

Collaborative Learning and Foreign Students Happiness: Implementation and Reflections

Editorial

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Introduction

The aim of the special edition of *Pedagogic Debate* is twofold. On the one hand it reports an outcome of a collaborative learning (cf. Dillenbourg, 2002)-inspired course entitled ‘Advanced Research Methods in Business Administration’, and reflects on the use of the collaborative learning approach in one given course. On the other hand, this edition is about students’ happiness; something that for a long time has been acknowledged to be tightly interrelated with students’ learning and learning-related outcomes (Totten et al., 1991).

This introductory chapter is thus divided into two separate sections, one entitled Collaborative learning-inspired course and the other called Student Happiness. The former section introduces the concept of collaborative learning, followed by a description of the course with intertwined pedagogic reasoning, and presents students’ experiences of the course. The latter section presents the results of the research papers produced by the students during the course, focusing on the topic of their investigation – student happiness – and presenting the enablers and disablers of foreign students’ happiness in the context of higher education.

The conclusion chapter presents Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) as experienced by the two instructors on this course and provides some reflections on the future and potential development of a collaborative learning approach in one given course and in the education programme in general.

Introducing collaborative learning

The term 'collaborative learning' refers to the method of instruction where students work together in small groups and as a collective to achieve common goals. It also builds on the premise of taking responsibility for each other's learning as well as one's own, and it is here that the success of one student helps other students to succeed.

Collaborative learning is deemed to be effective in creating an active exchange of ideas among participants, and in promoting critical thinking. That type of learning provides students with an opportunity to engage in discussions and take responsibility for their own learning, which ultimately results in the development of critical thinking (Totten et al., 1991)

According to Teasley and Roschelle (1993), in order for individuals to construct shared meaning in model-building activities they need to be put into situations where they must make conscious and continuous efforts to solve problems together. Putting individuals into groups and asking them to collaborate does not necessarily lead to collaborative learning efforts or outcomes. The important precondition for the collaborative learning to work is an active communication and interactions directed towards establishment of common focus and goals (Beers et al., 2006). Furthermore, the task at hand should be perceived to be of a complex nature (Minneke et al., 2007) so that learners realise that collaborative efforts would lead to

higher effectiveness and efficiency compared to individual efforts (Kirschner et al., 2009).

Research findings are rather inconclusive as to whether collaborative learning is of benefit to learners or not. While the positive voices are more numerous, there are a number of studies suggesting some difficulties, and that certain conditions should be met for the collaborative learning to provide benefits to learners. The positive effects of collaborative learning are suggested to be:

- Learners actively engage in the learning process (Morgan et al., 2000)
- Fostering of higher-order skill (Sloffer et al., 1999)
- Increased involvement in self-directed learning and reflexivity, and engagement in supporting activities (Van Boxtel et al., 2000)

The potential drawbacks are:

- Ineffective information use (Tindale, 1993)
- Ineffectiveness of resource allocation due to group dynamics difficulties (Smith et al., 1998)
- Production blocking (Diehl and Stroebe, 1987)
- Social loafing (Latané et al., 1979)

Yet research suggests that in highly structured and/or highly scripted environments (Dillenbourg, 2002) one can expect the emergence of more positive rather than negative outcomes.

Thus, the design of the learning environments, clarity of aims and provision of learner-available tools for solving the assignment are of paramount importance for learning outcomes (cf. De Westelinck et al. 2005; Mäkitalo et al. 2005)

What follows describes a course structure that was inspired by the collaborative learning approach. It describes the way the course was built and the ideas behind its structure and execution. The text below tries to present the course in a neutral manner, while a more critical approach to the course structures and approach adopted will be presented in the final chapter of this volume.

Collaborative learning-inspired course

Course details

The aim of the course entitled Advanced Research Methods in Business Administration (7,5 ECTS credits) was to enable students to develop the specialised knowledge and skills required for executing a second-cycle research study in business administration. The course further aimed at preparing the students for independent work on their master's thesis by expanding on the matter of methodological design. The course included the following aspects: theory of science; advanced research study design; advanced qualitative and quantitative research methods; advanced qualitative and quantitative data analysis; research report writing and presentation techniques; dissemination of research results in society; critical review of research reports; research ethics.

The course was run by two teachers, one with expertise in qualitative and one with expertise in quantitative methodology. The class was composed of 23 master's students almost equally divided by gender and very diverse in terms of nationality. The students were fairly homogeneous in the age and academic tenure distribution.

