

Co-creating cross-border learning experiences

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Abstract

In today's western society, participation and co-creation are central aspects of our everyday lives. The teaching-learning experience however, may not have developed along the same lines. In a multicultural classroom there are also issues arising from the difference in cultural background as well as teaching-learning traditions. Thus, in a cross-border learning context, it would be particularly important to pay attention to the aspects that promotes co-creation. The current study discusses the possibilities and the advantages of co-creation within a cross-border teaching-learning experience and raises awareness to this area of expertise.

Introduction

The teaching-learning relationship has been a topic of great interest for many lecturers within higher education. Lectures belong to an oral tradition of learning, where knowledge has been passed on by word-of-mouth, for several decades. In later years the introduction of "active learning" methods have become more popular. Yet, many lecturers continue to do lectures in a traditional way (Amundsen, Damen, Haakstad, & Karlsen, 2017), concentrating on oral presentations, given through ordinary 45-minutes lectures. In this article, we will place emphasis on "active learning" processes and we will argue for a joint co-creation (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) of the learning experience in international classes, within a cross-border context. The discussion is based on a cross-cultural classroom environment, where a flexible approach is particularly relevant, both as part of a learning strategy and as part of creating interaction.

Learning can be defined as a relatively enduring change in experience and behavior, as a result of former experience (Store Norske leksikon, 2015). A broad categorization of learning is deep learning and surface learning (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983). The way one teach will affect the learning outcome through the teaching-learning experience that takes place, either deep-learning or surface learning is encouraged. In a cross border context, where different cultures meet in the same teaching-learning environment, but with very different expectations of how teaching and learning should come about, it might be especially important to challenge traditional preconceived notions of how knowledge builds and to keep a good learning experience at heart.

The teaching-learning relationship

How can a good learning experience be encouraged through lectures? “The preferred way of giving lectures in higher education has been and still is – ordinary lectures” (Raaheim, 2011, p. 46). The traditional lecture is often seen as an inactive and passive way of learning (Exley & Dennick, 2009), where the teacher instructs the students, often through an oral presentation. This instructive and imparted way of monologic teaching can be understood as a “delivering metaphor” where the focus is on how one most effectively can disseminate knowledge from teacher to student (Pettersen, 2005). In consequence teaching is perceived as a quiet “simple affair”, where the main idea refers to an “I know – you don’t know – I’ll tell you”-style, equal to a more rhetoric way of teaching (Pettersen, 2005, p. 61).

In recent years, the attention towards “active learning” has increased (Amundsen et al., 2017). However, new learning methods represents challenges to the traditional teacher (Exley & Dennick, 2009). Meaning that the teacher must be competent within a range of different methods. With this knowledge, many teachers prefer to hold on to a more traditional way of lecturing, where the teacher is on the “active side”, while the students engage in listening (Raaheim, 2011). And with students’ lack of interest in note-taking or preparation beforehand, the results of teaching might not necessarily turn out to be very uplifting (Raaheim, 2011). Although, nothing is wrong with traditional teaching methods’ contribution to learning, Raaheim underlines, the problem is certainly not all the *good* lectures, but all the *bad*. So how does one create a good learning experience?

Wittek (2006) claims that the answer to what gives optimal learning, always depend on what kind of views and understandings one put forward. She says, with reference to Bruner (1997),

that especially four ways of understanding becomes apparent through our western culture of education. These sketches out as four models, each with weight on different teaching goals, including: learning as an imitation, learning as a delivery tradition, learning as activity and self-regulation, and learning as participation in an interpreted community (or fellowship). The two former models places the *teacher* in center of the lectures, while the two latter places the *student* in the «driver's seat». Undoubtedly, the latter models are most relevant when it comes to “active learning”. The “learning as activity and self-regulation” has an objective to create good learning experiences in a manner where the teacher tries to understand the students way of thinking, so that the lectures will be adapted to the students own level. Whilst the model “learning as participation in an interpreted fellowship” build on the idea that “knowledge is human constructions of reality” (Wittek, 2006, p. 28), and that learning can be seen as a conceptual understanding, evolving when arguing for or against, or when confronting ideas with other ideas, or when applying knowledge in the real world.

It is not necessarily so that one teacher should limit her- or himself to one of the four models. On the contrary, it might be more common that teachers use several teaching methods in their lectures. As Wittek (2006) underlines, it is the way we treat the subject matter and the roles we give students that are essential, not operating with a definite opinion on “what fits within a model”. A focus on active learning methods pave way for a better understanding of the learning experience that education is based on. Active learning methods includes activities such as problem solving, discussion, questioning, and other forms of interactive processes (Exley & Dennick, 2009). A teacher can contribute to the students' learning “by challenging, stimulating, involving, adapting, and giving feedback” (Raaheim, 201, p. 56). Raaheim claims that the mind-set that emphasize students' ability to learn more when listening to the teacher should be replaced with the idea that everyone can contribute. A teacher can prepare for learning, but cannot decide learning. Stimulating students' participation through inviting to dialogue and interaction will consequently be an important part of planning a good learning experience.

