Abstract

The relevance of creative and experiential projects in Higher Education shows that the configuration of their main attributes for satisfaction and happiness in the classroom is a very important question. The main objectives of this manuscript are the following: 1) to describe the configuration of learning experiences in Higher Education as a set of evidences causing positive outcomes in the behaviour of professors and students; and 2) to evaluate empirically the main dimensions for satisfaction and happiness in the classroom in the context of a virtual university in Spain. Firstly, this research presents a review of this theoretical approach and secondly a managerial process for professors in the classroom is designed and validated.

This research shows the relevance to explore several dimensions for success in the classroom and present an inventory of indicators to promote positive learning experiences, happiness and satisfaction to different levels of management. To sum up, the results and conclusions of this research are relevant in decisions of educational policy, but also on the teaching practice and theory in the scope of this study.

Keywords: teaching, learning experiences, Higher Education, virtual university, Spain.

1 INTRODUCTION

From a pedagogical perspective, the adoption of a student orientation in the classroom is a wish to disseminate education and culture closer to the requirements of the society, but also an important desire to understand students’ demands and adapt to their needs and expectations. In this sense, several authors [1, 2, 3] point out that the application of transformational teaching paradigms and student-focused didactic projects in the classroom evidence the importance for professors to intervene on variables and dimensions at different levels of instruction.

Educational innovation, happiness and satisfaction in the classroom are three relevant strategies to respond to student expectations [4, 5, 6]. However, [2, 7] point out that many practices in Higher Education setting lack a substantial theoretical ground to reinforce optimum learning. According to several authors, this is the reason why the absence of robust backgrounds and well-defined aims is determinant in deficient learning processes at universities and Higher Education institutions. Constructivist theories consider the relevance of a solid structure in learning to meet students’ diverse needs which requires the adoption of proactive didactic strategies from teachers and staffs.

According to [2, 3, 4, 7], many students find that Business and Economics are difficult disciplines. Usually in Higher Education, courses present high failure rates and for this reason research in Business reflects concerns about the quality of students’ learning and teaching. Specifically such concerns may be more relevant in virtual contexts.

Despite the affective implications of difficulty associated with Business Studies, only cognitive elements of learning are considered explicitly in the design of curriculum, academic programs and syllabuses. This paper investigates the processes and experiences of Business students’ learning at a virtual university in Spain. In particular, the aim of this paper is to explore the importance of certain elements for satisfaction and happiness in the classroom as a tool for improving didactic experiences. Specifically our intention is twofold: 1) to describe the configuration of learning and teaching experiences in Higher Education as a set of evidences causing positive outcomes in the behaviour of professors and students; and 2) to evaluate empirically the main dimensions for satisfaction and happiness in the classroom in the context of a virtual university in Spain.

The outline of this manuscript is the following. The first section refers the introduction and justification of this research. Second, we review the theory and empirical background on approaches and best practices in order to promote happiness and satisfaction in the classroom, in particular in Higher
Education. Third, a parsimonious and simple process to measure learning experiences, happiness and satisfaction of students in the classroom are described in this research. Fourth, a comprehensive interpretation and discussion of the results were carried out and analyzed. Finally, the last section is devoted to the conclusions, implications in the classroom and further research.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Teaching and learning experiences in Higher Education

In many studies on teaching and learning in the classroom, there are interesting theoretical and empirical contributions on how professors perceive what they do in the context of the classroom [1, 2, 6, 7, 8]. According to diverse researchers, in the literature analyzed to develop this paper we observed two clear research lines of research: the first line is focused on approaches to teaching and the second line is focused on studying different conceptions of teaching [9, 10, 11].

According to the above-mentioned line of research [1, 2, 3, 4], the review of the literature on approaches to teaching points out the relevance of the specific style applied by the professor in the classroom. The reason is that pupils’ perceptions of the teaching process rather than the method of teaching, affect student learning most efficiently. The effects of different forms of leadership style in the classroom and assessment, led educators to explore differences in the ways in which professors describe their teaching and carry it out [1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 9].

According to [1, 2, 3, 12, 13, 14], implementing the principles of Positive Psychology in order to develop a transformational leadership style in the classroom provides a manageable model to educators for transformational teaching. From the perspective of pupils, this style facilitates students ‘make sense’ of experiences in relation to real world events. Several educators point out that the above-mentioned line of research stimulates the ability of the professor to transmit motivation and enthusiasm to pupils in the classroom.

