Training to Teach Experimentation with a Metrological Physics bias

María de los Dolores Ayala Velázquez, Pablo Alejandro Lonngi Villanueva
Departamento de Física, División de Ciencias Básicas e Ingeniería
Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Unidad Iztapalapa,
San Rafael Atlixco 186, Colonia Vicentina, C.P. 09340, México D. F.

E-mail: dav@xanum.uam.mx.

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Abstract
We present how a virtual learning environment that specifies contents, objectives and metrological concepts, can provide in-service training to new teachers sharing the course with the authors. Specifically, the virtual environment gives them the opportunity to get acquainted in advance with the course material, decreases his or her anxiety with some parts and topics of the course, helps them to participate more fully in it and to tackle the course in a collaborative spirit which helps students to positively assume their own team work in the lab.

Keywords: Research in physics education, Use of Information technology in teaching science, Active learning of science.

I. ANTECEDENTS
At the Basic Science and Engineering Division of the UAMI courses of initiation to experimental work with basic metrology concepts are offered to pupils of the second and third trimesters of the Basic Trunk, common to all the Division curricula. Two professors from different departments of BSE share the teaching, usually from those of Physics and Chemistry, modality which started in 1998 and since then we have given some training for teachers to teach the Experimental Method I and II courses.

The objective of these courses is to offer students an harmonious work environment where they acquire basic skills of observation, knowledge and correct use of measurement instruments, estimation and calculation of the propagation of uncertainties, graphical analysis, determination of empirical models for the studied phenomena, their comparison with theoretical models and the determination of relevant parameters derived from the experimental work, paying special attention to get students to learn to word technical reports in which they clearly communicate the work performed, identifying its relevance and the quality of measurements.

In the Physics department we are aware that, because pupils are young freshmen in the university, it is important for us professors to offer all of our attention and experience in order for them to achieve their adaptation to the academic environment and acquire the necessary knowledge to become successful professionals capable of solving the problems of their time [1].

Often, in the Experimental Method courses one of the professors lacks experience in teaching experimentation and metrology and the course thus becomes a challenge for the professor with little expertise. In addition to interterm workshops, these professors usually extend their training by watching and trying to adapt and support the way topics are presented by the more experienced professor, through the interaction with him or her and the pupils, and profiting from whatever materials are available on the course.

II. BACKGROUND
We follow the cooperative learning approach which is an educational modality for working, learning and teaching for
students and teachers which profits from advances in science such as the Information and Communication Technology ICT as well as research about mediation processes in the classroom. Accordingly, the educator’s work is more professional in the measure in which it relies on science and counts on a method, since his activity must be endorsed by science and the scientific method. Proceeding scientifically allows a better understanding of what is being done, facilitates communication between professors sharing the responsibility of teaching and the pupils who learn, generates confidence in applying critically and responsibly previously tested material that diminishes the possibilities of failure, offering alternative scenarios, contingencies are foreseen and decisions are made when the accomplishment of educative objectives may be at risk, increases the control of the whole educative process and, in each of its parts, helps to systematize the work done, appraising successes and insufficiencies, and warrants results according to the conception, method and strategies used [2, p. 11].

We are interested in mediating between the pupil and the learning content to improve his progress in the development of his observing, classifying, analysis, reflection, decision and conclusion making, obtaining skills through the interaction and interchange with his peers [3]. We try to favor the development of thinking abilities to discover and study phenomena and to apply creative and innovative strategies that contribute to transform the environment of our pupils.

Promoting peer cooperation to achieve learning implies to direct pupils to act jointly with each other to reach a common goal. This requires attaining that students take part in their teaching-learning process [2, p. 42].

To attain a personalized attention in the group we need to resort to distinct strategies with ways of organizing teaching that favor each and every pupil in the class. We search for every student to have the chance to show his talent in a given moment, which will help him to have a better self-perception towards studying. Cooperative learning requires every lesson to be structured with different moments and teaching strategies to favor using the whole brain, intensifying and diversifying the participation of pupils in class [2, p. 51].

