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FLIPPED LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: A CASE STUDY OF AN INTERDISCIPLINARY COURSE PROJECT

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In Finland, teaching and learning in higher educations have become more and more virtual, opening new possibilities and creating challenges for both teachers and students. Higher education institutes in Finland work very closely with the surrounding society and businesses, changing the present and the future of both the universities and the business world. Teachers in universities must be aware of the constantly changing demands of the world for which they are educating the students, and this can sometimes be overwhelming. This paper describes a case study of a university language course on which a project was carried out for a real customer company. The lessons were organized both in a normal as well as a virtual classroom. The idea of this course was to teach IT students 1) English language and 2) working in a virtual learning environment as well as 3) introduce them to the flipped classroom method. This type of interdisciplinary teaching context offers many possibilities to students for showcasing their learning since the outcome can be measured and evaluated in various ways. Flipped classroom as a teaching method requires a lot from teachers but offers them a real way of becoming an agent for change. On this course, the theory was the practice.

Keywords: Intercultural communication, Virtual learning environment, Flipped classroom, Higher education.

Introduction

In Europe and especially in Finland, both teaching and learning in higher educations have become increasingly virtual, opening new possibilities and creating challenges for both teachers and students. Higher education institutes in Finland work very closely with the surrounding society and businesses, changing the present and the future of both the universities and the surrounding business world. Teachers in universities must be aware of the constantly changing demands of the world for which they are educating the students, and this can sometimes be overwhelming.

Higher education institutes and global, transnational work life networks have created a real need for intercultural communication skills where using a foreign language is essential for successful communication. In higher education institutes courses are often organized virtually, which has an effect on the communication process. This paper introduces a case study focusing on dimensions of a virtual learning environment, on a pilot course in Laurea University of Applied Sciences and taught by the author in the autumn of 2017. The empirical data were gathered from discussion forums and videos from the virtual course as well as ethnographic action research by the author. By investigating the experiences of students participating in the course, the aim was to understand the existing communication skills and the

competencies needed for different agents to cooperate and work side by side in environments that are becoming even more virtual.

This paper describes a case study of a university language course on which a project was carried out for a real customer company. The lessons were organized both in a normal as well as a virtual classroom. The idea of this course was to teach the students 1) English language while 2) working in a virtual learning environment and 3) introduce them to the flipped classroom method. This type of interdisciplinary teaching context offers many possibilities to students for showcasing their learning since the outcome can be measured and evaluated in various ways. A flipped classroom as a teaching method requires a lot from teachers but offers them a real way of becoming an agent for change. On this course, the theory was the practice.

Theoretical Background

This paper introduces a research focusing on dimensions of a flipped classroom in a virtual learning environment. The language of teaching was English as the course is a mandatory language course. An ethnographic action research method was used to study this case of a virtual course organised by Laurea University of Applied Sciences in the autumn of 2017.

The research questions were as follows:

- How can flipped learning be organised on a virtual course?
- What kind of communication skills are needed virtual learning environments, especially when using a flipped classroom?

The research aims at illustrating a virtual learning environment and the special skills it requires as well as discussing the notion of understanding the impact of intercultural communication in a virtual learning environment. In the beginning of this article, the concepts of flipped learning and intercultural communication competence are introduced. In the next chapter, the ethnographic action research in a virtual learning environment is introduced. The majority of this article concentrates on discussing the theoretical background and based on the analysis the conceptual dimensions of flipped learning and intercultural communication competencies in relation to virtual learning environments and their special features are discussed at the end.

Flipped Classroom & Flipped Learning

Ideologies in teaching are much discussed in Finland, nowadays especially the role of technologies and social media. In modern Finnish classrooms, regardless of the institution or school, there is a lot of technology present –and that does aid in utilizing the idea of flipped learning. Whereas a flipped *classroom* is a teaching method, flipped *learning* refers to an ideology of learning. In flipped learning, the teacher familiarizes the students with independent and self-driven learning and supports the students' choices, also in the pedagogical sense (Toivola et al 2017:20). What is new in this method is the focus on two opposite aspects: the student as an individual as well as a part of a collective context. Even though social interaction in the classroom is powerful in creating possibilities for learning, each individual student has their own ways of learning, forming knowledge and, of course, own goals for the outcome. Flipped learning also focuses on the teacher: the teacher aims at personal professional development as well as finding ways to motivate students. When flipped classrooms begin to form a continuum, a student-centered learning culture begins to develop into flipped learning. This process requires a lot of time and effort, and therefore the present case study is merely the beginning point of this development process. Learning is a life-long individual process, and students need to be able to choose themselves, in which ways they learn, what they do and what they contribute to the learning environment. The teacher needs to believe the students can make appropriate choices and utilize their own learning potential. The students

are encouraged to seek for alternative solutions and use problem-based learning methods (Toivola et al 2017:22-25).

