

Software Engineering Education: Challenges and Perspectives

Sofia Ouhbi

*Dept. Computer Science & Software Eng.
CIT, UAE University
Al Ain, Abu Dhabi, UAE
sofia.ouhbi@uaeu.ac.ae*

Nuno Pombo

*Instituto de Telecomunicações
Universidade da Beira Interior
Covilhã, Portugal
ngpombo@ubi.pt*

Abstract—The software engineering community celebrated, in 2018, the 50th anniversary of what is considered to be the official start of the profession of software engineering. Software engineering is a young and promising discipline which is still under development and improvement. This is reflected when teaching software engineering in higher education. The aim of this study is to investigate the challenges and perspectives of software engineering education. To do so, a questionnaire study was conducted. 21 software engineering faculty and experts in teaching software engineering related courses participated in this study. The questionnaire contained demographic questions, questions related to students' engagement and to different methodologies adopted by respondents in the classroom. Results showed that the majority of respondents found engaging students in software engineering courses to be the biggest challenge they faced in the classroom. Almost half of the participants found difficulties designing practical activities for students. Results also revealed that the problem-based learning approach is the most used in software engineering lectures, followed by gamification techniques and role-playing which are new trends used to engage students. Moreover, the majority of the participants considered that the adoption of new teaching methodologies in the classroom produced high impact in the students' learning experience. Based on the outcomes of this questionnaire study, a conceptual model to engage students in software engineering courses is proposed. For future work, complementary studies should be implemented to evaluate the proposed model in a real-world scenarios including its effect on the achievement of learning outcomes.

Index Terms—Software Engineering, Teaching Methodologies, Students' engagement, Education

I. INTRODUCTION

Software engineering education aims to bring together theory and practice, so that the learner may develop a deep understanding on cornerstone concepts and principles, along with skills and competences to solve real-world problems. Thus, it is not merely an academic concern about teaching relevant topics, but also a responsibility to shape skilled individuals adequate for the industry demand. Moreover, due to the fact that the software industry is developing rapidly and becoming transnational [1], several challenges are facing the qualification of software engineers, capable to develop products according to the international industrial standards into overseas markets.

Despite the celebration of its 50th anniversary in 2018, software engineering is a young and promising discipline which

is still under development and improvement, which is also the case for software engineering education. In the last years, several pedagogical approaches had been implemented aiming at improving learners' motivation and engagement [2]. The increasingly adoption of technology in the classroom disrupted traditional models in terms of lecturer-learner interaction, group dynamics, content delivering, and learning experience, just to mention a few. The rationale behind these pedagogical approaches lies in the attempt to produce innovative solutions that may enable place-based or remotely personalized and self-paced learning, in which, the lecturer may arrange appropriate learning activities to promote student thinking and further enhancing their cognitive levels and problem solving abilities.

Software engineering education requires both hard and soft skills. Technical competencies such as requirements engineering, modelling, programming, and testing are desirable. The ability to communicate, to cooperate, to connect pieces of knowledge to discover solutions, and to think critically are also strongly recommended. Since soft skills develop over time and require practice, it is promising that its awareness and learning may be provided in advance throughout a students' coursework and infused into software engineering curriculum. In the recent years, new approaches such as the formation of interdisciplinary teams composed by software engineering students and entrepreneurship students [3], or the stimulus for prototyping adoption through the end-user experience driven [4, 5], were mentioned in the literature.

The instruction of theoretical concepts, and practical skills in an individual-centered learning environment is an ideal teaching strategy for students [4], which is why several body of knowledge on the software engineering context were proposed. The most relevant ones are the Guide to the Software Engineering Body of Knowledge (SWEBOK) [6], and the ACM/IEEE Curriculum Guidelines for Undergraduate Degree Programs in Software Engineering [7]. Both guides aim to meet the challenge of rapidly changing landscape of software engineering, and to aggregate the diversity, and complementary of new emerging domains that interconnect with software engineering.

