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Guided peer learning in diverse student groups (0187)

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Research Domain: Student Experience

Purpose of presentation:
Collaborative learning in diverse student groups may offer benefits, but certainly also challenges. The purpose of this presentation is (i) to report briefly on a project where Guided Peer Learning (GPL) was introduced in an English Medium Instruction (EMI) course; and (ii) discuss how mandatory collaborative learning activities may both improve student learning and help eliminate some of the tensions that are often observed in diverse student groups.

Background:
In 2012 'Business Models', a mandatory EMI course for all accounting students at master level (MSc in Business), was transformed from classical lectures into an active learning concept (collaborative learning). It is a 5 ECTS credit course, accepting both home (Danish) and international students.

Over the years, the lecturers responsible for the course had realized that, generally speaking, the students did not adopt a deep learning approach under the traditional auspices: At the final examination they mostly reproduced what the professors had covered in the lectures, and they did not show real understanding of the subject. In brief, the lecturers wanted the students to move further up in the SOLO-taxonomy than did previous cohorts: from the multi-structural to the relational and the abstract levels. (Biggs and Tang 2011). An important part of this was the development of key competencies or soft skills: self-competencies (e.g. demonstrating responsibility, accuracy or commitment), social competencies (e.g. communicating effectively and maintaining team relationships), systematic competencies (e.g. skills in analytics and execution) and domain-related competencies (generic skills like English proficiency or software applications) (Schaeper 2009; Solbrekke and Englund 2011; Barrie 2007).

Guided Peer Learning requires students to teach one another and collaborate in and across groups with the lecturer as facilitator and coach. In this course, the number of international studies varies quite a lot from one year to the next, but the general picture is that the home (Danish) students by far outnumber the international students. However, in order to have an element of diversity in the peer group, there was ideally at least one international student in each of them, and no group consisted of international students only. The groups were also gender balanced.

Aim of project:
The primary aim of the research project, conducted at the end of the course, was to determine whether the aim of moving the students to higher levels of the SOLO-taxonomy was achieved. At the same time, the researchers looked for indications as to whether or not the group formation with diverse groups seemed to have influenced the learning outcomes of the students.

Methods:

At the end of the course, a questionnaire with 7 questions on 5-point-Likert scales (1 = completely disagree; 5 = completely agree) was sent out to the students, and around 50 % of 64 students answered. The questionnaires were followed by 5 student interviews. The cohort consisted of 64 students; 26 % of these were internationals students, 31 % females, and 69 % males.

Findings:

The format developed proved efficient. On the whole, the respondents stated that their learning outcomes were considerably improved by the teaching format developed both in the case of the subject *per se* and in the case of soft skills. Compared to the course evaluations from the 2011 cohort, the student satisfaction of the 2012 cohort had increased remarkably. However, many students stated that they had had to spend too much more time on the course than the average 150 working hours in a 5 ECTS credit course. Both the time spent on preparation, the group discussions as such, and the post-processing required much more time than does a traditional teaching format. In spite of this almost half of the respondents expressed a wish for more or much more GPL; a third, on the other hand, preferred less or much less GPL. There were no indications that the group composition had created tensions.

Discussion:

While this is obviously a small-scale study, there are some important directions for further research. First of all, the general implications of GPL should be researched in a longitudinal study: Do the students in fact reach a higher level in the taxonomy when this format is implied? Secondly, there is obviously a time factor that needs to be taken into consideration, especially if more courses are changed from a traditional lecture to an active collaborative learning format. In very concrete terms, lecturers responsible need to address the students' conspicuous 'debit-credit' approach to their efforts and also see to which extent correlation can be found between student approaches and student achievement. Do the students who actually accept that collaborative learning takes more time, in fact also learn more?

Thirdly the diversity factor should be further researched on two dimensions: (i) The fact that there were no indications of tensions within the groups may or may not be a coincidence. It would be tempting to conclude that students accept the benefits as well as the challenges of collaborative formats if they are placed in peer groups characterised by diversity when they are assigned mandatory tasks. However, we need a more large-scale study in order for us to determine whether this is in fact so. (ii) In business studies, for instance, it is often claimed that students should collaborate in diverse groups because this will prepare them for the realities of the world of work. The question is whether the students appreciate this as a benefit in peer groups while still at university, and more research is needed in order to determine that.

Literature:

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