Experiences of Multilateral Co-operation between Finnish, Georgian and Belorussian Universities

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INTERCULTURAL LEARNING
## Contents

1. Introduction: Principles of international collaboration  
   – background of the project .......................................................... 3  
   Katalin Miklóssy

2. Designing a successful international course  ......................... 6  
   Katalin Miklóssy

3. Institutional learning between different academic cultures .... 12  
   Hanna Peltonen, Minna Oroza, Matti Parkkinen

4. Exchanging innovative teaching methods  ....................... 17  
   Katalin Miklóssy

4.1. Student involvement as a way to enhance the learning  
   outcomes of a university lecture................................................. 20  
   Elena Korshuk

4.2. Teaching populism in Tbilisi................................................. 23  
   Emilia Palonen

4.3. Debating ........................................................................ 25  
   Katalin Miklóssy

4.4. Speed-dating with NGOs: learning from civil society .......... 27  
   Jarmo Koponen and Mari Nikuradze

5. Workshop for academics – reflections ...................................... 30  
   Anne Nevgi

6. Students’ experiences on collaborative and interactive  
   teaching – observations and analyses .......................................... 33  
   Anne Nevgi
The internationalisation of higher education is imperative in our globalising world. Student and staff mobility is increasing and there are new expanding trends of transnational teaching collaborations. International cooperation primarily aims at the exchange of ideas, the dissemination of scholarship, sharing the latest pedagogical methods and administrative know-how. Equally important is, however, the experience that students, teachers and administrators gain from intercultural encounters. To observe familiar subjects from a different angle not only widens one’s perspectives and understanding but can also produce new practices and ways to relate to the familiar. International interaction improves communication and language skills, the flexibility to accept divergent perceptions and adjust to different requirements, thus extending stamina and even in many cases productivity.

According to a latest report on the impact of student exchange programmes on employability, it seems clear that the competences the students acquire abroad are valued in the globalising job market. Students with international experience have better prospects of getting employment, with higher salary and more responsible tasks (Erasmus Impact Study 2014).

International teaching collaboration has in addition a wider, long-term advantage. By sharing academic knowledge and cultures of learning, we are building intercultural bridges that makes possible to learn about the basic values and visions of future societal development of our partners. Establishing dialogical relations with different socio-political systems also enables us to understand our own development in reflection.

The international collaboration in our case was organised within the Baltic Sea region and Caucasus network (BASERCAN), which is an integral part of a Finnish initiative, the North-South-South...
Higher Education Institution Network Program, funded by the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs and channelled through the Finnish Centre for International Mobility (CIMO). The program – that has been running since 2004 – aims to accelerate cooperation and networking between universities in Finland and other developing countries. The BASERCAN project was launched and coordinated by the Aleksanteri Institute (Finnish Centre of Russian and East European Studies) at the University of Helsinki. The partner institutions were selected based on the Aleksanteri Institute’s area profile from Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. Hence, two Georgian (Ilia State University and Tbilisi State University) and two Belarusian (Belarusian State University and Yanka Kupala State University of Grodno) universities were invited to participate in this project with the Aleksanteri Institute.

According to the framework of the North-South-South program, the cooperation included student and teacher exchange, and a jointly organised intensive course conducted in one of the partner institutions. In this volume, we concentrate on what we have learned from this multilateral cooperation concerning particularly the intensive course in May 11-16, 2015, hosted by the Tbilisi State University. As specified in the collaboration agreement, all five universities sent an equal number of students (5) and 2 teachers to Tbilisi. The course content was to discuss various aspects of societal development in Eastern Europe, and every teacher concentrated on a different angle (ideological, social, cultural, economic, political) of the subject. Both the selection of the students and the teachers depended on the decision of the respective universities. Even though the BASERCAN project was a multilateral collaboration, the Aleksanteri Institute had the leading role. This meant that the University of Helsinki was responsible for the ultimate success of all activities involved in the venture.

With this volume we want to share our experiences of this versatile multilateral collaboration from the points of view of cooperating institutions, NGOs, teachers and students. With this effort we wish to advise others who are planning similar projects on what to keep in mind and how to avoid the worst pitfalls in order to maximise success. What we have learned is that it is difficult to overestimate the advantages and mutual rewards of international interaction.
Sources and further reading:


2. Designing a successful international course

Katalin Miklóssy

The course aimed first and foremost to establish lasting networks that would enable the exchange of research-based knowledge among the teachers and students of the participating five universities. Equally important was to disseminate various teaching methods that support the students’ learning and generate more complex understanding. Hence, the overall purpose was to launch discussions between teachers coming from different academic cultures of how the quality of higher education can be improved by the implementation of new pedagogical tools. Thus, it was important to exchange ideas of how innovative pedagogy could accelerate also a more interactive relationship between academic knowledge production and its dissemination in the classroom.

Content of the course: area studies from new perspectives

The BASERCAN-network was originally based on the idea of linking together higher education institutions of various areas, such as the Baltic Sea region and a wider Eastern European space, including the Caucasus. It hence became an interesting challenge to share academic knowledge of the prospects of development of this vast territory. The leading organisation of the project, which initiated this multinational collaboration, was the Aleksanteri Institute at the University of Helsinki. The Aleksanteri Institute – the Finnish Centre of Russian and East European Studies – is an area study institution, thus the comparative analysis of area related evolutionary patterns was an important academic objective.

It is rather obvious that some disciplines are more embedded in the temporary context than others because they are more prone to changes in the political environment. Area studies are genuinely a multidisciplinary endeavor with a single meta-purpose: to grasp a geographical entity that is ultimately defined by political interest. This means in practice that the aim is to understand the development of an area holistically for pragmatic reasons. The definition of Eastern Europe is also a constantly changing phenomenon that can be approached through the perceptions of the scholars working in area studies and in the area. How the body of experts describes the boundaries and content of the spatial entity reflects not only the current self-understanding of the discipline but more importantly, reveals the considerations of funding agencies and direct political interests behind scholarly communities (Miklóssy 2015).

To choose an area study focus for the course was a conscious decision with the accentuated aim to learn how the participating other universities from Georgia and Belarus perceive their respective areas within the European context. Identification with an area and reflections of its development can be, however, a sensitive issue in comparative perspective. Therefore, it soon became evident
that defining the content of such a course would involve some politically rooted discussions. The political-ness of some questions was partly due to the fact that the partner institutions were embedded in distinct societal systems but, on the other hand, it was also apparent that different universities from the same country displayed seemingly different attitudes towards the political establishment. To avoid collision, it was vital for the main organiser institution, the University of Helsinki, not to give false impressions of an alleged Western normative stand regarding such value-loaded concepts as democracy, development, or societal transformation. Hence, all partners arrived at a mutual understanding that a broadly outlined framework subject would be inevitable in order to offer sufficient elbowroom for different, even divergent interpretations of the same theme.

The course ‘Development Scenarios in Eastern Europe’, was built around two main topics to discuss the internal and external effects on development related political choices: the social-cultural-economic characteristics of development patterns and the states’ space of manoeuvre between the EU and Russia. The representatives of partner institutions decided what angle they would be interested in providing to this complex theme. Thus, the host country, Georgia’s universities (Tbilisi State University and Ilia State University) generously offered 3 lectures while the Belorussian universities and the Finnish team presented 2-2 lectures.

The topics of the course dealt with
◆ Democracy – autocracy
◆ Changing concept of social welfare
◆ Populism and new features of political participation
◆ Good governance and problems of corruption
◆ Economic development
◆ Cultural values and changing cultural institutions

The heavy academic content of the course meant that extra consideration had to be paid to student selection. So, it was necessary to ensure that the enrolling students would have satisfactory basic knowledge of the subject. Hence, the course was advertised for MA-students and for those BA-students that had at least 3-4 years of preliminary studies. Furthermore, it was equally important that the students would be dedicated to the course and thus we required a letter of motivation as part of the application procedure. Course participants came in equal amount from all partner universities, and the partner institutions were responsible for the selection process of their own students. To ensure the flow of information, to disseminate course materials and to interact with students and teachers alike we established a central website for the course that was maintained by the project leader institution, the Aleksanteri Institute, at the University of Helsinki.