The overall objective of this study is to investigate the challenges facing academic professionals in teaching software engineering and to propose a conceptual framework to improve

software engineering courses delivery in the classroom. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section II introduces related works, including some examples and scenarios with a special focus on students engagement in the classroom; in Section III, the questionnaire deployed in this study is presented; Section IV presents the results obtained from the questionnaire study; Section V discusses the results and presents our proposed framework; and Section VI concludes the paper and presents future works related to this study.

II. BACKGROUND

Recent pedagogical trends such as the students' empowerment, engagement, and motivation replaced the old-fashioned models to deliver software engineering lectures. This paved the way for adoption of technologies in the classroom which may represents a double challenge. On the one hand, unique and/or complementary technologies must be wisely used to shape an effective and profitable learning tool; capable to enhance students' soft and hard skills, instead an additional source of distraction. On the other hand, learning contents and other materials may be delivered not only in a digital format, but also through different education scenarios such as traditional place-based, online, or blended (combining place-based and online). On top of that, modern students expect a personalized and self-paced learning. Software engineering education is expected to prepare students ready to step directly into software developer positions and succeed.

In [8], authors highlighted the gap between academia and industry as a motivation for the introduction of an educational program. The main goal is to provide an immerse learning experience that may guide students for complementary skills achievement required by the curriculum and by industry. Congruently, [9] also focused in the gap between academia and industry in which the balance between hard and soft skills through realistic projects was recommended on the learning process. In [10], authors proposed a framework; called *Essence*, to describe the commonality and the diversity of software engineering practices. The ultimate goal is to enhance the learning process by means of providing tools that may enable students to learn and to understand the diversity of software engineering later in their career.

Moreover, in [11], authors proposed a Software Engineering Competency Assessment Tool (SECAT), to assess the achievement of educational learning outcomes and the acquisition of competences related with either hard or soft skills. In [12], authors presented the challenge for the Global Software Engineering (GSE) education highlighting the most relevant Global Teaming Model (GTM) practices. In this study a more active role of SMEs in the education process is recommended. While, in [13], a trans-domain competencies and complementary learning approach is proposed by means of combine technical specifications and business.

In [14], the validation of software engineering student's learning within their rich professional context is proposed for the adult higher education at a distance. This study highlighted

the adaptability of teaching software engineering techniques based on the continuous assessment of problem-oriented practices. In [15] authors reinforce this concept, proposing real-world software development projects in order to enhance students' skills.

In [16], the authors, based on 10-years experience in teaching software engineering, highlighted that soft skills (such teamwork) were critical for success. However, large class sizes challenges for group dynamics and/or limits the adaptability of teaching software engineering. In [17], the authors proposed to use videos in software engineering education, and in [18] the authors highlighted the relevance in teaching software measurement in software engineering courses. Moreover, [19] proposed a learning process to encourage students to avoid multitasking and focus on learning multi-step tasks. The main purpose is to adopt athletic training principles (such as time optimization) in software engineering education.

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study aims to investigate the challenges and perspectives of software engineering education. In line with this, we designed a research questionnaire, presented in Table I, to get an overall understanding about the different approaches used to teach software engineering and challenges facing the respondents.

The questionnaire was sent to 28 software engineering faculty and experts in teaching software engineering related courses in early September 2019 and was available online for a period of two weeks. An invitation to participate in this survey was sent by the authors to colleagues and authors of papers identified in proceedings of an international software engineering conference. A total of 21 participants answered the online questionnaire, which was created using Google Forms and composed of 9 items segmented into two sections as presented in Table I.

The first section of the questionnaire was composed of four sociodemographic background questions to capture factors that might influence respondents' answers. The second part of the questionnaire contains 5 closed and short questions related to the topic of this paper. The survey was conducted anonymously. An estimated completion time of the online questionnaire was 5 minutes.

Data visualization was done using Excel to represent answers from respondents.

IV. RESULTS

Only 21 out of 28 of potential respondents have participated in our study. The 75% completion rate maybe due to the fact that the invitation was sent via email. Although a second email was sent to remind invitees at the beginning of the second week, the number of responses did not change.