There are various aspects of flipped classrooms and flipped learning that could be approached, analysed and developed in each case or on any given course. In the present case study the following aspects of flipped classrooms will be analysed as much as they come up:

- socio-constructive learning culture
- motivation
- autonomy
- collective learning
- active language skills

From the perspective of the teacher, the following aspects will be analysed:

- setting clear goals and planning
- multi-faceted evaluation
- utilizing technology

As a student, being in a flipped classroom requires a lot of personal motivation and autonomy in information search, innovation as well as project planning. In Laurea UAS students usually work in teams of language courses in order to aid in practicing active communication skills, so there will be collective learning –it is only the form of collectiveness that might change in this novel learning context.

From the teacher's perspective using the flipped classroom as a teaching method on a virtual course might bring benefits, since the pre-lesson recordings will save time from going through theoretical and practical issues in the live classroom and therefore allow team discussions and actual work on a given task to start sooner. It is yet unclear on how this method will affect evaluation. The students of the focus group are IT students, so the aspect of utilizing technology is ought to be in their favour.

Intercultural Communication

With globalisation and increasingly transnational work environments, intercultural communication skills have become a core competence for nationally and internationally effective businesses (Väyrynen 2000: 32-33) and need thus to be taught in higher education institutes. The same applies to communication skills in virtual environments. Intercultural work and learning environments make it possible to practice these skills in various ways, but virtual learning environments are also becoming more popular as the sole medium of teaching. Learning in a virtual environment does, however, pose novel challenges. When teachers and students do not get to meet face-to-face, there is a need to consider many special factors when planning and implementing courses. In the present paper, these issues are discussed from intersecting perspectives.

The intercultural arena of higher education transcends and alters communication. In addition, it can also hinder students from building social relationships in order to communicate and work effectively. This is especially important to take notice of in virtual courses. How are students able to or aiming at utilising the intercultural networks and their possibilities in a virtual learning environment? Is a lack of skills in a given language or technology a hindrance or a barrier? Linguistic and communication skills, socio-cultural knowledge, technological skills and personal attitudes as well as transferring professional skills to a virtual learning and working environment are the key areas in effective co-operation.

Intercultural communication competence in different professions will inevitably take different forms and require different skills from individuals. Intercultural communication can be defined as follows on the basis of the terms of *culture* and *communication*. When communication is both verbal and non-verbal exchange of opinions and thoughts between individuals and groups in social events, intercultural communication can be seen in this research as communication between such social groupings whose shared images of the symbolic reality they themselves have created are not completely correlative to each other. In a given social context communication means trying to bring the different worldviews and

meaning attributions closer to each other through and with the help of verbal and non-verbal interaction. Intercultural communication is also supposed to overcome any possible value hierarchies and emotional and cognitive differences, which may be obstacles on the way to reaching communicative competence. The term *intercultural* can only be defined by the people in that specific social situation, i.e. communication is intercultural if there is an aspect of the counterpart they do not feel they can relate with or understand. Cai et al (2000) found out in their respective study of intercultural negotiation situations that contextual collectivism increases the joint profit, but that *culture in context* perspective facilitates both the negotiation and enhances the understanding of the cultural values of others.

All of the above-mentioned aspects get a new meaning when they are approached and discussed in an educational, virtual context where there are no or only a few face-to-face sessions in class. How can these dimensions be taught and learnt? On a language course, how can the intersecting dimensions of language skills, communication skills, and cultural skills be taught, learnt and eventually evaluated?

Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)

It is more difficult to construct a working culture in virtual work communities where less information is shared than in face-to-face communities. The tools utilized in the communication have various effects, too. First of all, people may feel more insecure when they cannot utilise and interpret facial expressions and gestures in communicating via phone, chat or e-mail. Secondly, constructing a working culture slows down when people do not learn to know each other due to a lack of face-to-face connection, resulting in difficulties in understanding others' beliefs and practices and creating false expectations. (Berry 2011: 189-195.) In addition, members of a virtual work community do not necessarily know the restrictions or advantages of technological communication tools and are not able to utilise them in the most beneficial ways (Grosse 2002: 22).

