# Employer engagement in VET through challenge-based learning: a teacher's perspective from Asturias (Spain)

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*Day 1. Key actors: VET Hair & Beauty students meet Eva and Kike Rogado, entrepreneurs.*

One way of ensuring that learning is reality-based is to have the local business community directly engaged in the learning process with their expertise and hands-on know-how. In "Reto TMP/ TMP Challenge" local employers (SMEs, NGOs, sole traders) provide real tasks for VET students to work on and learn from. They visit the school and also communicate with the students online. They are a source of practical advice and experience as well as encouragement and motivation throughout the challenge. They are important role models, too.

When I was first introduced to Reto TMP concept I thought it was a great opportunity for my "Hairdressing and Beauty" VET students at IES El Batán to further develop key skills such as creativity, communication and initiative, so often neglected in our traditional education system.

Reto TMP is the brainchild of Valnalon, a brokering organization bringing together schools and employers. Valnalon seeks to reinforce employer engagement in entrepreneurship

education through the creation of Red Emprendedora, a regional network of SMEs willing to cooperate with schools, teachers and students. To date, more than 180 regional SMEs have joined the scheme on a voluntary basis. The network circumvents difficulties for SMEs to engage in VET. In our case, the challenge was posed by Eva and Kike, brothers and founders of *Linea Cosmética Eva Rogado* , a small regional company in the cosmetics industry.

### *Real world problems as key to learning*

Real challenges require real solutions for real users. The classroom is our basecamp but what's really important is action taking place outside the classroom to identify problems, generate ideas, build prototypes and putting them to test with real users while documenting every single step of the process in the blog specifically set up for the challenge: Reto TMP Eva Rogado. In the first session, Eva and Kike visited our school and shared a very down-to-earth account of what it takes to start up a company in such a competitive sector. Eva and Kike introduced not one but three different challenges followed by a short Q&A session bewfore we bid them farewell. Decision-making started as soon as the ball got rolling and the group agreed to focus its efforts on one of the three challenges: "How might we reach and develop a younger customer base for Linea Cosmética Eva Rogado?".

Kike Rogado @kikerogado · 13 de ene.

## Compartiendo unos momentos con las chicas del ÍES Batán de Mieres :) Les hemos lanzado 3 retos a las…

instagram.com/p/xy62ivG3D6/

🔁 7 ⭐ 5 •••

"Sharing some time with students at IES Batan. ☺ We've set them 3 challenges.."

In the next 3 sessions, staff from Valnalon introduced the students to the basics of Design Thinking, a methodology for creative problem solving. Students worked in small teams of 3-6 people and the action unfolded in the next four weeks in Spring 2015.
Looking back, I must say the experience has certainly exceeded all my expectations as a teacher. In fact I keep telling everybody this initiative is certainly well-suited to help developing a valuable set of dispositions, attitudes and skills in our students.

### *Students' feedback*

I'm firmly convinced that students' feedback is the best instrument for teacher improvement. Once the challenge was over, I handed them a blank sheet of paper and asked them to write down the things they learnt, the emotions they experienced and some suggestions for

improvement.  I tend to think our teaching practice has to be focused on students and largely informed by the real learning they derive from it.  Bear with me for the next pages, as I am giving the floor to my students.  I am tapping into their comments in an attempt to derive some conclusions from my own personal perspective as a teacher.  Let's get to it.

## Real contexts and entrepreneurial role models

> - *"It is nice to meet interesting and enterprising people that can provide a first-hand account based on personal experience"*
> - *"Kike and Eva have been very nice and supportive and that made us feel much more at ease".*
> - *"Pitching the idea to Kike and Eva has been a unique experience. That face saying "I like your idea" makes all the work and effort worthwhile.*

This activity parted ways with traditional approaches such as business simulations. Students have the possibility to meet real entrepreneurial role models.  Communication is not solely limited to the initial and final phase but ongoing throughout the process so that students dispel myths and gain a deeper understanding on the daily life of an entrepreneur.

Eva & Kike Rogado decided to create the company in 2006. While crafting their business plan, they received advice from Valnalon.  Thus, students got to know not only real entrepreneurs but also the people and institutions providing business start-up support. By working alongside Valnalon staff in the development of this challenge, students got familiar with the services it provides, and more importantly, they realised it is accesible if they ever decide to take the self-employment route.   Opening the classroom door to external stakeholders creates bonds between the worlds of education and business, an absolute "must" if we want to provide "high-quality" education.