A. Demographics

Table II presents an overview of the respondents' demographics.

Table I
QUESTIONNAIRE. Acronym: *Software Engineering (SE)*

Section 1: <i>Demographic questions</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Age: - Gender: - Job title: - Country of Work:
Section 2: <i>Questions related to teaching software engineering courses</i> <p>What are the SE related courses you have taught?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Software Eng Fundamentals - Software Quality - Requirements Engineering - Software Architecture and Design - Software Project Management - Software Construction - Software Testing - Others: (Please specify) <p>How long have you been teaching SE related courses?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1-2 years - 3-5 years - 6-9 years - More than 10 years <p>What are the challenges that you have faced in teaching SE courses?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Engaging students - Designing practice activities - Finding adequate textbooks - Finding adequate technology, and tools - Others: (Please specify) <p>What are the approaches that you have integrated in your lecture to improve SE related courses?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Gamification techniques - Role playing - Flipped classroom - Problem based learning - Others: (Please specify) <p>Do you think that this/these approaches made a difference in the learning experience of students?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Yes, but it was a reduced impact - Yes, it made a big difference - No

B. Research questions

Fig. 1 presents the results of the first research question. The majority of respondents have taught *Software Engineering Fundamentals* course, which is an introductory course for the principal concepts of Software Engineering, followed by *Software Project Management*. Less than half of the respondents have had experience teaching specialized software engineering courses: 43% have taught *Software Quality*, 38% have taught *Requirements Engineering*, same percentage taught *Software Architecture and Design*, 33% have taught *Software Testing* course, while only 24% have taught *Software Construction* course. Three respondents listed other courses: *Information Systems Security Management* course; *Algorithms and Data Structures*, which is a Computer Science course; and another course about multidisciplinary projects involving software development.

Fig. 2 shows that the majority of the respondents have taught software engineering courses for more than 6 years. Almost one third of participants has had experience teaching software engineering courses for more than 3 years and less

Table II
BACKGROUND INFORMATION OF RESPONDENTS (N=21)

Characteristic	Value (%)
Age	
Younger than 30	0 (0%)
31-40	10 (48%)
41-50	8 (38%)
51-60	3 (14%)
Older than 60	0 (0%)
Gender	
Male	17 (81%)
Female	4 (19%)
Job title	
Full Professor	1 (4.8%)
Professor	8 (38.1%)
Associate Prof.	2 (9.5%)
Assistant Prof.	3 (14.3%)
Lecturer	3 (14.3%)
Software Engineer	2 (9.5%)
Research Assistant	2 (9.5%)
Country of Work	
Portugal	10 (47.6%)
Spain	5 (19%)
UAE	2 (9.5%)
Morocco	2 (9.5%)
Germany	1 (4.8%)
Finland	1 (4.8%)



Figure 1. Results of research question 1. Acronym: *Software Engineering (SE)*

than 5 years, while 19% has had less then two years experience teaching these courses.

How long have you been teaching SE related courses?

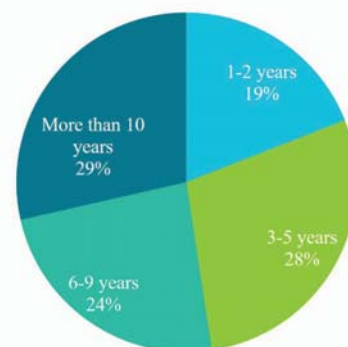


Figure 2. Results of research question 2. Acronym: *Software Engineering (SE)*

Fig. 3 presents the challenges that have faced the respondents in teaching software engineering courses. The main

challenge faced is engaging students in the classroom followed by the challenge to design practice activities for the software engineering courses. Five participants found it challenging to find adequate textbooks and the same number found difficulties finding adequate technology, and tools to incorporate in software engineering courses. Three participants suggested other challenges: (i) create assessments/exams that go beyond memorization; (ii) there is a big discrepancy between textbooks and practical life, students tend to do well on the test but in practice they are lost; and (iii) too much material to cover.