Balancing exhaustion: structuring the intensive course

Any intensive course of 6 days can be extremely weary for the students, and therefore the structure of the course and requirements had to be carefully designed in order to achieve the highest possible learning results. The partner institutions decided to mix the traditional lecturing format with other methods of teaching and learning. Hence, while for four out of the six days we scheduled lectures, they were nevertheless accompanied by debates, workshops, a meeting with NGOs, student presentations and a panel discussion (about the implemented pedagogical methods, please see Chapter 4). The variation of methods was vital for our purpose to generate active student involvement. According to the students’ feedback, the participants praised the course highly because of the applied ways of learning
that they were not used to.

In defining the requirements we kept in mind two principles: on the one hand we wanted to ease the heavy workload, on the other hand we acknowledged that the requirements had to support the aspired learning aims. Consequently, we divided the requirements into three periods, comprising pre- and after course tasks in addition to the performance during the intensive teaching phase.

As for pre-course activities, we set preliminary reading materials and short online videos (3 x 30 minutes) by the teachers that would provide a proper introduction to the different subjects of the course. We also divided the enrolled students from all partner countries into groups of four (eventually we had six groups in total) and they were informed of their fellow group members. Our objective was to encourage the students to get acquainted through the Internet (Skype, Facebook, chat-sites etc.) before the intensive phase. We thought that grouping up would ease the strangeness in the beginning and help them get settled in the unfamiliar academic environment. For inducing preliminary activity and collaboration of the students, we also defined well in advance the central assignment of the whole course: every group had to decide a topic and approach to be studied during the week of the intensive phase. This was to give enough time and opportunity for the students to discuss research related issues before the hectic and demanding intensive teaching week would start.

During the intensive phase, the group arrangement was the basic working unit because we wanted – as discussed in Chapter 4 on pedagogical methods – to support collaborative learning. Thus debates, workshops and presentations had to be carried out as group performance. Similarly, it was made clear to the students that they would be graded according to their group efforts. So, the intensive phase demanded mostly oral tasks and lively interaction from the students. According to students’ feedback, the group formation was fairly successful because the students developed strong bonds and even group identity which in turn created a non-formal, flexible atmosphere in the classroom that supported the learning process. Since one of the aims of the course was to teach students how to do research and make them realise that it is an ever evolving process, the task of the post-course period was to develop the group work further – ideally started already during the pre-phase and elaborated during the intensive week – into a research paper through cooperation of the group-members, using once again internet facilities in communicating with each other. As the intensive course began, it became obvious for the teaching staff that attitudes towards the requirements and overall performance was dependent on various culturally and disciplinarily embedded factors that we could not have anticipated.
Challenges of the multilayered classroom

The meta-aim of the Basercan-project was to further the internationalisation of universities by strengthening collaborative networks. The teaching venture thus was designed to deal with what I call a ‘multilayered group’ that comprised students of multinational and multiethnic background, coming from different disciplines and having multiple experiences of academic cultures. During the course, the students encountered a multinational, multidisciplinary teaching stuff representing different academic cultures as well. In retrospect, we have to admit that this complexity was not recognised satisfactorily in the planning phase by the partner institutions.

Multilayered groups set very different challenges than the nationally homogenous or one-discipline centred classrooms with similar background in academic culture that have represented the mainstream teaching context traditionally. These classes were generally managed by teachers with similarly homogenous backgrounds. Challenges generated by a multilayered classroom however affect not only the teaching techniques but more importantly change our understanding of the teachers’ role in relation to learning. Facing multilayered classrooms requires also a revision of our perceptions of the taught content epistemologically.

Multilayered-ness was an important factor in constructing the content of our course. ‘Development Scenarios in Eastern Europe’ approached from political, economic, cultural and social perspectives combined necessarily an attempt to generate an interdisciplinary discussion of teachers and students who came from different disciplinary backgrounds. The challenge in this aim was that we had no knowledge if the students or the teachers as a matter of fact had skills of carrying out an interdisciplinary deliberation that would benefit their study. To encourage interdisciplinarity, we consciously built into the various teaching sessions a lot of discursive methods where the students had to share their previous knowledge reflected to a subject they had just heard about. Similarly, the organisers aspired to cross-disciplinary collaboration by forming the students’ groups where members represented different disciplines and had to deliver a joint task. As we learned later on from the student feedback, just a very few of them had ever experienced interdisciplinary classes. Hence, some found it difficult to relate to subjects that seemed out of scope of their disciplinary backgrounds. Similar problems occurred in using theories or conceptual explanatory models in the lectures. Some participants complained later that

‘students from Georgia and Belarus have far less exposure to such concepts and ideas and how to articulate them. It meant that far too much time was devoted to
explaining and researching concepts rather than simple data for our presentation.’

This statement nevertheless is encouraging, because it demonstrates that our purpose of interdisciplinary learning within the groups worked and it actually exceeded what the lectures could promote in this area.

There was also another idea in the group formation: it was important that each group member came from a different country and a different institution. Since the subjects related to ‘Development Scenarios’ were in many ways susceptible to interpretations, we also wanted to induce an exchange of perceptions between the students in the blended groups over interpretations. According to student feedback, politically sensitive issues came up in student discussions after class and subjects such as nationalism, corruption, good governance and gender equality was fiercely debated. As one student put it:

‘They (i.e., subjects) are sensitive because many of us have experience about living in only our own countries or similar cultures. So, everybody had quite narrow view in these issues, including me. Still I feel that in these issues there is right and wrong answers and methods to behave. For some that may seen like arrogant “I and my society know better than you and your society” behavior. Which is of course not true. All in all, participants from different cultures had different opinions and it needed extra care to discuss about issues without hurting anybody.’

As this excerpt shows, even though the teaching staff was very cautious not to indicate any normative stance in any discussed topics, this was not case in student interactions. Looking at it from a different perspective, this problem clearly reveals the embedded normativity of higher education cultures that should be addressed more accurately.

Apart from the unquestionable benefits, multidisciplinary, multinational and multi-academic upbringing created grave problems as well. From the point of view of students’ group work, it became obvious that the students had different ambitions regarding the course, which disturbed their collaboration because the members were unequally dedicated to the joint effort. ‘Even though the course defined the requirements and learning objectives, nevertheless some students were serious about studying but some came to Tbilisi just to have a good time’ – as one of the student reported. This might be due to the different evaluation of the relevance of higher education and its contribution for people’s career expectations after graduation. In countries where only getting a diploma matters, the actual learning content is less appreciated.

An interrelated issue was the problem of requirements. It became evident that the organisers did not fully comprehend how assignments should be communicated satisfactorily for the students from various academic cultures to understand their content. Since the University of Helsinki was in charge of the course website, it was assumed by the Finnish staff that the uploaded instructions were clear for all students irrespective of their backgrounds. Rooted in the Finnish academic practices, it was also presumed that if there were any misapprehension about the tasks, the students were supposed to ask. This type of individual responsibility for one’s own learning that requires activity and initiative was taken for granted from the Finnish perspective. Similarly, as described earlier, pre-phase assignments for group work were carefully defined, but as we found out at the beginning of the intensive course, only a few groups had taken the group requirements seriously. This was probably a communication-related problem that we did not realise in time. We expected that the enrolled students would visit the course website maintained by
the Finnish Aleksanteri Institute, and the partner institutions would urge their students to do so. While the scale of the problem did not occur to us we started the intensive course in Tbilisi with repeating the group work requirements. According to the student feedback, some of the students were genuinely astonished by the workload they faced for the first time in the introduction lecture but it forced them to work effectively – as one student noted.