In Business classes, traditional didactic strategies (that is, lectures, dissertations, homework, laboratory experiences…) have been discussed because they inadequately prepare students to engage in the collaborative actions that are essential in the practice of Business and Economics. For example, professors and teachers who disseminate intellectual stimulation, idealized influence, individualized consideration and inspirational motivation can positively impact behaviors, perceptions, and learning outcomes by providing support and trust in the classroom [1, 2, 15, 16]. According to several authors, students may react differently depending on the teaching style [1, 2, 3].

In Education, we can find many definitions and models of leadership styles for professors. Similarly, this construct has been applied in many cases in the business industry, developing numerous instruments not only to improve the self-knowledge of the individuals and students, but also to enhance more effective strategies in the classroom [1, 2, 3, 4, 5].

According to [1, 2, 3], pupils are diverse in skills, behaviors and personal experiences, that is, their academic background is different from that experienced by professors and academic staffs. Therefore, teachers should implement a huge variety of teaching activities and didactic models that best fit to each group of students. In this line of research, many attempts have been made in order to discover diverse factors contributing to effectiveness in the classroom. Satisfaction, positive experiences and happiness in the classroom in Higher Education have evidenced a great growth worldwide [1, 2, 3, 5, 16, 17, 18].

2.2 Promoting happiness and satisfaction in the classroom

As a consequence of the increasing relevance of the discipline of Positive Psychology in many academic contexts, positive evaluations of satisfaction are linked to happiness and numerous papers have evidenced overall satisfaction of individuals in certain domains, including teaching and learning. For this reason, happiness and satisfaction in the classroom become pertinent in Higher Education. However, from an educational focus few studies point out similar relationships between constructs investigated here, this is largely because of the unequal presence of leadership styles of the professors and happiness of pupils in the classroom.

In [1, 2, 3], the author analyzed satisfaction and happiness in the classroom in relation to different leadership styles of teaching, but it is evident that instrument development of measurement is an iterative process that requires frequent efforts to ensure the psychometric soundness of the tool when
applied to various universes and samples. For this reason, in Education and Business studies is common to re-evaluate the existing tools for researchers.

In this research we followed the construct of happiness by [1, 18, 19, 20] who define happiness as the experience of more frequent positive affective states than negative ones. In this sense, several authors expand the frequency and degree of the predominance of positive affect in happiness by considering the dimension of an average level of satisfaction over a specific period of time. From this perspective, happiness is conceptualized as a hedonic feeling characterized by moderate levels of arousal and is often used interchangeably with joy [1, 21, 22, 23]. Thus, happiness is predominately affect-based but different from positive affect. In particular, individuals with high levels on happiness are more relaxed, can control their emotions better and are more capable of facing and solving problems.

Regarding stability over time, happiness is conceptualized as a construct with a higher temporal instability whereas satisfaction is described to be more stable. Several authors found happiness not to be more occasion-specific compared to satisfaction but it is clear that satisfaction is positively associated with gratitude, social support, self-efficacy, continuous planning and consideration of future consequences. For this reason, satisfaction in the classroom has been shown to be an indicator and predictor of functioning in college students [23, 24, 25].

However, emotions barely feature in research on teaching and learning in Business and Management studies. The conceptual framework here described offers an approach of teaching and learning that encompasses both cognitive and affective elements.

For this reason, the effectiveness of didactic techniques in the classroom highlights the importance to understand and manage the main attributes and dimensions impacting on learning in order to improve the happiness and satisfaction of the students.

3 METHODOLOGY

In this section we present the key research procedure, the overall methodological approach and the design of the study, methods and strategies. In order to analyze data from a conclusive and consistent point of view, we studied the importance of the conceptual framework according to the literature on satisfaction and happiness in the classroom. In particular, this research was applied in the context of a virtual university in Spain implementing learning styles oriented to develop generic and transversal competences in the classroom.

We used an exploratory approach in which participants themselves generate and facilitate data representing their experiences. Students were involved by professors in exploring their learning in order to describe detailed representations in the participants’ opinions, of their learning in Business.

Two important aspects of the methodology are considered in this research: 1) the sources and data, and 2) the detailed procedure of research. According to constructivist and experiential theories, a multidimensional approach of teaching is relevant in order to meet a diverse learning options with different strategies from the perspective of professors [26, 27]. For this reason, a triangulation methodology was adopted in terms of: 1) a bibliographic review of topics here described; and 2) a survey of students’ opinion collected on a structured questionnaire. The Business area was chosen because this discipline uses knowledge from various fields, such as Marketing, Administration, and Management in general.

According to the conditions of this exploratory research, the participants were selected from a virtual university because of these experiences and teaching practices may generate some important insights to obtain representative conclusions.