The facilitator’s role demands our relation with students to favor their learning, stimulate the development of their potential, correct deficient cognitive functions, propitiating the pass from an initial state of not knowing, not doing and not being to other qualitatively superior of knowing, doing and being, i.e., to offer them the required help for them to reach the zone of potential development. Thus, our intention must be clear, and we should promote reciprocity and stress the transcendence of the present moment.

The mediating tasks (facilitation) require to reach a mutual activity-communication relationship (reciprocity) in which both mediator and pupil participate actively in search of learning; having very clear what we want to accomplish and how (intentionality); help the pupil to find the tasks’ meaning and therefore to make them his or her own (meaning); project into the future the relevance of the work in class going beyond the present; create a new system of needs that move pupils to later actions (transcendence); awake in them the confidence that they are able (self-esteem) and the regulation of impulsivity, so that they manage to think before acting [2, p. 56].

Cooperation occurs when one of the team members perceives that he may accomplish the goal if, and only if, all of them work together and everyone puts his share. As facilitators, we must promote that the cooperative interrelation among classmates gives them chances to do, say and feel; support them according to the needs they show, growing expectations, constant positive reinforcement; different perspectives on the same topic; models that they can imitate; development of cognitive, social and affective skills [2, p. 58].

Learning is a consequence of thinking. Retention or memory, comprehension and active use of knowledge can only be accomplished by learning experiences in which pupils think on and with whatever they are learning [4, p. 104]. Without an emphasis on thinking, reaching a deep understanding of contents is practically impossible. Teaching to think, quite difficult task in this stage of life, underscores the student’s autonomy and independent enquiry. We also know that the sensations of control and of competence are essential to motivate students [5, 6].

Since we work towards accomplishing successful professionals in science and engineering, we are also interested in helping them develop a critical thought, i.e., that they have the ability and disposition to reach conclusions and to evaluate them based on proofs, confirming conclusions with facts, identifying the implicit suppositions, recognizing excessive or too tenuous generalizations, identifying the relevant and irrelevant information, as well as biases, stereotypes, clichés and propaganda to correctly eliminate them [4, p. 107].

We have oriented students in search of autonomous learning for them to develop competences to face challenges, solve problems and interact with others [7].

Considering that the cause of failure and difficulties pupils face to succeed in the experimentation labs is multifactor, as Marchesi and Pérez [8] assert, we designed with Moodle some resources of a virtual classroom that allow us to pay attention to some of those aspects, such as the professors’ training and incentives, teaching time, curricular flexibility, continuous attention to the pupils’ needs, improvement of their motivation, expectations and dedication to work and to offer them the means for self-assessment of the process throughout the course.

A. Individual work

Teachers’ personal work and commitment are essential to advise students in experimental work and the course topics, to clarify doubts, coordinate activities, strategies and experiments, to support students in discussion forums proposing topics of interest to all; apply classroom strategies for solving specific problems; evaluate and verify the effectiveness of their proposals and teaching strategies,
share their findings and concerns about the course and students’ performance with the other teacher.

B. Cooperation

Aware of the importance of cooperation to achieve meaningful learning in students, a common duty is to combine efforts, creativity and experience to promote it in the laboratory [4, 5, 6]. Discussion forums are excellent means for collective reflection and deepening of knowledge from the concrete teaching and learning situation in the classroom and encourage the commitment to become agents of change in acquiring personal and collective knowledge of science.

III. VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT EFFECTS

To complement presencial sessions in the lab, we took advantage of Moodle’s resources to build a virtual classroom where concepts are discussed, training is given in information search and in planning the experimental activities, in using measuring instruments and carrying out complete experimental activities, including the numerical and graphical data analysis, obtaining final results and comparing them with values reported in the literature and writing technical reports [9].

Training to teach experimentation with a metrological physics bias difficulties that they had to do their work right away allows us to help them with appropriate directions.