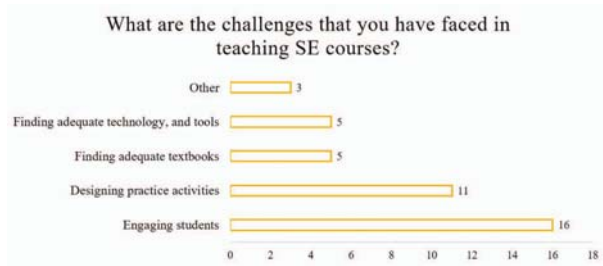


Figure 3. Results of research question 3. Acronym: Software Engineering (SE)

Table III links between the challenges and number of years of experience teaching software engineering courses.

Table III
NUMBER OF YEARS OF EXPERIENCE VS CHALLENGES FACED

Years of experience	Challenges
1-2 years	Engaging students, Designing practice activities, Too much material to cover.
3-5 years	Engaging students, Designing practice activities, Finding adequate textbooks, Create assessments/exams that go beyond memorization, Finding adequate technology, and tools.
6-9 years	Engaging students, Designing practice activities, Finding adequate technology, and tools, There is a big discrepancy between textbooks and practical life. Students tend to do well on the test but on practice they are lost.
More than 10 years	Engaging students, Designing practice activities, Finding adequate textbooks, Finding adequate technology, and tools.

Fig. 4 presents approaches adopted by the respondents to improve their software engineering courses. The majority uses *problem-based learning* approach, 43% integrate *gamification techniques* in their courses, 29% use *role playing*, same percentage use the *flipped classroom* approach, while 19% use different approaches: serious games, audience response systems, and storytelling using real-world problems and examples from industry.

Table IV shows the relation between the respondents years of experience and the approach adopted to improve teaching software engineering course.

Fig. 5 presents the respondents' opinion about the efficiency of the approaches adopted in their classroom. 71% of respondents have found that the implemented approaches have significantly improved their teaching of software engineering courses. Only 24% have experienced a slight improvement in

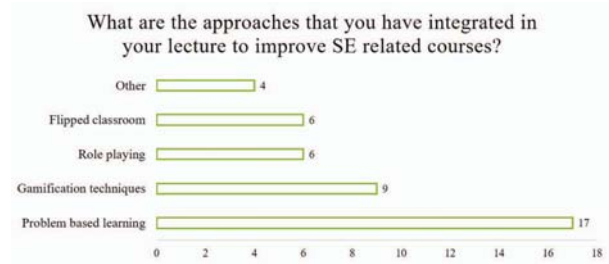


Figure 4. Results of research question 4. Acronym: Software Engineering (SE)

Table IV
YEARS OF EXPERIENCE VS APPROACH TO IMPROVE SOFTWARE ENGINEERING COURSES

Years of experience	Approaches adopted
1-2 years	Role playing, Flipped classroom, Problem based learning, serious games, audience response systems
3-5 years	Role playing, Problem based learning, Gamification techniques, Storytelling
6-9 years	Gamification techniques, Flipped classroom, Problem based learning
More than 10 years	Role playing, Gamification techniques, Flipped classroom, Problem based learning, Interactive systems for audience response

their courses. One respondent stated that it depends on the students but generally adopting new approaches improves the learning experience.

