Can we teach social networks better? A preliminary reflection

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Abstract

Having taught methodologies for the quantitative analysis of social networks for over 15 years, I have grown progressively less satisfied with the status quo when it comes to teaching practices around this topic area. The immediate technical focus of the teaching with its associated complexities cannot be a justification for a superficial teaching approach - which is reported by students themselves as one of the main negative aspects of their experience with quantitative methodological training in the social sciences (Murton and Lehtinen, 2010). This is especially true with undergraduate students where the technical competence of the instructor and cutting-edge of the curriculum cannot be a substitute for active engagement and participation of the students. Yet practices and syllabi designed for academics pursuing their professional development are often in my experience ported as is to undergraduate classrooms. Engaging students with quantification (Williams and Sutton, 2011) remains an open challenge in the teaching of quantitative social network analysis, as it is for all quantitative teaching to students in the social sciences. This challenge is compounded when the teaching of quantitative methods aims to be combined with the teaching of concepts – relational social concepts in this case. As a first step for this research, I conducted a pedagogical reflection based on my past experiences and those of colleagues also teaching methodologies for the quantitative analysis of social networks.