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Inviting the voices of international students to create better educational environments (0188)

Programme number: K10.3
Research Domain: Student Experience

Aim of the Presentation

The aim of this presentation is to discuss some methodological perspectives of three small-scale projects to enhance the study environment at Aarhus University in which qualitative methods were used to explore the student experience of 'Internationalisation at Home' at Aarhus University.

Background

In a review of "the literature on international students over the past two decades", Ryan (2011) identifies three phases within this research domain (p. 637 ff.):

1) In the 1990s, there was a micro level focus on international students as lacking in academic skills

2) From around 2000 and up until recently, there has been a meso level focus on lecturers and on their teaching as lacking

3) In the current phase, there is a macro level focus on the "'internationalisation of the curriculum' and … the broader 'internationalisation' of higher education" (ibid. p. 639)

When applying this perspective on our projects and on our own practice as agents in the internationalisation efforts of our university, it becomes clear that we still operate at least as much on the micro and meso levels as we do on the macro level. We still have a tendency to try to fix the students, fix the lectures, and fix the teaching.

Aim and Methods of the Projects

A survey of the study environment among students at Aarhus University in 2011 showed that international students were significantly less satisfied than Danish students (Aarhus University, 2011). In response to the survey three research and development projects were initiated in winter 2011, aiming at developing the study environment at Faculty of Arts, Aarhus University. The three projects included:

- Two workshops with 28 international full degree students about study and exams regulations, standards for academic papers, and the handling of sources. Among other activities, the workshop participants were invited to write Post-it notes with ideas on how Aarhus University may improve study conditions for international students.

- Four focus group interviews with 18 international full degree students about their experiences, needs, and wishes related to the teaching of academic skills. During the interviews, participants

tested and produced content for the Study Metro http://studiemetro.au.dk/en and its related Facebook-site: https://www.facebook.com/StudyMetro.

- ♠ Three focus group interviews with 14 international and Danish Master's degree students about the following topics: Study start, study environment, housing, practical matters, mentors, and working in study groups.

The three projects generated learning at a number of levels. In this context we shall focus mainly on some broader methodological perspectives.

Findings and experiences
In our analysis we focused specifically on the challenges faced by international students. We found their challenges to be mainly related to social interaction and integration such as getting into a study group and getting to know home students. This seems to be an ongoing challenge for internationalisation in higher education (Morita, 2012; Henderson, 2009; Dunne 2009; Campbell 2012; Leask, 2009).

Another general finding of the three projects was that on the whole international students share many of the same challenges as home students, e.g. with regard to acquiring academic skills, understanding implicit academic genre expectations, and working together in study groups. These findings are also in line with existing research, as summed up by Carroll and Ryan (2005). Applying the metaphor of 'Canaries in the coalmine' they indicate that the difficulties faced by international students "point out aspects of our teaching that all students will probably experience" (p. 9). This perspective seems helpful for all parties. Our three projects made us realize that we have a lot to learn from international students, not least about "the implied student" (Ulriksen, 2009), i.e. the various implicit and tacit assumptions about and expectations to our students held by university staff; assumptions that are implicit in our university system as such, and that students have to learn to understand and deal with in order to succeed.

In short, we realized that conversations with international students could help us explicate our expectations to our students in general and thus facilitate better learning opportunities for everybody in our student population, whose diversity is increasing all the time. This created a shift for us, a repositioning (Davies and Harré, 1990) of our international students from an object position (*they are lacking – we must change them*) into a subject position (*they see aspects of our system that we are blind to – they can educate us*).

Discussion - what could be the next steps from deficiency to diversity?
Ryan (2011) argues that "a new approach is needed that positions international students not as 'problems' to be solved but as assets' to internationalisation and the generation of new knowledge and new ways of working in the academy" (p. 631).

In our three projects, we found that the research and development methods applied were useful in positioning the participants as change agents. The application of simple participatory and dialogical research methods, where researchers and participants were positioned in Subject – Subject relations (McNamee and Hosking, 2012), allowed new co-ordinated and co-created understandings to emerge of the

challenges that we all face, international and home students, and teachers and administrators alike, of the ever increasing diversity of the internationalised context of higher education.

Could projects like these – small simple inquiries where everybody is invited to take a curious learning position – be micro level steps on the way towards creating macro level change – i.e. what Ryan (2011) refers to as "broader and more inclusive 'communities of practice'"? (p. 639). And how do we ensure that changes take place in order to create "transcultural" teaching and learning contexts where diversity is an asset rather than a problem – to the benefit of everybody involved?

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