

Editorial Conclusions

Alina Lidén & Timurs Umans

Conclusions

One of the main requirements we have of our students is to be reflective and critical. The same is valid for us as teachers; we need to continuously reflect upon what kind of teachers we are, how we perform in the classroom, what kind of pedagogical methods we are using, and whether these methods are adequate. In this concluding chapter, we are trying to do exactly this by reflecting upon the implementation of collaborative learning within one given course.

The aim of the course Advanced Research Methods in Business Administration was to provide students with specialised knowledge and skills in qualitative and quantitative methods, but also to prepare them for independent work on their master's thesis. On a pedagogical level, the course was informed by a collaborative learning approach. In the introductory chapter, the term 'collaborative learning' was referred to as a pedagogical method where students work together as a collective to achieve common goals. Furthermore, it builds on the premise of taking responsibility for each other's learning as well as one's own.

Three premises are important to keep in mind when considering the collaborative learning adopted within this specific course. First, it was a course on a master's level, implying that students already had basic knowledge and experience in the field. Secondly, the students enrolled in the course were international students. Thirdly, the aim was to prepare the students for the upcoming work on the master's thesis.

The students performed all examinations in groups of two; in the second and third modules, they worked on the same assignment, a collaborative research project with the topic “What makes foreign students happy?” The students worked on the reports in groups of two, but the preparation work (of developing the analytical model, the questions for the interviews, and the focus groups, the protocol for the observation, and the survey) was collectively performed. Students and teachers worked together, all participants being active elements in the collective learning process. Before the workshops the students were asked to prepare their own analytical models with the triggers of happiness that would be the basis of their reports in order to make sure their analytical model and the data collection instrument were aligned. The students were made aware of the need to engage in a collective effort to produce the instruments of data collection, and this played an important role in triggering collective learning mechanisms.

Another component of the course was a series of lectures on different research methods. The different lecturers presented and discussed their own work with the aim of encouraging students to participate as a critical part in the process of knowledge creation and dissemination. As a method to orchestrate a collaborative learning situation, the lecturers were asked to base their lectures on articles they had written themselves, and students were invited to problematise and ask questions about these. Departing from one’s own experience and work makes it possible for all participants to contribute their own thoughts and knowledge.

The versatility and challenges of collaborative learning are becoming even more obvious within an international context. The students in our specific course were, as mentioned, interna-

tional students from different countries. The students were rather homogeneous in their age and academic tenure distribution. However, coming from different educational systems implies having different experiences and perceptions regarding the nature of a learning situation in the classroom. For a situation to be collaborative learning, requirements are that students “are more or less at the same level, can perform the same actions, have a common goal and work together” (Dillenbourg 1999: 7). This is connected to what was previously been mentioned, i.e. collaborative learning is not just “duo-work”, but occurs as a result of performing an activity together, which triggers a learning mechanism. Performing an activity together implies a degree of symmetry in the interaction. The type of symmetry relevant in our case was the extent to which participants shared the same understanding of what a learning situation is.

To conclude, it is widely agreed that there is a need to find new ways of teaching and new ways of enhancing learning. Simply put, collaborative learning is a shared knowledge construction. It is not enough that participants share knowledge together (Mercer 2010) but “knowledge construction needs to be jointly built on others’ ideas and thought” (Mercer 2010). Learning within a framework of collaborative learning pedagogy does not occur because participants are working in groups of two, for example, but is a result of performing an activity together, which triggers a learning mechanism.

Foreign students’ happiness

During the course, the students were assigned to write two reports, one qualitative and one quantitative. The topic of these two reports was “What makes foreign students happy”, chosen by the course’s two teachers beforehand. We found it important to formulate a topic that students would find interest-

ing and easy to understand. Considering the international character of the students, but also their different educational backgrounds, the topic was deemed to be relevant.

Indeed, the students found the topic intriguing, and a collaborative learning situation quickly arose and thoughts and experiences were shared. A literature survey was performed to gain knowledge on the topic and identify triggers of happiness. It was interesting how despite working on the same topic and to large degree referring to the same literature, the students were able to develop rather different analytical models and identify a wide range of triggers.

The qualitative research of the topic was performed through three different methods; interviews, focus groups, and observations. Some students carried out interviews, while others performed focus groups and other observations. The data collected was to be analysed by all students for the reports they had to write. This presented challenges for several students that found it difficult to analyse data they had not collected themselves.

Departing from slightly different analytical models, the studies presented here identified a variety of triggers for foreign students' happiness. Personality, academic expectations, the physical environment, economic situation, opportunity to meet others and cultural diversity were the main triggers identified. The studies were unanimous in pinpointing the complexity of the phenomenon of happiness, and in answering the questions "What makes foreign students' happy" one rather needs to consider the interconnectedness of the different triggers.

What did we learn?

Overall it was a challenging and demanding course that was very satisfactory to be part of. It was only the first attempt to implement collaborative learning in one given course; our previous experiences have been related to collaborative learning-related modules within a larger course. Below are some of the aspects we feel one needs to consider when embarking on a collaborative learning-inspired course.

- Combining collaborative learning with a problem-based learning approach is the way forward given that overcoming realistic challenges and working towards joint solutions creates a positive learning and emotional environment in the classroom.
- Making students aware of the flexible and moving structure of a collaborative course is of great importance. Given that learning becomes a joint effort, the students need to be made aware of the uncertainties that they might meet along the way.
- Creating supporting structures, for example arranging for data availability is an important stimulus for increasing students' concentration on achieving the learning outcomes of the course.
- Creating an assignment to which students can relate and concerning which they might have experience is an important catalyst of learning that makes students more interested, and helps them feel more like an experts in the subject area.
- Creating a collaborative learning environment requires well-functioning collaboration in the teachers' team, so alignment of the goals and approaches to learning and

implementation is a key to a successful course. Brainstorming sessions, discussions prior and after the class, reflecting together and changing the course of action when needed are vital.

- Addressing diversity in the classroom and embracing the differences and discussing how these differences might relate to the success or failure of collaborative efforts as well as how these differences can be managed is of great importance. Being open and impartial towards these differences is an important academic endeavour to pursue and is of value, especially in a team-based collaborative course like the one we have just described.

We would like to finish this volume by quoting James D. Watson—the Nobel prize winner in medicine who with two of his colleagues co-discovered the structure of DNA, who said: “Nothing new that is really interesting comes without collaboration”, which is the guiding thought behind this and future courses we are planning to co-create.

Finally we would like to express our gratitude to all the students who participated in this course. It was a great group to collaborate with and we hope this collaborative experience and the knowledge acquired will be of value in the bright life they have in front of them.

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