Two scales to measure satisfaction and happiness in the classroom were applied to students at Universidad Internacional de La Rioja. According to the above-mentioned literature review and the particular procedure of research participants filled an on-line questionnaire related to experiences and particular situations on learning [1, 26, 27]. These instruments were previously tested in two universities with similar characteristics to those described as the specific ones in this research, in particular in Chile and Mexico.

Firstly, professionals and professors with expertise in learning were contacted in order to analyze the validity of this research. Secondly, our students were selected from a census and the sample coincided with it.
In order to appreciate the relevance of the constructs here exposed, we equally and randomly implemented a particular design in terms of two variables: the specific transactional versus transformational teaching style for professors; and Spain versus Latin American geographical area of learning for pupils. Students visited two alternative websites regarding a clothing company: La Fábrica de Camisas. In this research, pupils filled an on-line questionnaire with two sections: Part I: “Satisfaction and happiness in the classroom”, Part II: “Identification and classification data”. Both constructs in Part I and the satisfaction and happiness scales were collected ranging from 1 to 7.

Table 1. Methodology of this research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PHASE</th>
<th>ANALYSIS</th>
<th>METHODOLOGY</th>
<th>TECHNIQUE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Definition and evaluation</td>
<td>Documentary Face validity</td>
<td>Literature review</td>
<td>Bibliographic analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>Quantitative research</td>
<td>Descriptive analysis of items</td>
<td>Cronbach’s Alpha, item-total correlation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construct validity</td>
<td>(analysis of overall reliability and initial factor validity)</td>
<td>Exploratory/confirmatory factor analysis T-test</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The fieldwork at Universidad Internacional de La Rioja was conducted in two big regions, that is, Spain and Latin America between February 1st and May 7th, 2019 (see Table 1 for details).

4 RESULTS

The findings described in this section result from our particular analysis for this research. For example, in comparative terms Table 2 shows the profile of the students who participated in this study. Noting the difference between male and female students is very relevant in order to conclude about the implications of this research. The results are presented in terms of two dimensions: 1) context for happiness and satisfaction, and 2) experiential practices in the classroom.

Table 2. Total sample at Universidad Internacional de La Rioja.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SAMPLE</th>
<th>SPAIN</th>
<th>LATIN AMERICA</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AGE OF THE RESPONDENT:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>40.4</td>
<td>42.4</td>
<td>41.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Deviation</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>4.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GENDER OF THE RESPONDENT:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>75 %</td>
<td>47.4 %</td>
<td>60.2 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25 %</td>
<td>52.6 %</td>
<td>39.8 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORK AT THIS MOMENT</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>72 %</td>
<td>90.1 %</td>
<td>84 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>28 %</td>
<td>9.9 %</td>
<td>19 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL STUDENTS</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.1 Analysis 1: documentary and face validity

The first consideration in order to design this research was to assess the state of the art on the following topics: happiness and satisfaction in the classroom, that is, our specific areas of research. According to the methodology described in the last section, our bibliographic analysis identified implications and contributions related to insights and categories about these constructs. Several papers have been analysed determining if the contents are fit to the literature for this research.

In this research, we categorized the literature according to the following topics: firstly, on happiness in the classroom; secondly, on satisfaction. Both constructs are very relevant in the pedagogical
literature here investigated because of they are used as a signal for promotion and diffusion of a transformational style of teaching in the context of the classroom.

According to several authors [1, 16, 24, 25] in terms of experiential learning, professors and students interviewed for this paper pointed out aspects such as virtual academic programs and deadlines are relevant motivations generating performance in the classroom, specifically when they are combining studies and work. In this sense, it is known that emotional intelligence and satisfaction are two very important dimensions to develop in the classroom in order to pass the academic course.

4.2 Analysis 2: reliability and construct validity

In order to understand the interpretation and discussion of the results described in this document, we only present in this section the characterization of dimensions and variables related to this quantitative analysis. In particular, internal consistency of the happiness scale (Cronbach’s Alpha) was observed and the overall reliability of this instrument of measurement showed a coefficient Alpha of 0.836 (all items were approximately normally distributed: see Table 3 for details).

The results of this analysis related to the definition and evaluation of variables show important and significant empirical evidences. Moreover, a detailed analysis of Table 3 facilitate the interpretation of variables, that is, an item-total correlation ranged from 0.813 to 0.894. Additionally, in order to validate the psychometric characteristics of the instrument, exploratory factor analysis of principal components with Varimax rotation was applied on the sample and a confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to guide further redefining of the happiness scale. We analysed the adequacy of the factor structure through CFI, RMSEA and SRMR.