The course was divided into three modules which were interconnected with each other. There was a specific progression

where the results of the module assignments were related to the work students had to perform in the following module. Each module was examined through a separate assessment. During all of the modules the students worked on a collaborative research project that was trying to answer the question “What makes foreign students happy”. Collaboration was encouraged throughout the course by the dyadic structure of the learners’ teams as well as joint collaborative sessions where all team members as well as the teachers of the course formed large collaborative teams developing research instruments and discussing the way forward in the development of the papers. Courses three modules are described below

Module 1: Theory of Science

The module consisted of two sub-modules. Sub-module 1 contained lectures related to the theory of science and had a seminar where students in a round table discussion and, through presentations, discussed and made sense of the different articles related to different scientific paradigms. It was during this assignment that the students were put into situations of joint sense-making and knowledge creation that characterise collaborative learning. It was deemed especially appropriate for the Theory of Science module, given the complexity of the articles explored by the students, and thus a collaborative effort was thought to be the way forward for advancing students’ learning. Students were graded on the Pass and No-Pass basis on their participation in this exercise (Assessment 1). Sub-module 2 contained a lecture on Problematisation/Theoretical Framework as well as a lecture on Problematisation/Theoretical Framework for the Project performed within the course. Here the emphasis was put on joint and collaborative problematisation of the project’s main theme, which was encouraged through sharing of experiences of being a student and/or being

a foreign exchange student. Here and throughout the course it was important to be able to relate to the topic of the research project, which is why student happiness was chosen as a theme. Based on collaborative lectures and discussion during the class the students were asked to write a short introduction to their project work in groups of two, which was commented upon by one of the course teachers and feedback was sent back in written form.

Module 2: Advanced Qualitative Methods

The module consisted of eight interactive lectures lasting for two hours each, given by qualitative researchers in the field who presented and discussed their work with the students, with a specific emphasis on practical applications of qualitative methodology. During the lectures, students were encouraged to participate as a critical part of the process of knowledge creation and dissemination. To facilitate a collaborative approach 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. Based on the inspiration from these articles a collaborative workshop was organised where learners and lecturers as a team developed an interview guide, an observations protocol and a focus group interview guide. Prior to the workshop, students in groups of two were asked to develop a research model based on prior literature that they would need to explore. The entire day was assigned to this collaborative exercise, where groups' frameworks were first amalgamated into one large framework and then course participants in different constellations developed data collection tools that were then discussed in larger groups and agreed upon. After the workshops, students in groups of two went to collect the data which had been transcribed and put in a joint

course folder. Thus the collective data laid the basis for students' analysis and subsequent conclusions. This particular module for the collaborative approach manifested itself through formation of community of practice where both teacher and students act as learners and have the common goal of producing joint knowledge. Feeling joint responsibility and making a joint effort to achieve the goal is something that was shown to unite the class, and provided a productive and open climate of a collaborative nature. The final outcome of the research paper, produced during the module, was presented during the seminar and was based on the written submission. Here the students, who had identified different themes and had developed new models, learned that the interpretative type of research has no rights or wrongs but has a multidimensional and open-ended dimension to it. Both the presentations and the paper (Assessment 2) were discussed jointly by the class and graded and commented upon by the teachers some weeks later.

Module 3: Advanced Quantitative Methods

The module consisted of one lecture introducing quantitative methodology as well as five practice workshops and consultations. In this module, and based on the finding of their paper in Module 2, students jointly were supposed to find the most important trigger of foreign students' happiness, which was to be operationalised for the purpose of quantitative investigation. The collaborative effort was intensified and all the lectures and seminars were collaborative and reciprocal. Yet again, working with each other we developed a large framework based on students' findings from the qualitative paper. We also tried to explore what the concepts that emerged previously might mean in terms of variables and how these could be measured. Two workshops were arranged to jointly decide the most important

triggers of students' happiness as well as their potential operationalisation. After we, as a group, agreed on the concepts to explore in survey form, a questionnaire was developed and sent to students with experience of a student exchange period. As in the previous module all data was made available to the entire class, yet here each of the student groups had their own "favourite" trigger to explore. Two other workshops were held where the actual data coding, data analysis and interpretations were performed. We worked together as a group, exploring the data and helping each other with the analysis. Given the differences in knowledge of the quantitative method among the learners there was a collaborative effort to help each other, which yet again stimulated learning of the students and the learners. As in Module 2 the outcome of the module was reported in the form of an article-like report and presentation which was collaboratively assessed, after which the teachers of the course provided feedback and the grading.

Students' impressions

At the beginning of the course the students were informed that the course was built on the idea of collaborative learning, and the basic premises of the idea were described with a specific stress on forming a community of practice and on the importance of the joint effort in gaining knowledge. During the course evaluation, many students suggested this was the main strength of the course. Below are some extracts from students' evaluations.