A comparable challenge was the diverging perception of time. Since the Finnish staff took the lead of being responsible for the success of the whole course, the Finns set up the schedule of the intensive course according to the Finnish academic cultural habits. Hence, the schedule was very precise and the students were naturally expected to follow it accordingly. Since there were Finnish students in every group, the basic assumption of the Finnish organising team was that a kind of acculturation would take place. However, it became obvious during the week of the intensive course that adaptation happened the other way around: the Finns started to arrive late in class like the other students, as they adjusted to the local culture.

Based on students’ feedback, the multicultural learning environment we created bore great advantages. The students reported that the intercultural encounter was a very important value for them. Some participants mentioned that stereotypes and prejudices they had changed due to interaction.
Institutional learning is an important purpose and an inevitable prerequisite of carrying out successful cooperation of five universities from three countries, representing rather different academic cultures. Institutional learning is a process that is dependent on the way information is created, transferred, absorbed and used. Actual learning takes place if individuals or collective units change their behavioral patterns and institutional arrangements based on the implementation of new knowledge (Siebenhüner & Suplie 2005, cited in Carayannis et al. 2012, 138). An institutional learning process might be initiated by chance or necessity (Monod 1971, cited in Carayannis et al. 2012, 138). According to De Geus (1988), institutional learning should start with mapping out what the mental model of each individual is in an organisation, and learning about the organisation. There is a considerable advantage to learning, if this information is then shared and made explicit, to all members of the team. In this way, the individual mental models become building blocks to the bigger picture, thus implying that the entirety comprises more than its separate parts (ibid.).

The BASERCAN+ project followed this assumption, and therefore, a network meeting was organised for all the teachers of all universities involved to together prepare the intensive course. The aim was to motivate and make teachers committed to the course, and to create a common understanding of the content, requirements and teaching methods. Prior to the network meeting, the teachers did not know each other, and the goal was to get them acquainted and more familiar with each other’s field of expertise and teaching philosophy in order to help to create a consistent and logically interlinked course instead of a loose mosaic of individual lectures. The underlying principle of the project was that each country would delegate two teachers to give lectures during the course for Belarusian, Georgian and Finnish students, coming from all participating universities.

The planning stage of the intensive course was based on the assumption that collective decision-making is a part of the institutional learning process. Carayannis et al. (2012, 139) claim that information must flow freely, “spill over”, within the organisation. In our context, each teacher’s knowledge and expertise served as the premise for our network meeting. The teachers, however, came from different institutional backgrounds that can vary even from university to university within the same country. Furthermore, teachers are in dissimilar positions to influence the wider academic environment at their universities. In addition in our case, the Finnish, Georgian and Belarusian academics are anchored also to diverse societal conditions in their respective countries. All these differences provide distinct perceptions of the content and leverage of international teaching collaboration. This brought up concrete challenges such as agreeing on the common theme of the course especially when the subject was related to politically embedded views of development.
Another debated issue was the different levels of requirements of student performance. The network meeting took a conscious problem-solving attitude emphasising common discussion and careful, piecemeal type of planning.

As Carayannis et al. (2012, 139) point out; another key factor in institutional learning is the so-called “arbitrage” of strategic knowledge. This means that knowledge should be made available to domains within an organisation, to which it was not intentionally created in the first place (ibid.). In the short period of preparing the course, the aim was not only to negotiate the goals and boundaries of the teaching venture but also to actually produce a ‘common organisation’ agreed by all to run the project. As the course was a Finnish initiative but was supposed to be carried out at a Georgian university in Tbilisi including all other participating Finnish, Georgian and Belarusian universities, it was inevitable to share the organisational responsibilities in order to strengthen the commitment to the joint venture. Hence, for instance an invaluable factor was the presence of the administrative representative of the host institution at the network meeting, as she could inform us about the available institutional framework and teaching facilities.

**The process of organisational learning**

Organisational learning can be observed at three levels, depending, inter alia, on the time span of learning, namely: 1) operative learning, 2) tactical learning and 3) strategic learning. Operative learning can be described as “learning by doing”. These are the new or improved capabilities learnt at organisational level, such as HR management. Operative learning is short or medium term learning by definition (Carayannis et al. 2012 141-142).

The successful implementation of the international intensive course and, by and large the whole BASERCAN+ project, required considerable operative learning. The familiar elements and event planning at the home universities had to be revisited and brought into the unknown multilateral environment with new actors and institutions. This fact affected particularly such matters as recruiting teachers and students as well as devising the program together, planning the course syllabus, deciding about assignments and grading along with practical arrangements. Thus, we had to accept the differences of our institutions and academic cultures, and come to terms with them.
Tactical learning is learning on medium or long-term perspective. This form of learning requires changes to the conduct of an organisation, such as changing the rules or adding new ones (ibid.).

One important factor that represents tactical and even strategic learning in the Finnish case was the realisation that a much wider involvement of teachers was needed from the home institution. Teachers have to be involved already in the planning and application stage of a multilateral collaboration such as the BASERCAN+ project. The peculiar problem in the Finnish context is that the majority of the research and teaching staff are employed on a temporary basis, making it practically impossible to engage people for a two-year long project. This situation resulted in the administrative experts having to take much greater responsibility over an originally teaching project than ideally should be required. An international intensive course relies on teachers’ high level of involvement including preparation of teaching material for the course, communication with colleagues in different countries, teaching, grading papers and wrapping up feedback. Teachers, on the other hand, have their own networks that can be utilised in international projects, bringing completely new aspects to the course structure and content. In the Finnish case, engaging one active teacher launched a chain-reaction by involving two colleagues from other faculties. All three teachers were interested in developing new teaching methods. The active teacher also recruited a person with wide experience on non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to organise a course event with local organisations. This NGO specialist, in turn, recruited a local expert who did a lot of work contacting NGOs for the event. All this happened with the objective to create an appealing course to students.

Coming to terms with different academic cultures

Strategic learning is focused on the environment in which an organisation functions, and is aimed at developing and learning new views of the ‘operating universe’ (Carayannis et al. 2012). The aim of the project was to develop a joint organisation merging three national academic and five institutional cultures. The joint organisation was supposed to rely on a consensus of the modus operandi. The actual implementation, however, was conducted in one of the five institutions that brought an extra challenge to the picture. Academic culture can be defined as the norms, values, beliefs, and practices associated with the working lives of faculty members at higher education institutions (Clark 1987a; Tierney and Rhoads 1993; in Szelenyi & Rhoads 2013). From the point of view of strategic learning, the most interesting lessons came from analysing the international dimensions of organisational practices, flexibility versus hierarchy, as well as ways of communication.

In the Finnish context and in the case of the University of Helsinki, international projects have become an integral part of activities through different exchange and cooperation programmes, which enable the active mobility of students, teachers and administrative staff. Participation in international programmes has wide support on all levels of administration. Besides the university level, every department has its own international programmes and networks, and acts independently in the international environment. During the planning phase of the intensive course we noted that international cooperation was not as fluent as we would have anticipated in all cases, even though that the partner universities’ international offices have a strong orientation and commitment for international projects and the cooperation between colleague coordinators was fluent. Besides exchanging a lot of emails, our monthly meetings on Skype of-
fered an excellent platform for updating information and exchanging thoughts.

The divergences in flexibility and the level of hierarchy at the participating universities became clear during the process. One concrete example was the integration of the intensive course into the teaching curricula of the partner universities. According to the agreed rules, the intensive course should be fully counted into the degree in all partner institutions, rewarding the students with valuable credits. There appeared a serious breach in the flow of information that became apparent only after the end of the intensive course: the integration of the course into the curricula of some partner universities was not accepted after all, due to administrative rigidity. Courses have to be adjusted into the curricula before the start of the academic year, preferably one year beforehand, and the intensive course in question was agreed upon in the above mentioned network meeting in the preparation phase only 6 months before the course took place in May 2015.