Links to the objectives, contents and way to evaluate the course are included in the first session, for both pupils and teachers to be aware of its planning, relevance, and conduction and evaluation rules. This information turns out to be very useful for pupils and teachers to organize our time and get ready to carry forward a neat trimester with a well defined work method.

Figure 2 shows an example of the contents pages dealing with measuring instruments, their characteristics and types.

FIGURE 2. View of piece of web page for Measuring Instruments.

The fact that the contents are on the web site eases the development of support materials such as questionnaires and exercises that encourage the students’ meaningful learning.

In the first week of the trimester a diagnostic evaluation is applied to students on the items that they should know as a prerequisite to reach a good achievement in the experimentation course. Fig. 3 shows some impressions of students about how they felt finishing it and what they planned to do to correct their deficiencies.
Among the views expressed is that of changing their idea of their capability and to strive to fill information gaps in order to be better prepared. Also shown is the accompanying of the teacher, who helped the students to overcome their discomfort and take positive steps to properly correct the situation.

Since the focus of the course is experimental method, in Fig. 5 we show a part of the exchange of views on the subject held by 44 students from two of the groups taught by the authors. The first part shows the exchange between a student and one of the teachers of the course, who helps her to place the issue more clearly, to which the student responds very gratefully. In the second part a student comments on his impressions about the course and his feelings about not reaching good grades and some classmates who agree with him on his findings, look for ways to encourage him and lead him to identify that a useful means is the reciprocal support among the classmates. Notice that the different teachers’ participations in the forums of Figs. 4 and 5 are complementary.

**FIGURE 3.** Sample of forum: Impressions on the diagnostic evaluation.

**FIGURE 4.** Sample of forum: Measurement uncertainty.

**FIGURE 5.** Sample of forum: Experimental Method.

**FIGURE 6.** Sample of poll: Personal progress.
Training to teach experimentation with a metrological physics bias correctly knows or what concepts or ideas are not clear. Pupils can repeat them a preset number of times along the course until ideally he/she is satisfied with the results. Besides indicating to each pupil if his answer to any question was right or wrong, these results are very valuable for the teachers to identify the topics in which pupils need clarification or additional activities to achieve a good understanding.

Other very useful resource of the virtual page are the questionnaires that can be used as a way of knowing the students’ opinion about different subjects (polls) or as formative evaluations of their progress in their learning. Fig. 6 shows a sample of the first type with the opinion of two students about what they need to do in order to fulfill the course rhythm and covering all its aspects and requirements including working in the Moodle pages and their own initiative participating in lab classes. These answers also contrast the pupils' communication styles, one with concrete proposals and intentions and the other with more general and vague ideas. This information lets us try to help the student who deals with generalities to establish concrete goals to let him achieve his purposes.

In Fig. 6 one finds that the two students who answered think that investigating and studying the topics in advance and having an open mind help them to collaborate; that planning, organization and order prevent mistakes and help to finish their tasks on time; that Moodle helps them to be organized and do a more orderly work.

We used personal wikis for the pupils to write a diary describing what they are learning in each of the sessions, which requires from them a great deal of attention and effort to recognize. Fig. 9 shows a sample from such a pupil’s diary for session # 6. He recalls uncertainties, compatible measurements, repeatability conditions, reproducibility, and propagation of uncertainties. Since the format is completely free, this use of wikis lets pupils point out, in their own words, what they understood, what they thought or felt, etc. They are a practical means for the teachers to supervise their learning or lack thereof and to act accordingly.

**FIGURE 7.** Sample of poll: Team work.

Figure 7 shows the opinions at the beginning of the course of 11 of the 25 students who answered about working as a team. All of them coincide in the importance of working together in order to achieve the goals of the course and of exchanging ideas in order to get a common one that might help them solve specific problems and aspects of the course. Finally, they commented that in the experimental activity they started to learn to work as a team, to measure, to speed up their work and recognize the need of self-confidence to make questions right away in order to clarify doubts.