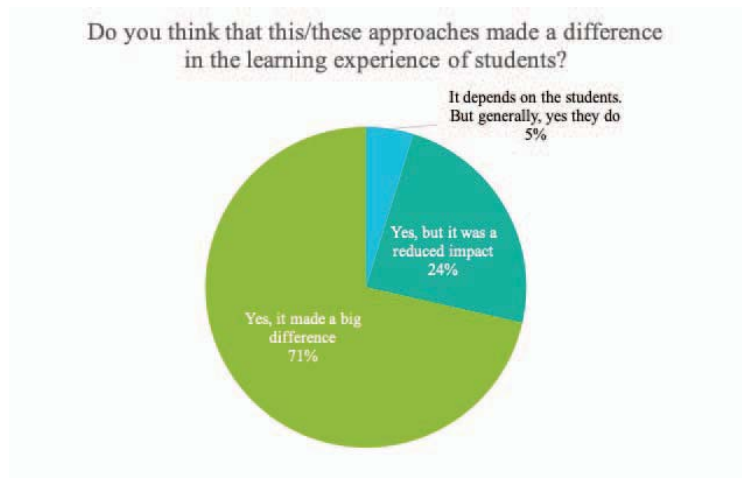


Figure 5. Results of research question 5

Table V shows the relationship between the approaches and their efficiency according to the respondents.

V. DISCUSSION

A. Principal findings

Engaging students is one of the main challenges in higher education [20], and is considered critical for students achievement in a course [21]. Engaging students in software engineering courses is particularly challenging as these courses

Table V
APPROACHES ADOPTED VS THEIR EFFICIENCY

Approach adopted	Feedback on their efficiency
Gamification techniques, Problem based learning, Storytelling	Reduced impact
Role Playing, Gamification techniques, Flipped classroom, Problem based learning, Interactive systems for audience response, serious games	Big difference
Problem based learning	It depends on the students

contain heavy theoretical notions with a few practical work in the classroom. For this reason many software engineering researchers have started focusing on approaches to engage students [22, 23].

Bridging the gap between the classroom and the real world is also one of the biggest challenges that instructors face in software engineering courses [24]. It is challenging to design practical work and finding adequate technologies and tools to integrate in the classroom. Numerous tools used in the real world by software engineers are not free and not suitable for education [25]. However, instructors can use a list of open source tools provided by Toth [26], which can be used to give students practical software engineering experience.

One of the challenges in teaching software engineering is finding adequate textbooks. Although guides like SWEBOOK [6] exist but it is difficult to design a whole course based on the definition available only in them. Often instructors tend to combine more than one source to prepare their lecture and find it difficult to rely only on one book. The traditional textbooks available for software engineering related courses are usually lengthy books, for instance this requirements engineering book [27] is 800-page long.

The majority of the approaches when adopted in the classroom had significantly improved the teaching experience of the respondents. A traditional approach is problem-based learning, which was the mostly used by the participants. Adopting this approach by instructors can be challenging as it requires them to shift from the position of knowledge provider to facilitator of learning [28]. However, its efficiency has been demonstrated in helping students understanding practical aspects of software engineering [29, 30].

Role playing efficiency has been demonstrated for requirements engineering courses in particular [31, 32, 33] and in software engineering courses in general [34]. The efficiency of using gamification in software engineering courses has also been studied in [35, 36]. However, a main challenge in using gamification is to decide which gamification elements to use in the classroom [37], this is why the results of our questionnaire found that gamification can have a slight impact in some cases compared to other cases where it can have a significant impact improving software engineering courses.

The effectiveness of using flipped classroom, also known as inverted classroom, in software engineering courses has been studied in [38, 39, 40]. The main challenge of this approach for instructors is the increase in workload compared to the

traditional approaches [41]. While for students, challenges are experienced in the out-of-class activities [42].

Other approaches were also listed by participants such as the use of interactive system for audience response, such as Mentimeter [43], or OMBEA [44]. Audience response systems are used to allow students to “answer electronically displayed multiple choice questions using a remote control device” [45]. The use of such systems in software engineering courses has been studied in [46, 47], and is found it increases classroom dynamic and improves interaction with students [48].

Combining more than one technique shows better results however it might be time consuming and requires much more effort from the instructor. Experience also plays an important role in teaching software engineering, instructors with more than ten years of experience teaching software engineering courses are the most respondents to use more than one technique in their classroom. This might be explained by the fact that they had more time over the years to integrate new approaches to teach software engineering than the rest of respondents.