Virtual communication has also some benefits compared to face-to-face communication. When communicating via an e-mail or a blog, you do not have to wait your turn and you are not interrupted before you have made your point. You can take your time to read messages and think them through, and also formulate your answer and point of view. For many, it is easier to read and write a foreign language than to listen and speak it. E-mail discussions are also easily shared with others and they serve as documents or memos of discussions. Berry (2011: 189-198) claims that virtual communication is more issue-specific than face-to-face communication, and emphasises the efficiency of issue-specific communication. In issue-specific communication, ideas presented by participants as well as feedback given to colleagues are more direct, and evaluations of fellows are based on their work rather than their personality. Moreover, there are fewer problems caused by stereotyping, power relations, personalities, group forming and political conflicts, and learning of all participants increases when different points of views are represented.

Opinions and attitudes towards VLEs somewhat depend on the available options used in a given institute. However, we might not know how our background limits our thinking and action until we encounter misunderstandings or poor results in intercultural encounters (Cunliffe 2004: 412). Difficulties in performing well technologically i.e. lack of technological know-how will have an effect on the whole learning process. VLEs require various communicative skills from both the lecturers and the students, and it can be considered to be an intercultural communication culture in itself. Intercultural communication has not been researched in this context a lot.

Optima and Adobe Connect were chosen as the virtual mediums to conduct the teaching. Optima (the year 2017 version) was used for this course as it was used at Laurea UAS at the time of this case study. Optima offers many tools that support the learning process and enable students to interact and reflect on what they see, feel and learn. These tools include both written and oral material; forums that were used to facilitate discussion and return folders that were used as places to return and discuss tasks. Adobe Connect (AC) was used in this course for virtual presentations and virtual meetings with the whole group, and especially for recording the lessons for the students in the name of flipped learning. There were four lessons in the classroom and three online. All lessons were pre-recorded as videos for the

students to watch before each class took place. Synchronous lectures during the course were created in AC and the links were added to Optima on a fixed schedule.

Ethnographic Action Research

In ethnographic action research, the researcher is both a participant as well as an observer. During the virtual course discussed in the present paper, filed notes such as e-mails, instant messages, student tasks, questions forums, and videos were used extensively in drawing conclusions and finding out intersecting issues related to intercultural communication and virtual learning in relation to flipped learning. In-depth interviews were, however, not used in gathering data as the students' syllabi did not allow time to be used for this purpose. A questionnaire with open-ended questions was given to all students at the end of the course and they also gave feedback to peers, the teachers as well as themselves. The VLE also shows the activeness of each student in all the segments of the course by the second. In analysis common themes, ideas or questions were grouped into codes.

Empiria

The course R0243 Professional Communication in English (5 ECTS), is the first mandatory English language course aimed at Bachelor level students who study IT Management. The aim of this first course is to enlarge and deepen the students' understanding of the core concepts of business language, from cultural, communication and language skills perspectives. The course consists of both oral and written tasks as well as individual, pair, and teamwork.

There were four lessons live in class, including the first and the last lessons. In addition, there were three live lessons virtually that were recorded live, and a pre-lesson video recording was done before all of these seven lessons. The students were sent a link to the recorded lesson well in advance, usually 2-3 weeks prior to the live class. The recordings were done after each class, not previously, in order for all important aspects discussed in class to be incorporated into the recording. The pre-lesson flipped learning lesson recordings varied from 20-30 minutes, whereas the sessions in class were 90-120 minutes (regardless of place, i.e. virtually or in class). Each class had a different set of tasks for individuals and teams to do, and all the tasks were done for a real customer company. The tasks were explained on the pre-lesson flipped learning recordings and discussed in live classes.

The empirical data was gathered from various sources with the primary source being ethnographic action research by the author. Other sources include written or videoed responses to individual and group assignments, question and discussion forums, and email correspondence. The main purpose of using ethnographic action research in this relatively small case study is to approach the theoretical background by referring it to and comparing it with the sample course process, feedback and results. This should create discussion between the theory and the praxis and make it possible to develop the use of flipped learning for future courses. Flipped learning has never been used on this course before, and it is vital to understand how to use it in a virtual context before basing multiple virtual courses on the same underlying idea.

After reading the theoretical background and analysing the data the following themes emerged as the basis of the present research: motivation, time-orientation, and evaluation in VLEs. These aspects demand a novel manner of approaching virtual learning environments, namely as treating them as their own intercultural contexts. The contents of the course as well as the researcher's personal interests have had an effect on the research and the interpretations done on the basis of the data.

Conclusions

Motivation seemed to be one of the key factors of success on this course. Some students felt that since there were no lessons every week that that was their free time when in fact during those weeks they were

supposed to watch the new pre-lesson recordings and familiarize themselves with new topics. Most students performed well, but there was a smaller team that did not appear to grasp the idea at all. In their case, the aspect of collective learning did not aid at all, since they all happened to feel the same, i.e. passively wait for the next lesson. Otherwise, collective learning seemed to actively take place, since teams had formed their own WhatsApp groups and freely shared opinions, answers, and tips to other teams, too. This type of collective learning also reflected in the evaluation, since it was very clear to see the level of tasks to be evaluated was significantly higher than on earlier, non-flipped classrooms.