This incident was not only a mismatch of administrative cultures and a gap in communication, but it had a more serious impact on the students’ expectations. Having been promised credits for working hard on an exhausting intensive course, they felt disappointed by the obvious misinformation they had received by the joint organisation of the course, and by their own respective universities. This episode pointed out also the weaknesses in international cooperation regarding teacher exchange programmes as well. Decisions on adding courses to a curriculum should be made on the level of a higher educational programme, so decision-making process at all participating universities has to be more flexible. However, some partner universities that took part in international exchange programmes have no institutional preparedness to implement concrete collaboration on the agreed terms. This is partly rooted in the rigidity of hierarchy in some countries’ academic culture that hinders the internationalising goals of their national education. On the other hand, the situation is complex due to the diversity of state-owned and private universities in any one country that creates different practices and level of hierarchies. In addition, it can be surprising how innovatively staff can actually operate – against all odds – within a rigid hierarchical system. A very good example of this was an on-the-spot practical arrangement where partners of this rigid type of a system showed much more flexibility and readiness to improvise than perhaps any staff from an otherwise more relaxed university system such as the Finnish one, would have done. This showed the real importance and power of a dedicated administrative staff. As Carayannis et al. (2012, 139) indicated ‘knowledge is inseparable from the person who possesses it. Thus it also includes the person’s skills, values, experiences and thinking.’ In our case, the representative’s expertise and professional conduct were contributing factors to successful organisation of the course.

Conclusion and suggestions for other projects

We analysed our joint course project through two key concepts: institutional learning and different academic cultures. In our view, it is vital to take into consideration, already at the planning stage, the different understandings of knowledge and values of all participating institutions’ cultures, including the academic cultures, within the context of international academic cooperation. For future projects, we propose to try out games as a way for organisations to learn, as they might accelerate the process of institutional learning, as de Geus (1988) proposes. Even if de Geus (ibid.) refers to a business environment, we believe that different kind of games, in an academic
context, could bring people together and help them understand each other’s values and operational models within the framework of different universities.

The intensive course had an ambitious goal of cooperation between five universities. What concerns the challenges, there should be always a plan B, which, unfortunately, was not the case in this project. Preliminary planning should also take into consideration the equal distribution of work between the different contributors. In addition to administrative boundaries, unexpressed expectations and goals of the participants should be made explicit at the very beginning of planning. One of our most important unexpressed goals was the intention to provide deeper understanding to the participants about the partner countries. How did we succeed: did the course and its planning offer this, especially to the teachers? In addition we need to contemplate the motivation and quality of teaching: what motivates teachers and students to participate in the course in a way that quality teaching can be provided? High quality teaching, which, in turn, enables new learning.

As we noticed, there were some differences in the different academic cultures. These should also be taken into consideration, already at the planning stage. At some universities internationality was a core value, whereas at other institutions the concept was given less attention. Different concepts of management (authoritarian vs. bottom up) and time (long-term planning vs. spontaneous decision-making) were also evident in the process. Some of the lessons learnt were our increased ability to work with different academic cultures and the implementation and exploitation of everyone’s strengths.

The joint course developed our understanding of our own and other academic cultures, and strengthened our skills in intercultural communication. We believe that good cooperation and thorough advance planning at institutional level result in better courses that presuppose shared planning and continuous discussions of expectations and possibilities.

References and further reading


4. Exchanging innovative teaching methods

Katalin Miklóssy

The course was designed to implement pedagogical methods that would accelerate collaborative learning and new ways of knowledge production. One of the most important purposes of the entire Basercan-project was the exchange of innovative teaching practices between the partner universities. According to our aims, an extended and lasting teachers’ network would positively affect the quality of higher education and build practical bridges between academic learning cultures as well. The teachers of the partner universities met before the intensive course-week organised in Tbilisi and together decided the pedagogical methods to be used. Mutual understanding was reached that any particular teaching format was
◆ to improve the students’ critical thinking and analytical skills,
◆ to enhance research based learning,
◆ to raise awareness of the complexity and contested nature of societal issues,
◆ to direct attention to various possibilities of acquiring information and using it innovatively, and
◆ to study by interaction and collaboration.

The course pedagogy relied on the principles of social constructivist theory where learning is based on interaction of the members of the community and knowledge is the outcome of the joint ‘construction’ of that community (Vygotsky 1978; Lave, Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998, Wertsch, 1991). Thus we perceived all members of the course, students and teachers, as being such a learning community. Therefore we wanted to further interaction between teachers and students by applying discursive and co-operative methods. We assumed also that activating teaching formats would assist students to develop critical thinking and new ideas. It was especially paramount in our case, because we acknowledged that there might occur disparity in the way of learning due to the fact that the students came from very different disciplinary backgrounds and academic cultures. In addition, the course was dealing with politically sensitive issues where interpretations were bound to diverge regarding the various perceptions represented by the partner institutions’ teachers and students.
The basic learning unit of the course was group-work that was to support collaborative learning. The participants were divided into groups of four already prior to the intensive course. Each group had members from all three partner-countries: Finland, Georgia and Belarus, and they also represented different disciplines. We designed the structure of the course and the requirements to accelerate students' activity and engagement in group-work. One important aspect was to improve students' research skills because the participants selected for this course were advanced Bachelor or Masters students. Hence, we applied methods that would facilitate a learning process by doing research. According to the assignment, the groups had to come up with a research topic linked to the course theme, Development scenarios in Eastern Europe. The requirement was to study the chosen topic throughout the six days of the intensive course. The idea in the format of ‘learning by doing research’ is that the students take charge over their group’s learning process and together produce new knowledge (Hakkarainen, Lonka & Lipponen, 2004). Therefore it is vitally important that the students themselves define the research questions and methodology. They also had to find information independently and evaluate its weight from the perspectives of their research. In this process the teachers are not the sole authority possessing ultimate knowledge but acting only as supporters of the students’ research process.

Hence, we created a structure based on different forms of teaching that would provide various sources of information for the groups’ research endeavor. The course contained six lectures dealing with different scenarios of development (democracy and autocracy, social and cultural aspects, good governance and corruption, economic development, populism). The lectures were interactive and discursive aiming to encourage students to challenge the lecturers. We also tested a relatively new learning format with the purpose of bringing the non-academic world, in this case civil society, closer to university activities. We invited NGOs relevant from the course themes’ point of view to be interviewed by the students. The NGOs provided the students with important field knowledge that the students could integrate into their research. Our goal with this format was to raise students’ awareness of what they could learn from society and social actors, and how could they apply their theoretical knowledge into practice. Similarly, the method of debating was a central means of learning how to relate to divergent perspectives. The idea was to accelerate the construction of new knowledge by studying different angles to various issues. This format is an effective way to activate the students’ previous knowledge of the debated subject and in the midst of debating this knowledge becomes revaluated.

The intensive course culminated in the group presentations of the research projects. With this structure including the different teaching formats and the students’ group research projects, we wanted to accentuate that knowledge is based on gradually gained, well-assessed information and is an ever-evolving dialogical process. The purpose of the course was to show that knowledge is never absolute but it depends on the point of view and context it was produced in.

In the following sections we provide examples of the various teaching formats we applied hoping that this could inspire other teachers who are planning courses based on international and multidisciplinary collaboration.
References and further reading


Tell me - and I forget, show me - and I will remember, let me do - and I’ll understand. (Confucius)

With all the rapid changes the modern world invites the Universities to embrace, a lecture is still a ‘formal talk on a serious subject given to a group of people, especially students’1 and an important way of teaching.

Probably, the very traditional type of lectures, i.e. an oral essay, at times with the visual support of a Power Point presentation, is the easiest way to systematically introduce material and ensure control of the audience. Or, to be more honest, some simulation of the ideal picture where the students listen attentively to what the lecturer says and absorb the information. However, today anyone interested can get access to a lecture by a world-known expert; and do it comfortably lying on their sofa at home rather than sitting in the classroom listening to their local teacher. Under these conditions more than ever we, the lecturers, have to employ all possible resources to overcome the alleged disadvantages of the lecture, first and foremost the one of ascribing the students a passive role, as well as that of one-way communication during a lecture.

