SOCIAL CRITICISM INSTEAD OF FORMULAS: A TEACHING EXPERIENCE FROM ARGENTINA

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In Argentinean social science studies (especially in political sciences), it is strongly believed that statistics is only about formulas or, even worse, it is ‘just mathematics.’ Students are not the exception to this viewpoint at all. In this context, teaching statistics becomes a real challenge. This challenge is two-fold. On the one hand, the myth mentioned above should be overcome while provoking enthusiasm for reading and learning statistics and, on the other hand, we should teach (or learn, from the student perspective) this issue with a high quality standard.

Therefore, the ‘traditional way’ (that is, the ‘mathematical approach’ of providing, explaining and computing mean, median and standard deviation – just as a few examples) have proven to be useless. Students’ (and lecturers’) disappointment was undeniable and a radical change in lecturing became unavoidable.

In doing so, the ‘mathematical approach’ was soon replaced by a ‘social approach.’ In effect, statistics was not a goal in itself but a tool for social analysis and social criticism. Soon, it became a way of better understanding social changes, myths and lies.

A critical review of official publications, newspapers and papers published by research centres (sometimes funded by political actors) do not only facilitate understanding social phenomena but also statistical measures, with their advantages and disadvantages, and all that with much less effort and much more efficiency.

After implementing this alternative way of teaching statistics to political sciences undergraduate students at the Catholic University in Argentina during the last three years, both the level of statistical knowledge and the students’ level of satisfaction (reflected on the student satisfaction surveys carried out by the faculty) increased considerably.

This experience strengthens the idea that ‘non-traditional’ approaches are not only useful but necessary for a fruitful and successful teaching of statistics within a social-science context. Social criticism instead of formulas was revealed to be a better way of teaching statistics.