Besides, in this particular case, Kike, Eva and Iván have shown a lot of empathy while interacting with the group of students, that realized a good professional needs a balanced mix of technical and personal skills.  This point is explicitly made in one of the commandments in EVA ROGADO decalogue: "*Because matter you're big or small, whether you work on your own or for somebody else… people is always the key*"

## Motivation

> - *"Work was fun and dynamic… lessons were not boring at all"*
> - *"I loved the whole thing".*

Design Thinking and "learning by doing" approaches add a very important motivational component to the learning-teaching process. The challenge elicits answers to a real problem

for a real customer within a given deadline. All in all, this creates an emotional bond that becomes the driving force of learning.

Such a student-centered approach goes hand in hand with a change in the role played by the teacher. Mere transmission of knowledge gives way to a facilitation role where I had to step back and provide guidelines and support in the process. The impact on student engagement has been massive.

### Creative problem solving

- *"I've learned to come up with ideas and turn them into actions".*
- *"We've squeezed our minds and eventually came up with good ideas".*
- *"We were constantly making changes to the original idea but that's the beauty of the creative process"*

Students learn to adopt a systematic approach to creative processes and to bear ideas to fruition. I still remember the stunned faces of my students when I first told them: "Today, we are devoting the whole lesson to think. We'll use some helpful techniques, but basically today's lesson is about thinking". This may seem obvious but there's not much room for thinking or learning how to think in our schools and I do believe if we want to make some progress as a society, that's where we should start: Teaching and learning how to think.

The challenge represents an opportunity to face a complex and open-ended problem. Further insights obtained in the interviews with users, customers, experts so that they gain a better understanding of the challenge. Once they've done that, the idea generation phase starts. Students apply different divergent thinking techniques and each team is asked to come up with three different ideas. Finally students agree on different selection criteria (feasibility, viability, innovativeness) to inform their decision-making process to choose one idea and move on to the prototyping phase.

Experimentation is a key aspect in Design Thinking and it helps students to accept "trial and error" is an important element in any learning process. The need to adopt a broader perspective and establish unforeseen connections makes the student familiar with the innovation process.

Another crucial feature is the need to test their hypothesis and ideas in the real world interacting with real people via observation, shadowing, interviewing. While engaged in this ongoing cycle of research a steady exchange of information with the company setting the challenge was taking place

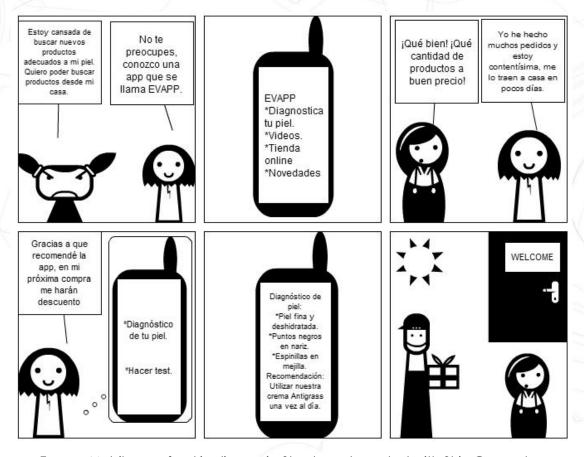*Field research (user interviews) and company feedback*

**Prototyping and digital literacy**

- *"I've learnt to use software apps I didn´t even know they existed"*
- *"We've used methods and software that may also be useful in the future".*

Throughout the challenge, teams are expected to self-manage their learning identifying what they need to learn. The "Show, don´t tell" principle entails transforming ideas into something tangible. Storyboards, posters, mock-up prototypes are some of the methods they got familiar with.  Internet is full to the brim with applications and tools that make things easier to craft them but it is up to the teams to locate and learn how to use the best tools for the task at hand. In this case, they started using tools that were previously unknown to them. They designed comics with Strip Generator, animated presentations with Powtoon and posters with Canva.

*Evapp. Mobile app for skin diagnosis. Storyboard created with Strip Generator.*

Bearing in mind some of my students were not even basic users of technology, I cannot but conclude that the progress is impressive. The aforementioned tools have paved the way for a experience of meaningful learning.

The ever increasing speed of change in the world we live justifies the need to emphasise the development of metacognitive skills, the so-called "learning to learn" competence so that our students, and future professionals, become aware of the importance of lifelong learning.