The fact that we were working together throughout the course was also a positive way of learning; you get ideas, guidelines etc. from others' perspectives which I thought was a strength and a positive attribute. (Learner 1)

The strength of this course lies in the collaborative and interactive nature of the lectures and seminars. Learning by doing is a great way to quickly understand complex ideas and processes. (Learner 2)

The collaborative and interactive learning environment in the classroom during the workshops contributes to my learning. (Learner 3)

The majority of the course participants were satisfied with the course and its approach, and many suggested that that way of learning made them happy. The students identified teachers' engagement, collaborative learning, class climate and friendly peers as important contributors to their happiness and satisfaction. So, what follows below picks up on this happiness aspect and presents the collaborative research project that the class was working on, and deals with what makes foreign students happy.

Students' Happiness

What makes students happy is a popular subject in the field of education and elsewhere. The seminal work of Watson (1930) in explaining why happiness is an interesting research topic to pursue states that "No human quest may claim a larger following than that for happiness and satisfaction in life" (p.79). Understanding student happiness in higher education is suggested to be of importance because happiness and satisfaction have been shown to be related to students' receptiveness to learning and as a consequence, to improved learning outcomes (e.g. Wiers-Jenssen, 2002). Lately, with the increasing internationalisation of higher education, the happiness of foreign exchange students or foreign students in general has been put into focus (e.g. Glaum and Rinker, 2002), motivated by the fact

that the increasing cultural diversity of the student body might have a profound influence on what makes students happy and how that in turn relates to their learning and learning outcomes.

Given the multicultural class in the course we thought that foreign students' happiness would be an engaging and complex topic for the class to explore. Thus it became a topic for investigation. Below, there are four qualitative and four quantitative studies that were undertaken by the students within the course and that highlight foreign students' happiness as an important aspect to consider in the context of higher education.

The qualitative studies

Based on relevant literature the students were required to problematise on the concept of happiness and in particular on happiness related to foreign students. The aim of this exercise was to identify triggers of happiness and present these triggers in an analytical model. Different triggers were identified, such as cultural aspects, academic expectations, leisure activities, economic aspects, and environmental aspects. The models also took into consideration aspects related to personality (i.e. whether one was a pessimistic or an optimistic person) and time aspects (i.e. time spent abroad for studies). With the models as a starting point, the protocols for the interviews, observations and focus groups were jointly developed by students and teaching staff.

One of the main conclusions put forward by the studies was that happiness is a rather complex phenomenon and in order to be able to give a comprehensive answer to the research question at hand one rather needs to consider how the triggers are interconnected.

The opportunity to meet people with different cultural backgrounds has been identified as an important trigger. At the same time, the same trigger was also shown to be a trigger of unhappiness when cultural diversity was too great. Furthermore, students also said that they tended to socialise more with students with a similar cultural background and especially with students sharing the same language.

The academic environment and quality were jointly identified as a significant trigger for students' happiness. Good quality of the educational programs, the academic backgrounds of the peer students and other academic facilities (i.e. study rooms, library etc.) have an important effect on how students evaluate their experience as foreign students.

There is an evident interconnection between personal growth, academic satisfaction and cultural diversity triggers. The opportunity to interact with people from different cultures and with different backgrounds, as well as the opportunity to study in a different academic environment are perceived to have a positive impact on personal development and hence trigger happiness.

The studies have further identified the environmental aspects as having a significant impact on the foreign students' happiness. The environment trigger includes many factors, but a majority of the studies identified the housing situation (dormitory), climate and transportation as some of the main factors that have a significant impact on happiness. The characteristics of the city were also named as important.

As mentioned, the four studies started with an initial model of happiness of foreign students. The findings resulted in an alteration of the initial models. An interesting aspect that could be

mentioned is related to the importance of personal characteristics. In one of the studies, personal characteristics were part of the initial model and it was concluded that the empirical findings did not support this variable. Nevertheless, another study found it necessary to include personal characteristics in the modified model based on the findings from the empirical research.

The quantitative studies

The quantitative studies took the results of the qualitative investigation as a point of departure. In summary, all four studies are consistent in their findings concerning foreign students' happiness. The studies show that the *Personal growth* orientation of the foreign students is one of the strongest triggers of students' feeling of happiness. The studies further indicate that *Academic quality* represents an important aspect of students' life and has a positive influence on their happiness. Finally, the studies indicate the *Relationship quality* with peers is yet another important trigger. Studies further indicate that *Cultural intelligence*, *University facilities* and *Social activities* might not be as important in creating students' happiness as the aforementioned aspects.

The eight selected papers, four of which performed qualitative investigation of foreign students' happiness and four of which performed quantitative investigation on the same topic, are presented below.

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