

# Immersive Learning as an Opportunity to Upgrade Learning Outcomes and Improving Skills in Political and Social Sciences

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**Abstract.** In recent years, new models and methods of learning and teaching have made their way into social sciences curricula, moving beyond STEM education in higher learning institutions. They can be considered as a complement to the classes. An interesting case is presented here for political science. Starting from the analysis of context and several experiments of immersive learning in the domain of political and social sciences, the authors report their own experience as teachers of the subject matter of “Elites and social movements” with BA students. This research corroborates conclusions from earlier studies and presents proposals that allow reflecting about the adequacy of new methods of teaching and learning to contexts of high exigency and training for new elite’s members.

**Keywords:** Political and social sciences · Elites · Pedagogical innovation · Immersive learning · Higher education · Teaching

## 1 Introduction

Several international and national institutions related somehow to education consider that students’ participation in learning processes is crucial for their social and cognitive development (Ananiadou and Claro 2009; OECD 2016; Schleicher 2012). This understanding is valid for all levels of education and follows from the fact of perceiving that the world is changing faster than programs of the disciplines (OECD 2016; Thomas and Brown 2011) and this has implications in our lives and the lives of other people.

The idea that the university’s role is not limited to the transmission of knowledge but to introduce people to work, that was defended by the European Union, with the so-called Bologna reform, which established a common system of credits and recognition of academic diplomas in Europe, is revolutionary, but already dated. Indeed, it is foreseeable that a lot of professions change considerably or even disappear in the future due to the development of automation systems and artificial intelligence. For example, IBM created ROSS, the first lawyer of the artificial intelligence world. The legal

opinions of ROSS are more accurate (90%) than human beings (70%) (Dondero 2016; see also the site of ROSS at <http://www.rossintelligence.com>). In medicine as well, systems of artificial intelligence are more reliable in the diagnostic of diseases than qualified doctors are. It is debatable if we have to prepare students for the practice of a profession, because it is more likely that they exercise during their lifetime several roles.

These data suggest that we should look differently at the role of education, and this, in fact, is already happening. Several recent studies indicate that more important than the student acquiring necessary knowledge for the exercise of a profession it is the acquisition, throughout the training process, of transversal competencies or skills (EC 2012), in areas such as communication, definition of priorities, creativity, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, teamwork, complex problem solving, etc.

The perception of the profound transformations occurring currently in the job markets is not new, but it presupposes a change of attitude, behavior and structures in the field of education, and in particular in higher education (Janta et al. 2015). This perception is backed by political scientists that argue for changes in the teaching and learning processes (Payerhin 2003).

This present document tries to contribute to the complex social problem of training students of political and social sciences relating pedagogical innovation through the use of pedagogies and immersive technologies with the transformation of the students' profile, aiming at a more efficient performance in their activities. Consequently, we expose our pedagogical experience as professors of the discipline of "Elites and social movements", a subject for undergraduate students taught in a regime of distance education.

Beyond the issue of change in teaching and the challenge ahead, we have tried to give a description of our experience insisting on the context of political science and the peculiarities of this disciplinary tradition to allow some bridges of interpretation for readers of other traditions such as computer science, gamification and experts in experiments in virtual reality.

## 2 Challenges of the Study

For Schleicher (2012), director of the Department of Education and Skills of the OECD, the systems characterized by higher educational performance have common characteristics: they give much importance to the training and selection of teachers; give more importance to the quality of the teaching staff than the size of the classes; substitute the bureaucratic control and the accountancy by the professionalization of the organization of the work. These systems encourage teachers to innovate in pedagogy, to improve their performance and the one of their colleagues and to thrive for professional development. The most advanced systems search on top of all that to provide a high level of quality for the service given, so that all students could benefit from excellence in teaching.

Schleicher refers to primary and secondary education, but his words are valid for higher education in which the success of students (Payerhin 2003; Schaap 2005) depends on their own behavior and the behavior of the rest of the agents, as well as on the characteristics of the education system.

According to a report from OECD (2012), the excellence of the system of education consists of the professionalization of professor, the creation of a coherent and collaborative network of schools and the valorization of the choices made by the students, and they matter more than the hereditary factors. Professors are invited to develop experiments for learning applied with the participation of students for their acquisition of new skills required in the job markets.