**Team work**

- *"We combined different ideas to solve the challenge".*
- *"It is hard to keep all team members equally engaged".*
- *"I've learnt to work in a team, to help my team mates".*

Synergies derived from teamwork are positively valued by students. Words like empathy, commitment and engagement start making sense when they realise what's their impact on team performance. For this challenge we've agreed to use a teamwork rubric as a self-assessment tool to be used at the end of each session.

Students have a first-hand experience of the pros and cons of teamwork such as the need to cope with and manage interpersonal disagreements and conflicts. This sort of negative experience or inconvenience becomes a fantastic learning opportunity in the classroom. Thus students learn to face and manage conflicts, applying attitudes such as assertiveness, empathy and resilience. Conflict comes in many shapes and forms. Perceived lack of engagement among team members, the need to cope with uncertainty about what to do next, meeting deadlines, making mistakes… I do always tell them "Girls, this is exactly what happens in real life. The fact that this is happening in the classroom is a blessing in disguise, as you are all learning to cope with it". I am a staunch supporter of real-word learning and as a teacher I devote a lot of effort to train qualified professionals with robust knowledge and equipped with tools so that they can actively search, contribute, and take advantage of all the opportunities they come across enjoying throughout the process.

**Communication skills**

- *"We've learnt new presentation techniques and skills".*
- *"We've got used to ask questions to different types of people".*

Communication is an essential element in the skill set of a good professional. Our students need to learn how to interact with all kinds of people. The challenge represents a perfect scenario to develop communication skills. Internal communication among team members, interviews with real people, and last but not least the final pitch are fantastic opportunities to overcome fear of public speaking while bearing in mind core values such as respect, empathy and assertiveness

The digital revolution we're immersed in is having a great impact in the way we communicate. Digital literacy is a key competence no school could ignore. E-mail, social networks are tools they may be familiar with. Yet, the need to keep an ongoing communication with the Rogado brothers and Valnalon has forced students to use them in a professional context, using appropriate language and codes of conduct for professional communication.

At the very beginning Valnalon set up a specific blog for the challenge. This is a shared learning and innovation space that creates incentives for students to showcase not only the final product, but the process and the great dose of enthusiasm, initiative and problem-solving skills they've put into it.

**Reto TMP Eva Rogado**

IES EL BATÁN (MIERES)

**#rogadízate, la campaña**

Publicado el ⏱ 6 marzo, 2015 por 👤 retotmpvalnalon ≡ Estándar

En este vídeo animado el equipo Solutions nos presenta su prototipo de la campaña promocional que han diseñado para Eva Rogado Línea Cosmética

**PROTOTIPOS**

Padlet Reto Eva Rogado

**EL RETO**

Los retos planteados son:

1- ¿Qué acciones se podrían hacer o implementar en un punto de venta (perfumería, centro de estética) para captar clientela más joven, ya que la nuestra por lo general es de una edad superior a los 45 años?

Add to it the use of social networks such as Twitter and Facebook, and you've got a perfect excuse to introduce concepts such as personal brand and digital identity. Simultaneously, our students start considering the potential of social networks as a source of learning and professional improvement.

The final pitch in front of the company represents a sort of an ordeal of fire for the student teams. The previous days were certainly hectic. Classroom was buzzing as they finetuned prototypes and rehearsed the presentations. Eva and Kike Rogado, the company owners joined us for the last session and carefully listened to team presentations before taking centre stage to provide constructive feedback. They were certainly impressed and assured some of the ideas will be definitely taken onboard.



*Eva & Kike providing constructive feedback after the pitches.*

**Dispositions and self-efficacy**

- *"I felt very proud of myself".*
- *"Once the presentation started everything went fine, I managed to overcome my fears and it made me feel good"*
- *"I am more confident now".*
- *"The presentations were impressive!".*

An essential part of my role as a teacher is to discover and reinforce the talent of our students.  In my opinion the challenge has reinforced the students' self-worth in what they are capable of: generating ideas that add value for someone else and communicating them. My experience says self-esteem is largely absent among the student population. This is explained by a myriad of factors.  Difficult family situations, long track record of academic failure erode their self-esteem and this represents a major obstacle for learning.  Thus, all efforts to revert this downward spiral will eventually pay off.  The challenge has certainly helped to bring the best out of my students and I guess that perceived sense of self-efficacy will be the main driving force for future learning.



*Collective selfie: Eva, Kike and student teams.*

To sum it up, I would like to share with all of you the message I tweeted  back home once the challenge was over. I only needed 140 characters. "Girls, congratulations, great job.  All the effort was worth it. I am absolutely proud of you ☺"