

Learning based on students' active participation in transforming theory into practice – as perceived by the students

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Introduction

According to the theory of constructivism, learners construct their knowledge with their own activities building on what they already know and understand (Biggs & Tang; 2007, p. 21). Thus, teaching is not a matter of transmitting but of engaging students in active learning.

Last autumn I developed a dialogue-based seminar where I gave lectures part of the time and the students participated in discussions, saw film clips and video case stories and analyzed paper-based cases. However, I had the feeling that the students did not really read the mandatory literature, at least not until after a mid-term exam, and that it affected their participation during class. Sometimes it made it difficult to have an active discussion in class. So, in order to further develop the seminar I wanted to encourage student participation by letting them work in groups preparing presentations of theories and models from the mandatory literature for use in analyzing case stories.

The seminar

The title of the seminar was: *Psychosocial work environment: Conflicts, negative behaviour and bullying in the workplace*. Nineteen students were enrolled in the seminar and they participated in the whole seminar. Most of the students were Danish and some were from Norway or Sweden. Approximately three-quarters of the students attended the class on a weekly

basis, at times a little more and at times a little less. I do not think that this is unusual for this type of course.

The course was outlined as a weekly two-hour seminar over twelve weeks between September and December with a mandatory curriculum of 600 pages which was used in class. The literature was mainly scientific articles and book chapters selected to cover the different topics of the seminar. In addition, the students needed to select 600 pages by themselves primarily for use in a synopsis exam. The exam is an oral exam based on a synopsis and includes supervision of the students which takes place in the second half of January.

A general outline of the seminar that was given to the students before they signed up for it:

At the seminar the concepts of conflicts, negative behaviour and bullying will be illustrated from a work psychological, managerial and relational perspective and by use of theories in these areas. At the seminar we will analyse risk factors/antecedents and consequences of conflicts, negative behaviour and bullying for the individual, the group and the organisation. The seminar will also include a discussion on how you can work with prevention and rehabilitation in connection with these forms of behaviour in organisations. The seminar will include lectures and case analyses and the students are expected to participate actively by giving presentations and participating in exercises (Source: Teaching plan, autumn 2010).

In order to motivate the students into volunteering to give a presentation, I argued that it would be a practical exercise for the exam, where they also have to give a ten-minute presentation. Accordingly, many students volunteered at the first session, two backed out again because they were not able to participate in the session they had chosen for their presentation and they did not want to take up another. The rest I tried to motivate along the way, however there were three students who did not want to do a presentation.

General instructions were given in the first session included that they should present one or two theories from the curriculum of the session that they chose. I also suggested that their presentation should only last approximately ten minutes. I tried to talk with the students in the session before they had their own presentation to make sure they knew what they should do. However, that was not always possible for various reasons.

The intended learning outcomes (ILOs) were presented at every session and an overall ILO for the whole seminar was outlined in the first session: *the purpose of the seminar is that you acquire knowledge about the*

psychosocial work environment with special focus on what may go wrong between people and the potential consequences that may have for the individual, the work group and the organization as a whole and how it may be prevented. The session ILOs were also focused on acquiring knowledge and some of them included that the students should be able to analyse a case.

In the first session, the students were asked to write their expectations for the seminar on a piece of paper, which I collected and tried to include when planning the sessions.

The seminar was organized so that every session included either reflections on a problem or a theory and/or case analyses in small (two persons) or bigger (four-five persons) groups based on the theory or models presented.

Evaluation of the seminar

The evaluation was carried out using a semi-structured questionnaire with seven quantitative questions and seven open-ended questions. The questionnaire was given to the students at the end of the seminar; two students filled in the questionnaire at the second to last session and two students were not present at the last session and did not fill in the questionnaire. One of the last two had participated in very few sessions (this student was the only one). The questionnaire also included an evaluation of the expectations that the students were asked to formulate at the start of the seminar.

A qualitative group-based mid-term evaluation was also carried out and the results were used to adapt the teaching of the second part of the seminar.

Results of the evaluation

To the first question: "Will you be able to use what you have learned at the seminar", fourteen students ticked the "to a high degree" box and three students the "to a very high degree" box.

The next question asked whether they had given a presentation; six students had done so together with one other student, five together with two other students, one had done it on her own and five had not given a presentation. A qualitative question asked them to describe how it was to give a presentation. All twelve students who had given a presentation made a comment. Ten students wrote that it was positive, a fine process, fun, a learning experience. One wrote that the articles were exciting and another that (s)he

learned from summarizing theory from different articles, to present and discuss in plenum. One noted that it was a different and positive process to work through the texts in a different way than just reading them. One found that it was manageable, which was positive because it motivates one to give a presentation when it does not seem immense. A couple of students wrote that the audience was positive.