Camacho and Lagare (2016: p. 155) in their review of the literature on competence based education (CBE) and personalized learning (PL) conclude that “Twenty-first century employers prefer to recruit employees who have demonstrated mastery of competencies in the related field, and who are ready to perform the skills and tasks necessary in the workplace”. According to Blackburn (2017), “With the development of new digital tools [“microlearning” or personalized learning], as a different form of knowledge acquisition, is becoming an important facet of learner motivation and learning outcomes”.

These authors highlight the importance of informal learning, based on relationships that allow agents of the educative processes to Exchange experiences, giving examples such as digital games and simulations used for building experiences approximating real situations.

In line with the European Union, several European governments bet on the development of science and higher education to promote citizenship and inclusion, employability, specialization and a production of new knowledge. With the initiative “Digital competencies e.2030 (*Competências Digitais e.2030*) Proposal for an integrated program in digital skills, for Portugal, 2017–2030” (Portugal 2017), the Portuguese government aims specifically at the training of students in digital skills in order to enable them to be produce new knowledge in international interaction.

This challenge has an obvious political, social and cultural dimension with implications in the teaching of the political disciplines (EC 2016), which justifies the present work.

### **3 The Immersive Dimension in the Case of Political Science Teaching**

At this juncture, it is worth trying to clarify what we mean by immersive practices and what do they serve, in the context of the teaching of the curricular unit of Elites and Social Movements, for undergraduate students in political science.

In the curricular unit of Elites and Social Movements we study the observable behavior of people in real social life. Specifically, we study behavior of people who stand out for their individual positions in society (elites), but also for collective behavior (social movements).

In a disruptive pedagogical exercise, we ask the students to place themselves in the role of the people and groups they study, trying to transform the knowledge acquired in the curricular unit into behaviors that are observable and measurable.

As a way to develop their behavioral skills, such as communication or leadership, we help each student understand how he or she can operationalize what he or she has learned in order to change his or her behavior and improve performance.

In addition to being an excellent tool to support the acquisition of knowledge, immersive learning approaches and techniques have the advantage of promoting the capacity of students to become involved in learning processes.

But what, after all, are immersive techniques in this context?

The immersion is understood as an experiential training technique that consists of transforming the learning processes into stories carried out by the students who are invited to live stimulating experiences and parallel those to their daily life.

Students' tasks are performed in cooperation or interaction with other students and people and are recorded.

An immersive experience is a real-life situation in which the student engages in an unexpected and disruptive context that produces, among other things, a set of emotions that work as key to understanding how to use the knowledge transmitted in the learning process.

In curricular activities, we promote the development of what we call "real life games" where each student puts into practice specific actions with peers and others to achieve results (e.g., the elaboration of a rule or regulation, the passing a law, the creation of a civic movement or political party, etc.).

The ability to take specific actions gives students rights such as the right to publish an article, take a study trip, or undertake an internship. In this way, students become aware of aspects of reality that they normally do not pay attention to, and their behaviors become more dynamic in order to achieve the desired rights and recognition.

As professors responsible for the curricular unit we have a great concern with the design of the training activities, with the evaluation of student satisfaction and also, though not exclusively or mainly, with the evaluation of student learning.

What we expect from students is what employers normally expect from their workers: a behavioral change. In practice, there is an initiation of students to work, with anticipation of problems and reactions typical of employers, which is a powerful learning factor for students.

Throughout the years in which we taught the curricular unit of Elites and Social Movements, we realized the benefits of experiential learning which have improved the techniques used.

Our experience is based on similar experiences that occur in face-to-face teaching, which work as a complement to traditional pedagogical approaches, although in our case, the experience is reinforced by the fact that we use a virtual pedagogical model that is already the result of the application of Innovative and disruptive principles.

By comparing the results between the more conservative approaches and the immersive methods to teaching this curricular unit, we notice the greater impact of the latter approaches in terms of students' motivation to learn, learning outcomes and student belief in their ability to do things properly. It is, in fact, a change in the mindset that is taking place.

