali, 1981: 31-32):

- 1) Progressively decrease the learner's dependency on the educators;
- 2) Help the learner to understand how to use learning resources especially the experiences of others, including the educator, and how to engage others in reciprocal learning relations;

- 3) Assist the learner to define his/her learning needs —both in terms of immediate awareness and of understanding the cultural and psychological assumptions influencing his/her perceptions of needs;
- 4) Assist learners to assume increasing responsibility for defining their learning objectives, planning their own learning programs and evaluating their progress;
- 5) Organize what is to be learned in relationship to his/her current personal problems, concerns and levels of understanding;
- 6) Foster learner decision-making —select learner-relevant learning experiences which require choosing, expand the learner's range of options, facilitate taking the perspectives of others who have alternative ways of understanding;
- 7) Encourage the use of criteria for judging which are increasingly inclusive and differentiating in awareness, self-reflexive and integrative of experience;
- 8) Facilitate problem-posing and problem-solving, including problems associated with the implementation of individual and collective action; recognition of relationship between personal problems and public issues;
- 9) Reinforce the self-concept of the learner as a learner and doer by providing for progressive mastery; supportive climate with feedback to encourage provisional efforts to change and to take risks; avoidance of competitive judgment of performance; appropriate use of mutual support groups;
- 10) Emphasize experiential, participative and projective instructional methods; appropriate use of modelling and learning contracts.

In the innovative work there are examples of how teachers or educators, both initially and under way in a project, have described and clarified the character of the process for the pupils, giving them a general view, graphic representations on the blackboard, etc., which illustrate where they are at the moment in the process and which working phases and sub-processes are yet to be covered.

Briefly, the course of a project work, as an example of learning contract, can be sketched using the following phases:

- 1) An introduction phase.
- 2) A phase where participants zone in on a topic and choose the content.
- 3) The formulation of simple problems.
- 4) Planning how to gain knowledge about, investigate, etc., the formulated problems with the help of active teacher guidance.
- 5) Carrying out the planned investigations with the help of active teacher guidance.
- 6) Planning the presentation phase.
- 7) Presentation and questions, criticism and evaluation.

- 8) Conclusion and taking stock of insight gained through the project.
- 9) Final evaluation - and then what?

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