No matter what type of lecture one analyses, what style the lecturer prefers, what equipment and additional materials are used, or the presentation skills and the charisma of the lecturer, the salient features of a lecture remain unchanged. It is still a structured way of presenting the material, providing an overview of the existing literature on the issue; it presupposes further individual work and group discussions. What can and should be changed is the way to do it, so as to prevent ‘a professor’s lecture notes’ from going ‘straight to the students’ lecture notes, without passing through the brains of either’ as already in the 1920s either Mark Twain or Edwin Slosson remarked.2

Lectures in the humanities and social sciences are fertile soil for these changes thanks to the very nature of their subject matter that requires the development of cause-effect thinking on the one hand, and allows the teacher enough variability in the presentation of the information, on the other hand. Sometimes, this type of lecturing is called eclectic.

The optimal group size for this lecture type is limited by the facility of the lecturer to keep eye contact with the majority of the students at most times. For this purpose, the teacher may walk around the room. Maintaining eye contact as much as possible enhances the positive emotional context and nurses in every student the feeling that the lecture is delivered to her/him personally; it also helps the teacher to get feedback, estimate the level of attention, tiredness, understanding, etc. and better adapt the lecture to the condition of the audience.

4.1. Student involvement as a way to enhance the learning outcomes of a university lecture

Elena Korshuk

1 www.oxforddictionaries.com/

2 http://quoteinvestigator.com/2012/08/17/lecture-minds/
The lecture may be accompanied by any technical devices or means, i.e. Power Point presentations, hand-outs, video, audio, etc. that best serve the aim of ensuring better appropriation and longer retention of the information by the audience. The lecture still pursues its common goal, that of introducing new material in a structured and systematic way. Therefore it starts with the presentation of the plan of the lecture. The plan can be quite extensive, so as to be further used as a prompt both by the teacher during the lecture, and by the students in their independent work on the material.

To keep all students active, enactments of illustrative situations are sometimes employed. This way is, for instance, an extremely efficient way to explain the notion of CULTURE in a multinational and multidisciplinary audience.

The teacher refers the students to the plan of the lecture, where the notion of Culture and its major characteristics make one of the sub-topics, and goes through all the enumerated features on the example of the enacted situation. In a short time the students are themselves capable of putting together the definition of Culture.

During the lecture, the teacher maintains an active dialogue with the students. This has been greatly appreciated by the students as a different method to the traditional lecture. This method of conducting lectures is much more effective than the one in which teachers simply voices their notes. Definitions are not immediately spelled out by the lecturer; rather they are worked out together with the audience. The teacher uses leading questions, thus leading the students towards giving the desired response, formulated on the basis of their own arguments. This contributes to the development of logical thinking in students. The application of this method of teaching also results in the fact that the material is absorbed better as it is analysed at the same time it is presented. This method involves all students in the process of learning the new material, due to the fact that everyone is invited to ponder on the answer to the question asked by the teacher. Through conducting a kind of a dialogue, the lecturer establishes a stronger contact with the audience.

Sometimes enactments involving students are used to exemplify a certain situation. It is important that in this case the so-called “question-answer” method is used. The students are encouraged to make their own conclusion from what they have seen. When necessary, the lecturer provides some guiding questions.

3 A. Shepelkevich, 3rd year Tourism major student, International Relations Department, Belarusian State University

4 My sincere gratitude to Dr. Katalin Miklossy, University of Helsinki, the 3rd year students of International Relations (International Tourism) and 1st year students of Information and Communication at the Institute of Journalism of the Belarusian State University for their assistance. This article would not have been possible without their help.
Each task is preceded by some initial information feed provided by the lecturer. It can be a visual image (e.g., a map) or a video to analyse in order to reach the objective set by the teacher at this particular stage of the lecture, an oral example, an enactment, etc. This information creates the background against which the group inductively – or deductively – develops and absorbs knowledge.

Another important factor is a friendly atmosphere in the class. The lecturer takes into account the psychological characteristics of the students present in this particular class. Everyone in the audience is perceived as a personality and is considered to be an active participant in the process of learning, rather than an object of the teacher’s influence. Every opinion counts and makes a difference. Students are free to share their thoughts, and thus new knowledge is acquired through discussion. All of this leads to the development of creative thinking, and ensures that information is better retained in the memory of the students. The teacher provides ample examples that link the theoretical information with experience. It is worth to note that the teacher uses examples from her own working experience in the area. The students are equally invited to share examples of their own.

Last but not least, the lecturer’s ultimate goal is to ensure that the students understand not only the WHAT, but the HOW, and, most important, the WHY of all the material, and become able to creatively apply the knowledge they get.

According to the students themselves, “It was new for us that you gave us a chance to guess the correct answer on our own, to build up on our logical thinking. Thanks to this approach, the information is firmly stuck in my memory.”

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5 Nadzezhda Hil, 3rd year Tourism major student, International Relations Department, Belarusian State University.

6 I heard this wonderful thought during a Summer School for teachers in the Central European University, Budapest.
Teaching populism is never easy. There are preconceptions regarding the term itself and the topic often evokes suspicions. When one seeks to define populism in a way that would override the usual understandings, it is particularly important to reflect on these preconceptions. Already prior to the trip when I told people that I would be teaching populism in Georgia to Belarusian, Georgian and Finnish students, eyebrows were raised. It seemed a little funny, so I turned it into a joke. The course was about discussing development scenarios in post-communist Eastern Europe, a subject that is closely related with democratisation and what I would be teaching was something as controversial as populism.

Here in the European academic context relating populism to democracy sounds odd to many people, but from the theoretical background I come from, some populism is actually necessary for democracy (Laclau 2005) – although what works as an ingredient may not work as the source of nourishment in the long run. The required pre-course article (Rovira Kaltwasser 2014) the students had or were supposed to have been reading for the course pondered on the relationship between populism and democracy. So I thought, if I can laugh at myself and allow others to laugh at me for “teaching populism”, why not allow the students to laugh about it too? I resorted to drama as my tool for dealing with populism. And a lot of laughter followed.

In my lecture, first we started from definitions of populism. What is populism? I asked the students to reflect upon the question in small groups. We discussed how populism was or could be defined and mapped them on the black board. We tried to integrate this to the literature that not every student had read. The discussion was linked to a blog [https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/cas-mudde/populism-in-europe-primer] by Cas Mudde, perhaps the most prominent contemporary political scientist working on populism, that had been published very recently. This piece from the Open Democracy website (which was now introduced to the students) discussed populism in different countries. I made a point that for instance Mudde had not believed the Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán was a populist in 2010 and Orbán’s Fidesz party to be a populist political force, but Mudde changed his mind later and accepted the argument that Orban was, after all, a populist. This example was to show that definitions and readings, and even political circumstances develop. Populism can appear in quite different forms in different places, so I did not claim to be an authority on the contexts the students knew perhaps even more about, but sought to invite them to reflect on populism in their countries.

In order to integrate the students’ views of populism into a more academic discussion, it was important to highlight the multiple perspectives. Furthermore, embracing the ideal of research-based teaching, I presented the cases of mainstream, fringe, and compet-
ing populism: the populist dynamics that I had been developing as a framework for analysing populism. Nevertheless, I emphasised to the students that as a teacher I did not want to give too many empirical examples of populism – rather than limiting the students’ imagination, I expected them to provide the examples. The definitions the students gave were often related to the popular preconceptions that I actually wanted to challenge, but they offered an opportunity to open various insights into the definition of populism.

Although the entire course was based on permanent student groups, for this exercise the students were divided into new temporary groups. They were invited to recognise a moment of populism and present it to the others in the form of drama or other presentation means. One of the groups presented a small poster, others worked on drama.

What was achieved was an operationalisation of the concepts learned in action – through a learning by doing approach. Deeper understanding of the populist moment through the bodily experience and at the receiving end as the audience. The students had already been working together intensively for a few days, so they knew each other – even if I did not know them – and they felt relaxed and there was quite a lot of laughter around. The students presented dialogues and cases of populism and there was a feeling of having learned something during the session.