The case course being a language course, active language skills were in focus, naturally. The expectation was that English would be practiced and used a lot more outside of the classroom than it eventually was since that was something the students expressed they wanted to do. However, it seems that the hectic schedules at work, at Laurea UAS and from the customer collided in such a way that this type of 'voluntary' practice was left undone and students relied on their native languages. The oral and written coursework proves, nevertheless, that all students did enough to demonstrate their language skills in relation to the course's requirements and even to receive a good grade. This was a very pleasant surprise on such a demanding pilot course.

From the perspective of the teacher, setting clear goals and planning everything extremely well was in focus. Planning was crucial, even down to the day and time of when to release the pre-lesson recordings so they would receive the widest audience possible. All information was sent to all students, so they would receive the information from two sources: from the teacher as well as their peers. But the pre-lesson recordings resulted in a very unwanted issue: there were students who felt that they need not come to class at all since the theoretical/ practical information was always given before the class. Because of this, they missed a lot of lessons in which we did teamwork and discussed all relevant matters, practicing language skills at the same time, obviously. This type of lack of commitment resulted in poorly done tasks and according to the feedback, a feeling of not learning enough of anything. To fix this, attendance in class will be made mandatory for the next course.

Evaluation is always very challenging and interesting, since language skills and demonstrating them is such a personal thing. All students are not able to perform at their best level when it comes time to give an oral presentation, for instance, nor do all students take time to proofread written assignments well. On this pilot course, a decision was made to offer students either a team grade or an individual grade from all the work done on the course. Most students relied on the teamwork and selected a team grade, whereas the teams who were not in class or were quite inactive, opted to receive individual grades. 50% of the final grade came from oral skills and 50% from written skills, and the teams who gave feedback about their teamwork being very good, received better grades in both evaluation segments. It must be noted, however, that there were two students who were given permission to complete the whole course individually, not attending classes at all, and they performed very well on their own. Their motivation was, according to their self-evaluation, high and that shines through as very good grades, too. This indicates that students who are motivated could benefit from virtual courses much more, too. The only problem is that no-one knows the motivation of a given student—even the student himself—until it is time to begin working.

Utilizing technology was easy to this case group, just as anticipated and hoped. There were no problems in accessing or using the pre-lesson recordings nor producing own recordings on any given topic, on any given method. This can be seen as a key factor in this type of virtual course being a success. There were no novel challenges and all teams who took part in the virtual lessons felt, according to feedback, at ease in the virtual classroom. They created a new learning culture very easily, which in turn helped the teacher in giving instructions and planning the course ahead. When teachers and students do not get to meet face-to-face, there is a need to consider many special factors when planning and implementing courses. On this case course, a video connection was used all the time, and when in the 'normal' classroom, it was made sure that all students were communicated with on an individual basis. This type of access to nonverbal communication appeared to aid in establishing an equal, trusted and positive learning culture. Luckily the aspect of intercultural communication skills was not be evaluated during this course since it would have been an impossible task.

The students were able to use their intercultural communication skills quite well, especially in teams where all students felt their objectives for the course and learning were close to each other. The IT skills most definitely helped, and even the students with a lower level of oral skills reported that they could use their foreign language skills adequately.

Virtual learning environments are nowadays very common and a much sought after method of teaching and learning in higher education institutions. Normal classroom work cannot, however, be transferred into VLEs as such, but virtual classrooms should be treated as their own *cultures*. New requirements such as technological issues, language choices, nonverbal communication and time-orientation, just to name a few, demand a close analysis before the courses begin. The results of this case study indicate that *attitudinal orientation* in successful intercultural communication crucial. This virtual course was based on individual work that had to be negotiated within a small group and in groups that submitted their tasks the attitude towards either virtual work or communication or both was positive. Leaving the course or leaving tasks undone might have resulted, as feedback entries indicate, on realising that virtual courses actually demand a lot of work in both the substance and in communication. Additionally, it appears the course was seen as something extra because the tasks were done “after school hours”. This is important as now when e-learning is being marketed as learning that can be done ‘anytime and anywhere’, it is still evident that the boundaries of ‘own’ and ‘study’ time are difficult to draw. If this is so, it is interesting because it means the whole *culture of e-learning needs to be rethought* – some people view it as something in addition to their studies that encroaches on extra-curricular time. This is an aspect that is also extremely relevant from the lecturers’ point of view, too, as they often found themselves responding to queries outside ‘normal’ working times to ensure that the course ran smoothly.

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