A part of the results of a formative evaluation containing uncertainties, systematic error and round up is shown in Fig. 8. The blue text in the third column denotes the right answers while the red text are the wrong answers. In the fifth and sixth columns we find the number and percentage of students who chose either answer. Formative evaluations such as this are meant to let each pupil identify what he correctly knows or what concepts or ideas are not clear. Pupils can repeat them a preset number of times along the course until ideally he/she is satisfied with the results. Besides indicating to each pupil if his answer to any question was right or wrong, these results are very valuable for the teachers to identify the topics in which pupils need clarification or additional activities to achieve a good understanding.

**FIGURE 8.** Part of a formative evaluation results on instrumental uncertainties.
Samples of a poll applied to pupils enrolled in an Experimental Method II group to let teachers identify pupils’ majoring field and their knowledge or competence on various items covered in their previous Experimental Method I courses are shown in Fig. 10. The first answer shows the distribution of the students’ intended major, information very useful for teachers to select and direct class activities. A very important datum for us is that a large proportion of students acknowledge their imperfect handling of the propagations of uncertainties, graphing measurements and applying graphical analysis, which prompted us to explain these topics in the class whenever they were to be required.

In Fig. 11 we show some of the pupil’s answers to the question “what did you learn in writing this methodological guide” which comes last in a poll built as a checklist for the guide’s content. The straightness and frankness of many of the answers may serve the teachers to recognize the terms, concepts or parts of that work needing more discussion or work in class. Some of the comments may refer to the professors’ observations added to their work in the writing environment used, for which with the intention to promote collaborative work among the working team’s members, the authors had suggested to try the text editor of Google Docs.

FIGURE 11. Sample of poll: Methodological guide.

Very fundamental and relevant topics are approached in the Experimental Method I course to direct pupils to their first steps of their professional life, among which writing a formal report, the items that it should include, and especially the importance of knowing how uncertainties are handled, since these are essential to perform a good analysis on the experimental data. Even if students don’t clearly visualize how important handling these topics is because they don’t see them applied in their profession, it is a good thing that each professor has the enthusiasm to motivate pupils showing them some of the applications that the topics discussed in class have in each of the careers.

IV. RESULTS

As results we present a few teachers’ opinions, that show the relevance and effects on them of this project.

Teaching the course jointly with a colleague from a different department and area is very rewarding, in particular when working with someone who has extensive experience, especially for someone like me, just a beginner in teaching. This is the first time that I teach the course with a person who shows good and creative vision in the group management, addressing the topics in a dynamic way by having students learn to reason, reflect, think, analyze, teamwork and most importantly to discuss in the classroom about the topics and about what each student seeks or pretends to achieve as a professional. It’s nice to work like this. I myself, like the students, have learned a lot. Some other colleagues are dedicated to just giving the topics but leaving aside the pupils’ awareness of the topics’ importance. With two teachers working together in one course, there is the risk that one stays aside while the other transmits knowledge to the students, risk that can be prevented using strategies to share the handling of the group. Regarding the platform, it is a useful tool for both parties, the teacher shares the knowledge with students giving them useful and very important material for each topic. It is easy to use, gives feedback on learning and most
V. CONCLUSION

The use of a virtual environment helps prevent the reduction of the course to a conventional one, focusing in the formation of professionals who are able to solve problems putting together and using the knowledge gained throughout their educational life. In these courses we pretend to teach students to create, design, understand, analyze, discuss and resolve issues in an amusing and innovative way. In so doing, one has to work very hard and learn a lot, first, to put the site together and give it reasonable maintenance, and latter, to be sensitive enough to respond to the students’ needs that we recognize in the platform’s various resources and work to fulfill them.

Disponibility of different materials and formative evaluations of the course in the virtual page, help beginner teachers to: get acquainted with those materials; to know students’ needs along the term in order to offer them opportune personal or groupal attention; introduce changes and adjustments to the order of presentation of topics; be flexible and creative; direct students to search for complementary information and to complete Moodle

Training to teach experimentation with a metrological physics bias activities and tasks; permanent review of its materials with the possibility of improving them with links and new information.

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