Where this format of teaching failed in our case was the timing: each session was supposed to last only two hours, and we did not have time for the final discussion of what actually happened in the short sketches. From the perspective of pedagogy, the exercise should include a discussion after the drama session, recognising the populist logics or dynamics and different conceptions of populism in the plays. The students should, of course, be able to write down their own reflections or use this as a basis for further research. Obviously, the method also taught transferable skills, such as project management, teamwork and presentation skills – while raising awareness of populism and democracy and enabling reflection on their connections in their own or other contexts.

References and further reading


Debating is a teaching method that has been popular with students and teachers alike because it can improve learning results. The idea is to construct new knowledge by studying different angles on various issues. My aim with this format was to deepen and elaborate the main concepts and subjects of the lectures. In addition, since debating always allows elbowroom and freedom of building up the argumentation, this format enabled students to bring new perspectives that had not been discussed previously in the lectures.

In this format debating is a team-effort, thus it is based on group-work and close collaboration of the participants. According to the course requirements, the students were informed already in the pre-phase that debating would be an integral part of the intensive course week and they were supposed to prepare for it as a group. We announced on the course website three subjects considered for the future debate, but what topic and which side the individual groups would be assigned to was to be revealed only at the introductory lecture of the intensive course in Tbilisi. The groups were expected to construct an argumentation strategy reflecting several aspects of each theme. Since we had six groups we had three themes including solidarity vs. individualism, integration vs. independence, and nationalism (pros and cons). The subjects were selected keeping in mind the multidisciplinary potential of the topics and also the course’s main agenda. In addition, it was important to choose subjects that would engage the students’ previous knowledge and life experience.

Each group contained three nationalities (Georgian, Belorussian and Finnish) and different disciplinary backgrounds. The selected topics were also provocative because these themes have been challenged internationally and especially in East-West dimensions. The debaters had to consider also historical roots, the current situation and future perspectives of each theme. The debates were conducted as 1 to 1 group discussion on one of the three topics. The topics were chosen by the groups and miraculously the selection of the topics went really smoothly: there occurred no conflicting interest and each group got the theme and angle what they were striving for.
The students were required to gain by themselves background information, facts, and relevant theories in order to prepare for their side of the debate. The debates were organized on the second and third days meaning that the students could also take advantage of the content of the respective lectures before the debate. This format was designed so that each of the themes was relatively broad and the temporal perspective (past-present-future) attached to the topics was also significant hence the task had to be delivered by relying heavily on a division of labor within the groups. However, to come up with a convincing body of argumentation the group members had to share the individually acquired knowledge and work together intensively before the debate took place. The advantage pedagogically is that the students had the necessity to share besides factual knowledge also different disciplinary-anchored theories and moreover engage in discussions over values.

Each debate of two groups lasted 45 minutes after which the rest of the non-debating teams acted as evaluators of the debating groups’ performance. The audience was also requested to contribute to the debate with at least one additional question that has not been dealt with satisfactorily. This was in order to actively engage the non-debating students in every debated theme and process the different angles. Debating not only teaches students to switch perspectives but also to evaluate what is a convincing argumentation that would support a position or claim of the debating sides.

Debating relies on quick reaction and meaningful response to the opposite side’s arguments, hence this was an excellent way to practice oral skills. Debating also proved to be a format that produced, at times, heated discussions as the students defended their views vigorously. Facing opposite views intensified besides the crystallization of the group-stance, also the deliberation of the whole subject. The students seemingly enjoyed debating. Emotions and passion surfaced that actually assisted the cognitive process. I decided not to use any ‘managed form of debate’ (such as for example the Oxford-style debate) but let the groups take the discussion in any direction they wanted, within the frame of the topics and the compulsory temporal angles.

Debating was one of the most successful and enormously popular teaching format. In the student-feedback they described that ‘debating taught them how to make powerful arguments and counter-arguments’, but it also ‘urged them to cooperate and rely on each other’. For the question, ‘How did the techniques of debating help your learning process’ the answers were unexpectedly positive, as Table 1 below indicates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How did the techniques of debating help your learning process</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>4.4 (0.61)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scale:  
1 = not at all, not useful to me  
2 = a little useful to me  
3 = somewhat useful to me  
4 = quite a lot, useful to me  
5 = a lot, very useful to me
One of the central ideas of the intensive course was to bring the non-academic world, and especially civil society, closer to university activities. On the one hand, we wanted to raise the students’ awareness of the enormous amount of information that is embedded in social actors. On the other hand, the goal was to point out to the students that their characteristically theoretical knowledge of higher education has wider relevance for society and is applicable into practice.

Thus, keeping in mind the content of the intensive course, i.e., development scenarios in the post-communist space, we approached NGOs to share their reflections on societal evolution. The NGOs were to provide the students with important field knowledge and the students had to integrate what they learned into the research assignments required by the course curriculum. The students were working in groups through the whole duration of the intensive course and formulated their own research agenda.

We invented a ‘speed-dating’ learning format where representatives of six NGOs\(^1\) sat by different tables placed to form a big circle, each table having a ‘host NGO’. The task was for the groups of students to go around the circle and interview one by one each NGO for 20 minutes and – according to the speed-dating choreography – then switch to another table and interview another NGO. This meant that every NGO was interviewed by every group. The interviews were

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\(^1\) List of NGOs participating in the session: Identoba (Georgian LGBT Rights & Gender Equality NGO) represented by two persons; EMC (Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center) represented by Sofo Verdzeuli; IDFI (Institute for Development of Freedom of Information) represented by Levan Avalishvili and Londa Beria; Caucasian House (The Centre for Cultural Relations) represented by Thea Galdava; Center of Cooperation Between Ethnicities, Agit Mirzoyev; Democracy and Freedom Watch, represented by Mari Nikuradze; Vikes (Finnish Foundation for Media and Development) represented by Jarmo Koponen.
totally in the hands of the groups: they had to structure their questions and construct an interviewing strategy of the information they needed the NGOs to reveal from the perspective of their own research theme. Students had an opportunity to become familiar with the work of Georgian NGOs present at the meeting in advance, as most of the organisations provide research and reports in English on the internet.

The NGO-speed dating session was organised in the middle of the course at the host institution, in the Tbilisi State University’s premises. The initiative, planning and coordination were based on a long standing collaboration between an expert of a Finnish NGO (Vikes, a foundation promoting freedom of speech, communication and media), Jarmo Koponen and Mari Nikuradze, a journalist from Tbilisi who has a wide network and field experience with Georgian NGOs. An important aspect was that the students coming from different societies of Belarus, Georgia and Finland, maintaining diverse attitudes towards civil society, could meet various non-government organisations based in Georgia.

The NGO speed-dating format was unusual for both students and NGOs participating in the meeting. Both parties found it interesting and entertaining at the same time. Londa Beria, a spokesperson for the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI), said she had experience in having discussions with students, but the learning format was new to her. ‘Our conversation was lengthier, and students asked questions digging deeper into activities of our organisation’ - she remarked. Beria outlined that IDFI has several working directions, and so they were able to answer questions for students who were working on different topics. ‘During the meeting, some students expressed more interest in our publications, and we have sent them individual e-mails based on their interest.’ Agit Mirzoev, from the Center of Cooperation Between Ethnicities, characterised the meeting as ‘interactive, vivid and interesting’. He tried to explain how ethnic minorities live in Georgia and what challenges they have to face every day. Most of the NGO representatives expressed interest in attending such meetings in the future.

Many of the students were interested in rights of LGBT people in Georgia. Unfortunately representatives of Identoba, an organisation working on sexual minority rights in Georgia, were not able to attend the meeting due to urgent call at court; however partner organisations did their best to satisfy the interests of students.

Tornike Tsiramua, a student from Georgia, shared his impressions:

‘It has been a really interesting and productive discussion. We’ve heard diverse positions. I find it hard to say anything negative, as it has been one of the best events I’ve attended. I wish I had an opportunity to attend more events like that.’