Co-creating active learning experiences with international students

The content of a lecture is underpinned by a context. This context is connected to different traditions, and can be seen as part of a foundation within which each teacher identify

themselves. Exley and Dennick (2009) ask how one can change a traditional passive situation in a classroom to a more active arena where students can be involved, and at the same time learn more. “The teacher is not just ‘the sage on the stage’ but must also become ‘the guide by the side’” (Exley & Dennick, 2009, p. 2). Given a situation where we have several nationalities in one classroom, each student with different background, various culture and language, it is important to create an arena for interaction. Acting as a “guide by the side” is a role a teacher should aim for, allowing students to be a part of – and to co-construct their own learning experiences so to say. By organizing lectures in a manner where students can be socialized, engaged and involved, the teacher can function as a participant alongside with the students allowing co-creation experiences to evolve. Through teaching within smaller groups, opening for problem-based learning, and motivating students to participate in self-directed learning activities, one can also encourage students to deeper learning. This particularly makes sense in learning environments with international students, where communication will support a functional co-creation that again can affect the learning outcome.

According to Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004, p. 8) co-creation is about “joint creation of value”, joint problem definition and problem solving. Prahalad and Ramaswamy further emphasize that co-creation is about creating an experience environment in which one can have an active dialogue and co-construct experiences. In a teaching-learning context, taking on such an approach would imply that the teacher should aim at forming an active co-creation arena. Inviting students to take part in the classroom experiences would enable learning outcomes that are personal to the individuals who participate, but still based on the same theoretical foundations, acknowledging the skills and knowledge of each individual student.

Cases from the Arctic

The teaching-learning experience, used as an illustrative case in this study, is based on observations, discussions, and participation in several multicultural classes with students of different nationalities, who represents a wide variety of cultural backgrounds. The authors are Norwegian and have many years of teaching experience in English, in multicultural classes. The different cultures’ acquired way of learning, and the cultural differences (Hofstede, 2001) naturally affects expectations and outcomes of learning experiences. Through prioritizing a way of teaching that inspires to discussion and reflection, the students are challenged and encouraged to participate in debates of different theoretical concepts. In addition, by

combining theory and practice during e.g. business visits, teachers give ground for activity based learning processes.

The students applaud the use of business visits to gain insight into the real world, and to apply theory in practice. “It contributes to a better understanding of theory,” one comments. Moreover, in the evaluation of courses, students see business visits as a positive activity. Using practical examples in class are also highlighted as something that enhance the understanding of theory. In cross-cultural classes, it is essential having a common case to work with. By giving a common foundation for theoretical discussions related to a case company, each student can contribute, based on his or her own cultural understanding.

The students often come from a classical teaching context, where teachers give lectures in a traditional way. Nevertheless, students express great satisfaction with a more involving and participatory way of teaching and learning. This is seen in quotes like: “I prefer these classes, even though it is more challenging”. Although the experience from taking on active co-creation methods is perceived positively both by the teachers and the students, there are also challenges in taking on such forms of teaching-learning approaches. On one hand, students express the need to prepare for class by reading the assigned literature before class, so that they are able to engage actively in fruitful discussions. On the other hand, teachers have to create a good atmosphere for co-creation activities and make sure that students feel free to participate. From a teaching perspective, preparation is a prerequisite for achieving the desired learning outcome of an interactive teaching strategy. Moreover, to fully co-create the learning experience, where the knowledge and skills of each individual are acknowledged, it is essential that each student can co-construct his or hers experience to suit his or hers context.

The focus on co-creation of the learning experience is recognized as favourable by both teachers and students, although it requires efforts before the actual meetings. Not only are the students positive to this way of teaching, they also report that it has good effects on their learning outcome. The invitation to discuss and debate various topics and articles is seen as new and challenging; however, students comment that they learn more than in the traditional classes they have been used to, from earlier educational activities.

Conclusion

The teaching and learning experience in an international or cross-border context is challenging yet rewarding. According to Raaheim (2011) teaching is more than communication of theory and research results, one should also include the students into a professional community, where they are central participants. One might wonder if this is possible with a group of students from different nationalities and cultural backgrounds. This article argues that the benefits of a more including way of teaching with a focus on different active learning methods, can improve learning and encourage to in-depth learning processes. Our study case implies that when teachers and students co-create the teaching-learning experience, it results in a positive learning outcome. Co-creation of knowledge will adhere to the students' interest in the subject, as they continuously are encouraged to raise questions to the theories at hand. By promoting exploration of theories and topics, one can pave way for learning through wondering. The co-creation that happens in a cross-cultural classroom would imply learning for both students and teachers, as the subtitles of the different cultures could provide new insight into theoretical issues as well as extrinsic and intrinsic value for the participants. It is only by acknowledging the joint co-creation of the teaching-learning experience that one will stand the chance to learn from each other.

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