On the more negative side, two students indicated that the instructions were not clear enough. One felt that she was cut off by the teacher because they talked about something that was on the agenda for the next session. One found that the teacher asked many difficult questions and hoped that it would not be so at the exam. One felt that it was a learning experience for the presenter but not always so for the listeners. One student experienced a great freedom with regard to expectations and how it was done, which (s)he appreciated but felt that the quality could have been higher if the instructions were more specific with regard to critique of theories, use of PowerPoint etc. Some students just summarized the articles which was not very interesting, I think. It would have been more interesting to find special points, questions of doubt or something else that would have generated a discussion.

The students were also asked about their experience of the other students' presentations. All students made a comment; and thirteen had positive comments: structured and interesting, professional, useful, exciting, relevant, some better than others, everybody was prepared and knew the theory, the PowerPoint presentation was good, nice to hear other students' interpretation of the texts. On the negative side were comments like: different standards, should have been shorter, sometimes too much repetition and a little boring when you had read the text yourself, too bad that not everybody had a presentation, often it was too time consuming, but also nice with variation of the teaching.

The students were also asked what they thought about the format of the seminar in general. There were four response categories between "really good" and "bad"; five students ticked "really good", eight ticked "good" and one ticked the third category "not so good". One ticked in between "really good" and "good" one in between "good" and "not so good".

Fifteen students also wrote comments. They were mostly positive: they liked the variation between lectures, student presentation, reflections and opinions, that there was time to discuss theories and methods, analyzing cases in the form of film clips/videos and written cases, aimed towards use in real life.

The last question asked whether the seminar met their expectations; six students wrote “yes, to a high degree”, nine ticked “to some degree” and two ticked “no”. Twelve students wrote comments. A few wrote that the atmosphere was good.

Discussion

The evaluation of the seminar shows that the students generally speaking were satisfied with the active form of the seminar and all found that they could use the knowledge that they had acquired during the seminar to a high or very high degree. The seminar exam is after the deadline of this paper, so the level of actual learning will be evaluated later.

According to Mazur (1997) most students tend to read their textbooks too quickly without reflecting on the meaning of what they have just read. Thus, a more participatory way of preparing for class may be a better learning experience. As one of the students commented in the evaluation: it was “a different and positive process to work through the texts in a different way than just reading it”.

I do not think that student presentations should be the only activity in the class since the person(s) who learn the most will be the presenters. However, in combination with the other activities, including group analyses of cases whether they were presented in film clips, videos or written cases, it will enhance the learning of the individual student. Still, some students found that it was “nice to hear other students' interpretation of the texts”. Thus, you can also learn from other people's interpretation and how they choose to present a text.

Some students found that I as a teacher asked too many difficult questions. According to Brousseau's theory of didactic situations (Christiansen & Olsen; 2006) people learn by relating to specific situations. Such situations may be created through case stories that the students discuss and analyse among themselves. The theory of didactic situations points out that it is important that a “personalization” takes place, for the students to find the teaching meaningful and relevant. Instead of the teacher asking questions in relation to the presentation, deeper knowledge may be attained when the students analyse the cases together with fellow students and present possible problems and discuss them in plenum afterwards. The teacher participates in plenum discussions primarily as the coordinator and leader of the discussion.

Adaptation to an environment – Piaget’s basic metaphor about learning (Christiansen & Olsen; 2006) – is important for didactic situations. However, adaptation demands a personalization of the text. An even higher level of personalization would be possible if the students were to discuss their personal experience with the subject to a higher degree, as a couple of students suggested in the evaluation. This would demand a high level of confidence and security in class. I think that this was present in this particular class – some of the students wrote in the evaluation that there was a good climate and atmosphere in class which made it possible for at least some students to talk about their own experiences. This is in line with Brousseau, in so far as he emphasizes social relations and their importance for learning (Christiansen & Olsen; 2006). However, it is also an important task of the teacher to make sure that the reflections on the texts or cases do not move to any great extent from an academic and analytical perspective to a more personal and anecdotal one.

In general, the objectives of the course seemed to be met at least when looking at the evaluation. In this regard, they met the expectations of fifteen out of seventeen students. Whether they actually learned something will be revealed at the exam. Some of the students had hoped for concrete, practical and useful knowledge about the subject and felt that they had achieved that. In future seminars, I will focus the objectives even more on the ability of the students to analyse cases.

The level of activity in the seminar was quite high. Some students were most active in small groups, however, I think that is quite normal and it is therefore important that group work is possible in class. The general level of activity was high, even for this sort of course. The students evaluated their own activity a bit higher than their fellow students did.

In conclusion, I think that introducing the student presentations was a success and I will use this in future seminars of this type. It should not be the only student activity, though, but together with the other activities I think that it worked out well.

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