Another student, Andrew Nicholas from Finland, had a critical remark about the meeting:

‘The first part was useful, but I wanted more time to speak with some NGOs, for example, some NGOs were not necessary for our project, so it seemed like wasted time with some NGOs, and on the reverse side we only had a few minutes to speak with some NGOs we really wanted to speak with, so we didn’t get as much information as we could have’.

There were students who had lists of questions, but due to lack of time they did not manage to ask them during the meeting. They have
agreed with the organisations to communicate online and answer questions they did not manage to ask.

After the NGO speed-dating format had ended, a traditional NGO presentation was arranged, introducing an additional aspect of society that had not been represented by any civic organisation during the speed-dating session. The GoGroup Media (Eyewitness Studio uniting professional and citizen journalists documenting real-life stories) showed a short video of a young woman in a patriarchal society. The film induced hot discussions that continued after class more informally in a café and lasted more than an hour. The students felt necessary to set up a large round-table, with coffee and snacks, where NGO representatives and students sat down all together discussing various topics dealt with and learnt from the NGOs during the day.

It is easy to agree that continuation of the debate at the coffee table was important: it was beneficial to have a less formal setting, where people could voice their opinions. It was encouraging that the students were active in presenting their opinions, but at times it was difficult to moderate the debate. The debate emerged clearly from the fact that students came from different backgrounds and had various cultural knowledge.

In conclusion, the NGO-meeting raised considerable interest in the students and was a new experience for the representatives of the NGOs too.
The intensive course provided an excellent opportunity to introduce to the academics the collaborative and interactive teaching-learning methods, and in particular, to present the latest inventions of Finnish higher education that help to increase the quality of teaching and learning. Hence, I organised a workshop for university teachers of the Ilia State University and the Tbilisi State University. It seemed that there was a clear need for the subject and over 60 teachers registered, but in the end only thirteen turned up.

At the beginning of the workshop, I demonstrated the pedagogical support system invented at the University of Helsinki aiming to assist university teachers to deliver high quality education. This support system is build up by the collaboration of various actors such as the wide networks of Senior Lecturers in University Pedagogy and the Teachers’ Academy, in addition to the Central Administration led by the Vice-rector and including the Academic Affairs Unit and the Educational Centre for ICT (see Figure 1). I also mentioned that uni-

Figure 1. The pedagogical support system for academics at the University of Helsinki
University teachers are increasingly involved in the very popular pedagogical development programme *University Pedagogy* (extending to 60 ECTS) that is organised by the Centre for Research and Learning in Higher Education, which is also responsible for further develop the programme research-based. This comprehensive pedagogical support system raised a lot of interest and questions.

At the next phase of the workshop, I introduced the principles of active learning, and talked about the differences and significance of collaborative and cooperative learning, in order to ensure that the theoretical background was clear and understandable for the participants. Then I described some useful group work methods (such as the Jigsaw model, or Inquiry-based Learning etc.) that would strengthen students’ engagement and motivate them to share their knowledge to other group members. In my workshop, the participants became most interested in the Learning Café method (see Figure 2), hence it was important to demonstrate this format in practice. Therefore I organised for them an assignment to experience how the Learning Café actually works. The task, rooted in the theoretical background of active learning was focused on elaborating various topics related to active learning. The idea was that several tables were set and each table received a different theme to discuss. Participants were divided in groups of 4-5 members. At each table, there was a host who introduced the theme of the table to the group. The group pondered about the theme and wrote their ideas, comments, questions on a sheet that was attached to every table. The hosts remained at their tables but the groups moved to another table. The host explained the theme again and described what the previous group had discussed. The new group added their own comments to the sheet on the table. Then the change of the tables was repeated. Finally, the groups returned to their original table and the host displayed all the comments and questions that had come up about the theme, and then the groups made conclusions about the educational implications for their theme. The hosts presented the conclusions and educational implications of their groups to all the participants. The session ended in a general discussion.

The participants reported that experiencing a group work method in practice helped them to understand properly why this format can engage students to work in groups and to learn more than they could have done individually. These teachers also remarked that the workshop as a whole had helped them to understand why active and collaborative teaching methods support students to overcome learning difficulties and to absorb knowledge better than they would...
do while studying only individually. A certificate of participation in the workshop was sent to each participant afterwards.

The success of the workshop became evident when the next day I was invited to visit the Department of Education Sciences at the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences to meet the Head of Department and the Dean. The workshop aroused such an enormous interest that currently I have been commissioned to run a three-day workshop for teachers of the Ilia State University and the Tbilisi State University in December 2015. The intensive course in this sense exceeded its original aims and generated an assumedly longer collaboration between academics exchanging innovative teaching practices. This may serve well the ultimate goals of the North-South-South programme to produce lasting results as an outcome of an otherwise temporarily limited interaction of higher education institutions (about the programme, see the Introductory chapter by Katalin Miklóssy).
6. Students’ experiences on collaborative and interactive teaching – observations and analyses

Anne Nevgi

I was invited to participate in the international intensive course ‘Development scenarios in Eastern Europe’ hosted by the Tbilisi State University in May 2015 as a researcher. My task was to observe and analyse how the new pedagogical approach worked out and to investigate students’ experiences of interactive and collaborative teaching and learning methods applied in the course. In this chapter I elaborate the following questions:

1. What kind of experiences did the students have of various teaching and learning activities and how did they perceive that these activities helped them to learn?
2. What kind of effect did the applied pedagogical methods have on students’ learning on the course?
3. How did the students perceive the international learning environment and working with students from other countries?

The data for this study were collected as a researcher’s observations of teaching and learning activities in classrooms during the course and as student feedback.

As a researcher, I observed all the lectures and group work supervised by teachers. However, I did not observe how students worked together as groups when they prepared their assignments and presentations. While observing, I had my laptop or iPad and wrote my notes and took photos of students working together in various organised group work sessions and of how they interacted with lecturers. I paid special attention to interaction and how focused the students seemed to be.

Student feedback about the course was collected by three different methods: (a) paper feedback questionnaire, (b) oral feedback by Fishbowl group discussion, and (c) electronic survey questionnaire.

a) Paper feedback questionnaire: 17 out of 22 participants filled out the paper feedback questionnaire on the last day of the course. Students were asked to evaluate the following: how interesting and useful the topics and issues discussed in lectures and group work were; how useful the NGO event was and what they thought of the organisation of the course. They were also asked to specify their rating after each structured question. Two final questions of the paper questionnaire focused on students’ perception about how the intensive course had encouraged them to cooperate and how it had raised their awareness on developmental issues.

b) Oral feedback: A group discussion was organised on the final day of the course applying the ‘Fishbowl’ method. Students were asked to discuss openly about the pros and cons concerning the course by formulating two circles. First students sitting in the

1 Responses were gathered applying the Likert type scale: 1 = not interesting, useful to me, 2 = a little interesting, useful to me, 3 = neutral, 4 = interesting, useful to me, 5 = very interesting, very useful to me.
2 Students were asked to evaluate these by applying the scale (1) Not at all, (2) To a little extent, (3) To some extent, (4) To a large extent, and (5) Completely.
inner circle discussed for approximately 15 minutes, and then students sitting in the outer circle commented and added their pros and cons. 20 students out of 22 participated in the Fishbowl group work and brief notes were written concerning the issues students raised up during the discussion.

c) Electronic survey: Students were asked to fill out an electronic feedback questionnaire after the course when they had submitted their final assignment to the teacher. 15 students out of 22 answered the electronic feedback questionnaire. In it students were asked to evaluate their learning on the course by rating seven items measuring their learning experiences by applying the scale (1) Completely disagree, (2) Somewhat disagree, (3) Somewhat agree, (4) Completely agree, and (5) No opinion. Furthermore, they were asked to describe what topics or issues were challenging to discuss during the course or in their groups. Students were also asked to describe whether there were any “taboos” in studying at their home university and what they thought about possibilities of democratisation in their own university.3

Student experiences of various teaching-learning activities

First, I examined how students’ perceived different lectures and what kind of feedback they gave concerning lectures. Most of the students reported that they had experienced the topics and issues of lectures as interesting or very interesting for them. Students had perceived the lecture ‘Contemporary challenges of social changes in Eastern Europe’ (M = 4.2) as the most interesting and useful for them and only one student has perceived the topic as not an interesting one.