It is our goal to apply in the future these immersive methods to the organization where we work by imagining ourselves as participants in real-life experiences with the objective to move that organization to a higher and more effective level of performance.

## 4 The Context of Pedagogical Practice in Political Science, International Relations and Related Disciplines

The specialized literature reports a significant number of innovative pedagogical experiences in political science and international relations (Asal and Blake 2006; Brock and Cameron 1999; Cairney 2012; Dorn 1989; Fox and Ronkowski 1997; Frederking 2005; Omelicheva and Avdeyeva 2008; Smith and Boyer 1996) involving the use of participatory and immersive technologies. The political nature of the disciplines favors this experimentation (Nield 2008; Payerhin 2003; Schaap 2005).

The study of elites and social movements is part of political science and politics. Specifically, elites are groups of people who, by their characteristics and qualities, are at the top of society (Michels 2001 [1915]; Mosca 1939; Pareto 1991 [1901]). The systems of political representation in the modernity developed themselves in the sense of articulating the political elite (Pareto 1991) with the aim of democracy of the masses supposedly represented by the same elite. In this context, the formal education system was seen by national governments as a factor of democratization in the access of the masses to higher education (Dahl 2000). However, the history of democracy has shown how problematic it is, difficult to do and sometimes insurmountable.

The formation of social elites is related to the use of advanced pedagogies and technologies (Dirckinck-Holmfeld et al. 2012), but to what extent can participative and immersive pedagogies and technologies be appropriate for the formation of elites?

Our pedagogical experience covers undergraduate students in a distance education system and obeys the same pedagogical principles of the experiences reported to in face-to-face teaching, i.e., flexibility of educational processes, interaction between agents, introduction of students to work and research activities.

At the same time we analyze the usefulness of the recourse to immersive tools by undergraduate students in virtual environment and try to know if they fit the formation of elites.

According to classical political sociology (Pareto 1991 [1901]; Mosca 1939 [1896]; Michels 2001 [1915]), elites are those at the top of the social pyramid, regardless of the reasons why individuals occupy these positions: hereditary factors, intelligence, social relationship capacity, etc. Nowadays, the study of elites is essential for understanding social change, social inequality and democracy. If social change is not accompanied by adequate social policies and practices, it tends to be unpredictable and inequitable (Turner 2011). Paradoxically, the democratization of education in recent decades has been accompanied by an increase in social inequalities (Jones et al. 2008); (Turner 2011). Paradoxically, the democratization of education in recent decades has been accompanied by an increase in social inequalities (Jones et al. 2008).

The digital society, characterized by widespread use of computers and telecommunications in all spheres of life, implies a renewal of practices and models (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung 2016).

In Shanghai, teachers use a digital platform to share lessons. Their reputation increases in function of the number of lessons that are 'downloaded' and commented. At the end of each year, the school director asks the teachers if they have taught the students well and also what was their contribution to improving the education system

(Schleicher 2017). By stimulating crowdsourcing of educational practices, Shanghai has created a community of practice of teachers that allows the sharing of creative experiences, fueled by the desire to contribute and be recognized for it. This example shows that the success of changes in educational processes depends on the behavior of agents, aiming not only at individual but also at collective goals, and at the teaching structures.

The old dispute of the social theory of knowing what is most important – human structure or action – does not make much sense today, because both are important (Archer 1995; 2000; 2013; Elias 2001; Sayer 2010; Sayer 2011).

The students of the Elites and Social Movements course, belonging to several bachelor's degrees, are getting prepared to be elites, giving their best in their various activities (*e.g.*, studies, volunteering) and helping to improve the performance of others with those with who they relate.

In the preparation of the learning activities of this curricular unit or class we have taken into account the reports of experiences with participatory technologies in classes of political science and international relations (Dacombe and Morrow 2017).

By participatory Technologies, in the field of education, we understand the technologies that allow students to intervene in the construction and dynamics of the teaching and learning processes.

Students' participation, in the learning processes, as active citizens, tends to be valued as an explanatory factor of democracy itself (Bonavides 2004) existing different forms of student participation (from simple to complex) with a focus on social and cognitive development (Duarte 2009: 10 e s.).