B. Proposed framework

Based on the finding of the questionnaire and the literature studied on the efficiency of each approach, we propose the framework shown in Fig. 6 which combines SE courses, teaching approaches and the rationale for its adoption. On the one hand, seven software engineering courses are included in the framework: Requirements Engineering, Software Project Management, Software Quality, Software Testing, Software Construction, Software Architecture & Design, and Software Engineering Fundamentals. On the other hand, five teaching approaches are recommended, namely: Role Playing, Gamification, Problem-based Learning, Flipped Classroom, and Automatic Response Systems. Due to its simplicity, Automatic Response Systems may be applied in every course as a tool to empower audiences by means of real-time interaction. In addition, Flipped Classroom is proposed as an approach to ease the delivering of software engineering principles. Moreover, Gamification, and Problem-based Learning are suggested to deliver a practical experience on students. Finally, Role Playing is suggested to deliver a complementary overview on a specific topic.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study presented the results of a questionnaire to investigate the challenges facing instructors of software engineering courses. 21 respondents gave the challenges they face and the teaching approaches they have tried to improve software engineering courses. The main challenge is engaging students in the classroom while the main approach used in courses is problem-based learning. Based on the questionnaire’s results, a conceptual framework is proposed to link each course with a technique that can be used to improve the learning experience of students. For future work, we intend to investigate more the applicability of the framework to make further adjustment in it.

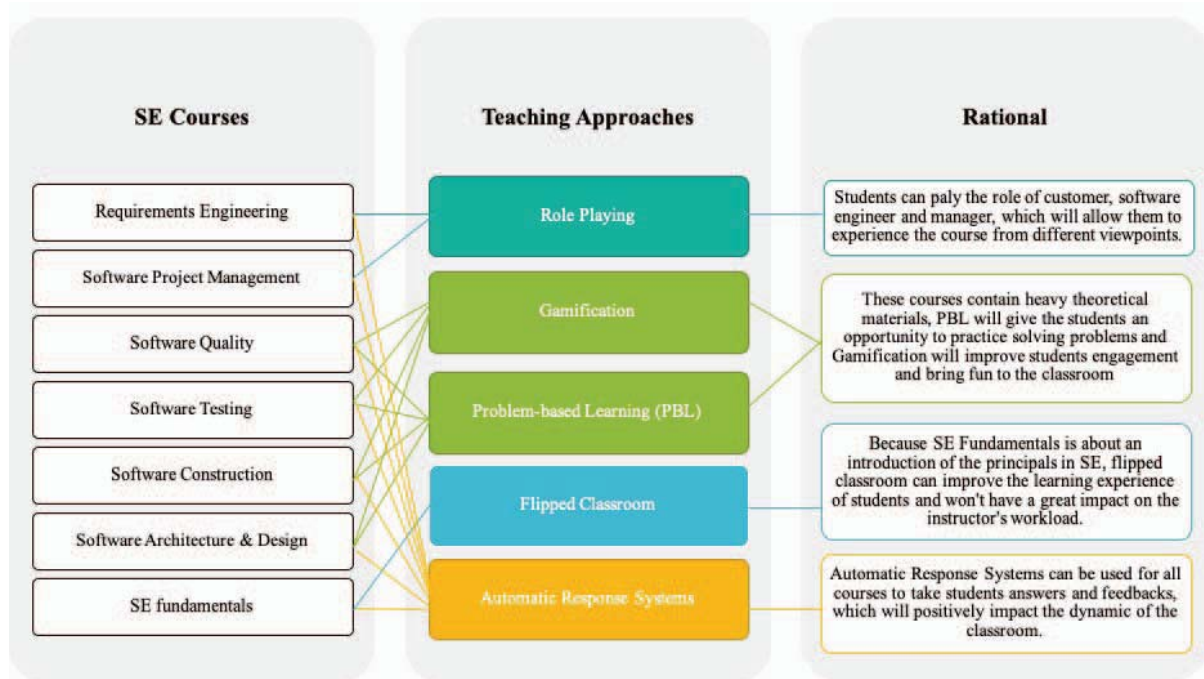


Figure 6. Framework to integrate approaches in software engineering courses. Acronym: Software Engineering (SE)

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