Table 1. Students’ satisfaction (Frequencies, Means and SDs) concerning the topics of the lectures on the course

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lecture</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Democracy-autocracy and social aspects</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.6 (0.86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Contemporary challenges of social changes in Eastern Europe</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.2 (1.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Good governance</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.8 (0.95)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Economic development</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.6 (1.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Cultural topic</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.8 (1.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Populism</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.9 (0.99)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scale: 1 = not interesting, useful to me, 2 = a little interesting, useful to me, 3 = neutral, 4 = interesting, useful to me, 5 = very interesting, very useful to me.

Students’ responses concerning lectures were classified in two groups: (1) lectures as informative and giving new knowledge and (2) lectures as giving basic and general knowledge. Some students had perceived lectures and topics as basic and they explained that they already had a very sound knowledge base of the topic.

3 The data was analysed by both quantitative and qualitative methods. First, students’ responses to structured quantitative questions were analysed by calculating frequencies, means and standard deviations for each structured question of both feedback questionnaires. The relationship between students’ perceptions concerning usefulness of various lectures was examined by calculating Pearson’s Correlation Coefficient. Students’ open answers were content analysed. Researcher’s observations were used as an additional source to understand what students had described in their open answers.
‘Some lectures were rather basic, however, this is likely due to my academic background.’ (Student P13)

‘Some of the lectures were really general. I feel they could have been more challenging and more connected to the Eastern Europe.’ (lectures 1 and 4) (Student P01)

For some other students lectures were informative and they felt that they had learned new issues and new perspectives.

‘The lectures were great opportunity to get more information.’ (Student P16)

One student had perceived the construct of populism as challenging to discuss with others, and one student perceived that the way the cultural topic was approached seemed strange from his/her perspective.

Next, I examined whether students’ perceptions of how interesting the course topics were for them were interrelated. I calculated Pearson’s correlation coefficient in order to examine what kind of interrelations could be revealed between different lectures. Students, who perceived that the lecture focusing on contemporary challenges in Eastern Europe was interesting for them, perceived also that the topics of good governance and populism were interesting for them. Students perceiving the topic of good governance as an interesting one, were also interested in the topic of populism ($r = .71$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lecture</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Democracy-autocracy and social aspects</td>
<td>-.27</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.00</td>
<td>-.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Contemporary Challenges of Social Changes in Eastern Europe</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td>-.21</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.55*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Good governance</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>.71**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Economic development</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Cultural topic</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Populism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$*$ = $p > .05$, ** $p = .01$

**How the applied pedagogical methods enhanced learning?**

Students were asked to evaluate after the course how their learning on the course had been supported by the various teaching and learning methods. In general, students had perceived that the various teaching and learning methods helped them to learn. All the students who replied to the feedback questionnaire on the last day of the course had perceived group work tasks ($M = 4.6$), and cooperation between group participants ($M = 4.7$) as interesting or very interesting and useful for them. Students had also perceived debate ($M = 4.6$) and group work presentations ($M = 4.5$) as interesting or very interesting and useful for them. Only one student had perceived debate and group work presentations as neutral for her learning. Students’ experiences in learning by doing research ($M = 3.5$; $SD =$
1.06) were divided, half of the respondents reported that they had learned only little or somewhat by doing research and the other half reported that had learned a lot by doing research.

As a new mode of giving students the chance to meet various experts from non-governmental organisations, an event called NGO speed-dating was organised. (See more about this topic in the article by Jarmo Koponen and Mari Nikuradze in this volume.)

In general, students were very satisfied with the NGO meeting ($M = 4.1; SD = 0.74$) and perceived that the meeting helped them a lot as expressed by these students in their open answers:

‘The best part of the whole week. So useful to meet all those NGOs and ask my own questions. I was really pleased about the selection of NGOs (human rights focus + media etc.) but maybe others would have wished also for an economic part of view etc.’ (Student P01)

‘It [NGO meeting] was useful for me because I want to be a good specialist in the issues of policy, economy, development.’ (Student P06)

Three students had perceived that the meeting with NGOs did not help or had helped them only a little and an additional three students reported that their experience was neutral, not positive nor negative. In their open answers they complained that the organisation of the meeting was unclear, or that their group had such a theme for their group work or they had not yet selected their topic so they did not benefit from interviewing NGOs.

‘I think that the NGO meeting was not very useful because our group didn’t have the topic chosen, so we couldn’t ask exact information, but got only wide range of news from which most wasn’t useful for us. It would have been better to have one NGO to each group for an hour.’ (Student P05)

However, for most of the students the meeting of experts from NGOs helped them to gather information to their group work task.

My research question focused on what kind of effect the applied teaching and learning methods had on students’ learning experience. In general, students reported that diverse teaching and learning methods had helped them to learn better, and they perceived
that the course raised their awareness of societal problems in order to see these from different angles \((M = 3.7)\). Furthermore, the students perceived that group work supported them in their learning process \((M = 3.7)\). Most of the students reported that the course had supported them to obtain new information compared to their previous knowledge. Most of the students reported that the course had facilitated and improved their critical thinking, analytical skills, and argumentation skills. Furthermore, most of the students reported that the course had raised their awareness of the complexity of societal problems and different angles embedded in these issues and that they could now better understand how to acquire and use wider social knowledge in academic studies. However, the principle of self-directed and active learning in terms of learning to do research during the course was not realised: seven students somewhat disagreed and only three students completely agreed that the teaching and learning methods at the course had helped them to learn how to do research.

Table 3. Students’ perceptions (Frequencies, Means and SDs) on how the course supported them learn

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items describing principles of collaborative and interactive teaching</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. In comparison to my previous knowledge the course provided new information.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.1 (.74)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The course improved my critical thinking and analytical skills.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.3 (.62)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The course helped to learn how to do research.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.7 (.80)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The course raised my awareness of the complexity of societal problems and different angles embedded in these issues.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3.7 (.46)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The course helped to understand how to acquire and use wider social knowledge in academic studies.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.5 (.64)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. The course developed my argumentation skills.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.5 (.52)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. The group work was important for my learning process.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3.7 (.72)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scale: 1 = Completely disagree, 2 = Somewhat disagree, 3 = Some what agree, 4 = Completely agree, NO = No opinion

Students’ experiences of working and studying in an international learning environment

Based on my observations, students worked very intensively in groups. They both challenged and supported other members of their group, and had lots of laughs and good humour. Students reported that working in an international learning environment and meeting other students from foreign countries was one of the most inspiring factors of the course. They reported that they learned a lot from other students, and even got new friends. They felt that the course was very intensive and sometimes very challenging and tiring, but at the same time they enjoyed it as they could improve their skills and
knowledge both in expertise of their subject and in communicating in English.

In their Fishbowl discussion, students highlighted that the collaborative and interactive teaching and learning methods and group work helped them to break stereotypes and to overcome prejudices concerning people in foreign countries. Overall, the course had an informal atmosphere and students reported that there were no hierarchies between teachers and students. They emphasised that one of the best factors of the course was to learn to know students from other countries and to learn from their peers about both the political and economical situation in the country.

‘It was really great experience, and I got enriched with a lot of information as well as with new connections, which is very essential for me. It was very tiring but it was definitely worth of it.’ (Student P05)

‘This course was great opportunity to get a lot of knowledge and to improve my expertise. But the most important thing is, I got new friends. Thank you for organising.’ (Student P16)

‘I hope that I will have a chance to visit other courses, because this course was great. Good atmosphere, new friends, non-formal atmosphere, interesting focus and methods.’ (Student P04)

References and further reading


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