Students' participation in the educational process is seen as valuable because it strengthens their personality and contributes to their formation as responsible citizens (Laver 1997; Fox and Ronkowski 1997; Damron and Mott 2005).

If, on the one hand, individuality is relevant in social processes, on the other hand, in the most developed societies teamwork and collective values are favored.

Given the evolution of societies, several authors note the scarce variety and effectiveness of the "conventional" means of teaching political science (Omelicheva and Avdeyeva 2008). The complexity and abstraction of the subjects implies learning problems (Loasby 1999) and students' lack of interest (Cairney 2012).

In constructing the activities of this curricular unit, we defined as objectives (aims) the most effective involvement of students and the development of their cognitive capacities and knowledge appropriation. For this purpose, we took into account the proposals of the use of simulations and construction of alternative scenarios by the students (Dacombe and Morrow 2017, p. 209; Dorn 1989).

Learning activities and outcomes were rigorously defined and timed for a period of four months (between March and June) in the school year 2014–2015. We selected 59 students from a total of 111 who chose the modality of continuous assessment, which implies the performance of regular practical activities. The students were accompanied by the teachers and two tutors, who are PhD students in political science.

One activity focused on the students' analysis of the life paths of personalities, real or imaginary, of the country and city of their residence, partly identified by themselves. The students working on these tasks were free to define the model of people's evaluation and to change the rules of social recognition, and their positions had to be explicitly substantiated.

In another activity, the students were asked to pronounce themselves on a model of evaluation of performance of the professors of a university; they were allowed to change it, at the same time justifying their choice in a reasoned way.

The students were also asked to analyze, in a reasoned and grounded manner, the scientific and pedagogical rules applicable at the university.

Finally, students were invited to write various opinion articles and to vote the best one on European political elites and/or social protest movements in the European Union.

The students had access to all the learning resources available on the university portal and also the possibility to access, upon a reasoned request, to other documents that they considered necessary.

The evaluation process was defined by the teachers, with a hearing of the students. The students' participation was weighted at 40% of the final classification, according to the university's virtual teaching model, with a similar degree of requirements as for those with just the final exams (those not included in the modality of continuous evaluation).

## 5 Discussion of Learning Processes

After our experience, Dacombe and Morrow (2017: p. 209) reported on their own experiences in the use of immersive techniques, which they called immersive theater, for the teaching of political science in the classroom. Their experiences were developed with undergraduate students, as in our case, using simulations inspired by the principles of immersive theater. These authors conclude that the principles of immersive theater, which are similar to the principles we apply, have the potential to develop teaching techniques that strongly engage students in the discussion of theoretical problems while developing their negotiation, communication and working skills in group. The authors attribute the success of their experiments to the development and planning of the simulations, as well as to a structured reflection period after the sessions.

It is important to note that the development of the Dacombe and Morrow simulation experiments was done in collaboration with Coney, the theater company specializing in immersive performances. In our case, we listened to psychologists from organizations studies, social scientists and politicians, and we organized a dedicated panel at a political psychology conference that we organized in Lisbon in early 2017.

Our experience has much in common with the experiences reported in the literature but at the same time allows us to complement some conclusions of the studies in this area. Like all other experiences, our experience focused on students and aimed to increase their learning potential. The results were presented on the moodle electronic platform, although most of the work was developed by participants outside the platform.

We will now turn to the discussion of the conclusions we have reached.

In the first place, the idea that the use of flexible and interactive pedagogical tools allows to cross the frontiers of political science and politics is proven. Students have skills that because of the closeness to the teacher and to peers that they are able to reveal.

Nibbelink (2012) speaks of a radical intimacy propitiated by the use of immersive pedagogies and technologies that meets the emancipated spectator and that gives them the ability to perceive the big issues. Our students have used means and resources beyond what we have suggested, which has opened the door to new research topics. There were real experiences of initiation not only to the work but also to the investigation by the students. We also note that the classifications of the learners in the course have improved because of the students' participation in the applied activities.

Secondly, we prove Laver's (1997) thesis that politics is also played and constructed. Several students have gained motivation for the exercise of civic and political functions, previously or in the meantime initiated.