Additionally, scales such as satisfaction and happiness in the classroom were obtained in terms of the mean scoring of the sum of the items measuring each construct. To evidence the importance of different measures related to the happiness scale, a t-test analysis was conducted to compare the scales by geographical area or region (that is, Spain vs. Latin America). In terms of the mean scoring of these scales, only significant differences were found on happiness in the classroom (see Table 3: p-values < 0.05).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VARIABLE</th>
<th>MEANS BY REGION</th>
<th>SPAIN (n = 62)</th>
<th>LATIN AMERICA (n = 58)</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p &lt; 0.05</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction scale</td>
<td>4.37 (0.95)</td>
<td>4.487</td>
<td>3.365</td>
<td>19.123</td>
<td>0.134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness scale</td>
<td>4.37 (0.95)</td>
<td>4.816</td>
<td>3.612</td>
<td>4.333</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus, the results showed that only the happiness scale was impacted by region (i.e., Spain vs. Latin America). However, by geographical area no statistically significant differences were found in the satisfaction scale as described in Table 3 (p-values > 0.05); the results described in this paper show that the satisfaction scale is not related to the geographical area of the students. Preliminary literature review studied in the context of this research suggests that professors who provide attention to their students may support similar students’ engagement and satisfaction independently the specific learning environment into consideration.

To sum up, the study here presented shows the impact of learning and teaching actions on the performance of the students in the classroom, in terms of happiness and satisfaction. One hundred and twenty students completed the questionnaire containing items related to experiences and actions relevant in the virtual classroom. The results of the analysis suggest that participants distinguish academic activities and interests in the classroom according to their personal motivations. Obviously, students describe optimal situations and experiences defining happiness in terms of their personal characteristics and learning contexts. Furthermore, the main implication is that certain experiences positively impact on happiness and of course are relevant on happiness in the classroom. For this reason, measuring experiences and actions becomes essential to improve learning and teaching in Higher Education.
5 CONCLUSIONS

This research has been focused to explore the learning experiences of Business students in the particular context of a virtual university in Spain. An important conclusion is related to the implications of two relevant tools such as satisfaction and happiness in the classroom in order to improve certain educational processes in Higher Education. Furthermore, designing the professional and academic curriculum of students facilitate to institutions the improvement of their pedagogical actions in the classroom.

In our opinion, the most important contribution evidenced in this research is related to the construct of happiness in the classroom. In addition, in this paper we appreciate certain implications motivating transformational styles of teaching across several geographical areas or regions. Based on psychological and educational approaches on positive emotions and sentiments in the learning process, several respondents in this academic project pointed out that the more professors adopted transformational styles of teaching in the classroom, the more they facilitated motivating considerations for their students.

There is fortunately another construct from a supply-side perspective which is the “managerial decisions” adopted by professors in Higher Education. Teachers and professors, who are in charge of implementing relevant changes made in the classroom, must consider carefully what changes have to be done to improvement the academic success among their pupils, satisfaction and happiness. However, to date little research has been done related to manage opinions in the context of virtual universities. The highly competitive environment forces to institutions to work hard in order to rise the student expectations differently from the competitors. Educational decisions trying to be quite accurate to adopt managerial actions based on the management techniques that incorporate smart strategies, quality guarantee campaigns and opportunistic marketing approaches at universities, among others.

As most investigation in Education is related to student satisfaction, this study deals with an original topic describing emotions and perceptions with teaching and learning preferences. The purpose in this research is to evidence relatively robust frameworks, drawing as far as possible on constructs based on evidences and practices pertaining to virtual universities. The characterization that we have described is related to direct best practices in the classroom, but so far draws particularly on the literature of what has come to be called the theory of Positive Psychology.

The main focus in Higher Education institutions is in terms of societal and institutional development, and Social Sciences and Business emerged for the same reason. Both private and public institutions in education are in search of actions for effective changes. In this paper, a research with representation of cross-sectional nature was conducted at Universidad Internacional de La Rioja between February 1st and May 7th, 2019, within the framework of a research project focused in virtual contexts of learning and teaching. The ultimate aim of this work is to assess the impact of different combinations of teaching styles related to student-focused attributes on happiness and satisfaction in the classroom, considering some locational and personal characteristics of pupils.

This paper contributes to literature on satisfaction and happiness in the classroom reinforcing an action research approach linked to emotional and affective dimensions of engagements with best practices in Higher Education. Additionally, this paper contributes to recent literature review in the configuration of diverse spaces of knowledge at virtual institutions particularly in disciplines such as Business and Social Sciences.

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