

Study transparency through meta-communication (0141)

Hanne Thingholm

Aarhus University, Center for Teaching Development and Digital Media, Denmark

The contribution of this paper is the linking of student-life and world-life and the term *study transparency* which is developed based on a quantitative survey called *Navigating in Higher Education* (NiHE) conducted at Aarhus University, Denmark (Thingholm, Reimer, Keiding, Due & Smith, 2016). The purpose of NiHE is to gain insight into the relation of teaching and learning and generate data for teaching development. In line with the purpose, the design of NiHE is inspired by the didactical triangle: content – teacher – learner (Jank & Meyer, 2006, s.57). The survey is a two-part questionnaire about university teaching trying to identify similarities and differences between the perspective of the teachers and the perspective of the students concerning selected elements of higher education, among others: preparation, examination, assignments, learning goals etc. Nine different studies from the faculties of Arts, Health and Science and Technology are included in the survey and 1410 BA students and 283 teachers have participated. Some of the findings in the survey reveal disagreements, or in line with the 'dark side' of higher education (Bengtzen & Barnett, 2016), a 'foggy' dimension in the relation of teaching and learning. To illustrate this three findings are extracted from the results:

1. Defining clear learning goals:

In average 89% of the teachers agree that they clearly define learning goals.

In average 59% of the students agree that most teachers clearly define learning goals.

2. Handing in thoroughly worked through assignments:

In average 46% of the teachers agree that the students hand in thoroughly worked through assignments.

In average 83% of the students agree that they hand in thoroughly worked through assignments.

3. Being well prepared for class:

In average 43% of the teachers agree that the students are well prepared for class.

In average 72% of the students agree that they are well prepared for class.

These findings point to a need of creating more common understanding of; how to understand learning goals, when an assignment is well worked through and what is actually meant by being well prepared for class. When reflecting on findings like these, that are revealing a 'foggy' dimension or different disagreements or discrepancies, a need for creating transparency or clarifying the relation between teaching and learning – not entirely but as much as possible – becomes essential. But how can we understand the concepts of teaching and learning and how are they related or connected?

In the perspective of system theory teaching and learning are strongly connected and teaching is regarded as the means for learning which is regarded as the goal. But even though the concepts are strongly related they are very indifferent to one another. Teaching is regarded as a social and communicative interaction involving teacher and students – a social system. Learning is regarded as a personal and individual ongoing process in the mind of each student – a psychological system (Luhmann, 2006). Each student constructs his or her meaning and understanding but is obviously affected by the social and communicative interaction. It is not possible to transfer knowledge and understanding from a social interaction into the mind of the students, knowledge and understanding is constructed when meaning is invented – not found.

Being a personal and psychological process, learning and the way students navigate in higher education is part of – not extracted from – their life-world in general which means that student-life is affected by different aspects not directly related to teaching: family and friends, hobbies and holidays, love and luck, new plans and perspectives etc. A consequence of this is that student-life can be described as being complex, chaotic and vulnerable (Batchelor, 2006) just like modern life in general. The way students learn and navigate in higher education is influenced by their life-world, and therefore students navigate in many different ways; some are serious and hard-working, others want to have fun and explore their way through higher education, some are social and prefer collaboration and others are lonely riders not expressing themselves unless they have to. Some students easily crack the academic code, others are having a hard time cracking the code which they are unfamiliar with, since they have no experience of the academic world before entering the university. For all students, but especially

for those having a hard time cracking the academic code, because their world-life affects their student-life in a way less fruitful for higher education, study transparency becomes essential.

Teaching and learning are related or combined in the *studying* of the subject concerned. The teacher cannot engage directly with the learning process of the students or make the learning process transparent in order to qualify it. But the teacher can engage in the way students *study* or navigate in higher education and the teacher can be *explicit* on ways to analyze a text, approaches for preparing for next week, methods for writing an academic assignment and so on. Such a meta-perspective can be implemented in several ways; as clear instructions about metacognitive learning strategies or integrated more generally in the existing classroom culture (Tanner, 2012). It is not enough for the teacher to lecture or 'deliver the content', students must be taught to learn how to learn, which also requires that they are conscious of how their life-world affects their student-life. The students need to be aware of this in order to regulate their learning strategies. Being explicit on this and exploring new ways of studying is a common task for the teachers and the students. To sum up; meta-communication, or classroom communication about classroom communication, is described as a strategy in order to create study transparency and thereby reduce disagreements and discrepancies in the relation of teaching and learning and to understand and regulate the relation of student-life and life-world in general.

References

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