Third, it is proven that the preparation and development of activities are very important for the success of immersive practices. The learning styles count (Damron and Mott 2005) as already proven with students of Political Science (Fox and Ronkowsky 1997). For several years, we had class experience in which only a small number (less than 15%) of students had good, very good or excellent grades. In order not to have a very high rate of disapproval, there was a tendency to lower some of the requirements. Our experience demonstrates that it is possible in an introductory course to discuss important issues and get appropriate responses from students as long as they become active. In more than 80% of cases, students were able to use the technologies to access useful digital resources. It also increased the volume of resources used, confirming Nield's (2008) perspective of the student's emergence as an actor/author of the educational process.

Fourthly, discussion about what is most important or effective in fostering good learning - the classical class, the debate, or the new active learning methods, has been hampered, because, in different ways, all have been used.

Fifth, it is highlighted the pertinence to do this experiment with undergraduate students. In a 2009 study, Julie Loggins discusses the success of the experience of simulating the decision-making process in international relations with undergraduate students (Loggins 2009). The idea of the infantilization or lack of autonomy of undergraduate students, now so fashionable, may be partially true, but must be rebutted with active pedagogies that motivate students to learn.

The idea that we have to do things differently is very strong (Payerhin 2003). Learning political science through games (Schaap 2005) is indeed possible. The design of simulations in a virtual classroom is one of the most remarkable facts that we observe in the relationship between teachers and students and between students themselves.

The idea that democracy can be perfected and that, in addition to political parties, we can have the direct and responsible participation of citizens is no longer utopian. However, pedagogical activities should be tested and evaluated in order to guarantee high standards of learning and achievements.

In the last activity of the Elites and Social Movements course, we left a question for students to think and answer, individually or in groups: can we reinvent politics through human creativity and imagination?

The reflections of the students, along with their works, were published at the end of the semester in electronic format. The response rate for the last request was 94.5% (52 students out of a total of 55 students).

## 6 Conclusion and Future Work

Understanding what tools are most appropriate for a teaching and learning process that generates students capable of contributing actively to their personal development and to the development of the country and the world in which they live is a task that concerns us as teachers of the discipline of Elites and Social Movements.

We started with the assumption that innovative teachers seek to respond to students' learning needs outside the conventional classroom model. To that end, we have taken the recommendations of international and national institutions and the work of various authors in the field of social and political sciences. Laver successfully used games to demonstrate the complexity of political interactions. Smith (2012) used games to teach undergraduate students to learn the concepts developed by Maurice Duverger. Woodcock (2006) used the Simpsons series to get students to discuss political theory and democracy. These initiatives have in common the perspective that learning should not be a passive but an active process and that the students should feel free to collaborate with each other and discuss the meaning of their own learning and what they want to learn.

We are talking about pedagogical experiences that may be in conflict with the norms of a classroom of a conventional university. The point is whether it is possible to vary the form and methods of teaching in a university and to what extent. Immersive practices are not the panacea for solving all the problems of the students in our time but they are an important element, along other ones, if the standards of exigency are high.

In his book *Playing Politics*, Laver (1997) *Playing Politics*, Laver (1997) discusses the need to develop ways of teaching that make it possible to understand political concepts by large audiences. This is the greatest challenge to the use of immersive pedagogies and technologies. More and more digital resources are being used to enable collaboration among students around the world, but it is not yet clear who the beneficiaries of these practices are.

Immersive practices allow not only for improved evaluation, but above all for better or more active participation. And perhaps it is this participation or implication that is reflected in the results of the students and leads the universities of reference to use them. It is necessary, however, to think more carefully about the role of the teacher. Countries where institutions collaborate, students and teachers perform better, so attention should also be paid to the work of teachers.

In future work, it will be interesting to investigate what a good student is and what a good teacher is and how they relate in virtual environments or immersive approaches; namely knowing how to make decisions and who takes them. Thus, we will know if these new practices effectively contribute to the creation of old-fashioned elites or new elites, with this or another name. A crucial aspect to take into account is the internal recognition (e.g., publications and other joint work) and the external forms of collaboration (e.g., visibility).

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