

# **Enhancing Student Activation and Learning in a Master's Course through Case-based and Dialogue-based Teaching**

Marius Brostrøm Kousgaard

Department of Public Health  
University of Copenhagen

## **Introduction**

Activating students during courses is important for learning, and there are several ways to promote active engagement in and between teaching sessions (Rienecker et al. 2019). This paper describes a project aimed at enhancing student activation and learning during teaching sessions in a master's course through the systematic use of a case-based and dialogue-based approach.

The course is entitled “Change Management in Health Care” and is part of the Master of Public Health Program. The course consists of 10 course days, usually lasting 4 hours. The course deals with issues such as change management strategies, organizational context of change, stakeholder analysis, reactions to change, implementation methods and theories, and changes across professional and institutional boundaries. The overall goal of the course is to strengthen participants' knowledge (of key concepts, theories, models) and analytical skills concerning change management in healthcare organizations, and to make them able to apply their knowledge and skills in specific change projects.

Typically, between 8 and 20 students attend the course. Most participants hold a health degree (e.g. in nursing, pharmacy, medicine, or physiotherapy) and have professional experience in healthcare organizations. In addition, some participants are single-subject students that work in public or private organizations and want to develop specific competencies in change management within the healthcare sector. Finally, a limited number of master level students from other study programs at the university are allowed to enroll. The teaching form is a

combination of classroom teaching (including lectures, discussions and group work), supervision, and student-student presentations and student-student feedback.

To pass the course, the students must submit an assignment paper in which they analyze a specific change management project using one or two models or theories from the course. The students are encouraged to select the case themselves – if possible, a case from their own organizations – based on the idea that the “more authentic cases you can make or find, the greater the likelihood that the student will approach the task with rigour and energy” (von Müllen 2019, p. 253). Also, on the last day of the course, the students must present their paper to the class and participate in discussions about the rest of the assignment papers.

## **The teaching intervention: Background, content and rationale**

As stated in the introduction, activating students is important for several reasons (Rienecker et al. 2019). In relation to the present course, the most important reasons are:

- That activities help to maintain students’ attention during lectures and other forms of teaching. This is important since all course days are at least four hours long. For lectures, research has shown that students’ attention gradually decreases and that students can stay concentrated for a maximum of 20 minutes (Dahl & Troelsen 2019, p. 184).
- That students can learn from each other via activities. This is important since the students always bring various knowledge, work experiences, and perspectives to the class.
- That students develop their skills and competences through “active interaction with material and in dialogue” (Rienecker et al. 2019, p. 229). This point is particularly important in relation to some of the intended learning outcomes of the course, namely that students can:
  - a. Relate the theories and concepts of the course to empirical change projects in the health care sector (skills),
  - b. Identify potential challenges and opportunities in specific change projects in health organizations (competencies), and

- c. Participate in designing implementation strategies for new change projects in health care (competences).

Although various forms of student activation (such as discussions during lectures, and some casework in groups) have always been part of the course, my participation in the UP course motivated me to improve the course by increasing student activation more systematically. Specifically, as course coordinator and as teacher (on most of the course days), I aimed to implement an approach to activating students which included continuous case-based and dialogue-based learning. This approach would give the students the opportunity to work on and discuss their cases throughout the course. Again, the assumption was that allowing students to select and work on their own cases would enhance their motivation in group work (von Müllen 2019).

To systematically increase student activation, the course days were structured along the following lines:

First, the teacher gave a lecture (about 45 minutes) on the topic of the day [While some activation strategies were also used during these lectures, these are not the subject of this paper].

Second, the teacher presented the students with 1-4 exercises/questions to discuss in small groups of 2-3 people. The exercises were prepared to connect the subject of the course day with an empirical case (often the students' self-selected cases). For example, after a lecture on 'Stakeholders and their reactions to change', the students were asked to perform a stakeholder analysis of their own case. The intention was to make the students apply the concepts and tools from the lecture to their own cases to create clear links between theory and practice (Krogh et al. 2019). While cases had previously been used on some course days, the students had not previously been given the opportunity to work with their own cases in class in a continuous way.

Third, following the group work, the students were invited to share their reflections and work in a plenary session, where we discussed the various contributions. Since an important aspect of case-based learning is "the dialogue among students and between students and teacher" (Krogh et al. 2019, p. 208), these plenary sessions were deemed important for articulating, discussing, and reflecting on various questions and learning points from the casework. Hence, research in learning suggests that "the

individual student's active engagement in university work and participation in dialogue with the teachers and fellow students is crucial for the acquisition of the material and for building up competences to put it into perspective" (Haugsted & Ingerslev 2019, p. 289).

The goal of this 3-point structure was to increase student learning in terms of reflecting on and applying the concepts, tools and theories of change management to real life cases.

## **Evaluation**

Overall, I experienced the intervention to be successful. The students actively engaged in group work based on the cases, and the subsequent plenary discussions among students and between the students and the teacher were lively and constructive, presenting many opportunities to further exploration of issues related to the topic of each course day. Also, in the final examination papers and at the oral presentations, the students showed good skills in applying theories and models from the course to their own cases [Of course, given the nature of the project, no causal link can be asserted between the teaching format and the quality of the papers or between the format and student motivation].

Since students' experiences of learning activities may differ from the intentions and perceptions of the teacher (Hounsell & Hounsell, 2007), it was important to include the students' perceptions in the evaluation of the new course structure. This evaluation was conducted on the final course day, during which I engaged in a dialogue with the students structured around a set of standard evaluation questions used by the department, as well as some additional questions specifically aimed at assessing the learning project. The class consisted of 8 students of which 7 were present at the evaluation.

The evaluation showed that the students were positive about the structure and content of the course. They appreciated the opportunity to work on their own cases during the course, and that the casework enabled them to recognize the practical relevance of the course content. The students particularly emphasized the learning value of the plenary sessions following the case-based group work as these sessions allowed the students to engage in a qualified dialogue about emerging issues and

questions with each other and the teacher. Some students noted that the structure of the course days worked particularly well when the lecturer had both explained the theory and demonstrated its application to a specific case since this increased their understanding of the theoretical content prior to the case-exercises. While students appreciated the opportunity to work with their own cases during the course, some suggested that it could add beneficial variation to alternate between student cases from one course day to the next – for example focusing on Group A's case on Day X, Group B's case on Day Y, and so on. This approach could potentially also enhance learning across groups since all groups would work on the same case on each course day.

In conclusion, based on the experience of systematically using the three-point structure to activate students through casework and dialogue, this core structure will also be applied in next year's course.

## References

- Dahl B, Troelsen R. "Lecturing". In Rienecker L, Jørgensen PS, Dolin J, Ingerslev GH (eds.): *University Teaching and Learning*. 2 ed. Samfundslitteratur 2019.
- Haugsted MT, Ingerslev GH. "Discussions and argumentation in teaching". In Rienecker L, Jørgensen PS, Dolin J, Ingerslev GH (eds.): *University Teaching and Learning*. 2 ed. Samfundslitteratur 2019.
- Hounsell D, Hounsell J. "Teaching-learning environments in contemporary mass higher education". *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 2007: 91–111.
- Krogh L, Stentoft D, Emmersen J, Musaeus P. "Case-based learning". In Rienecker L, Jørgensen PS, Dolin J, Ingerslev GH (eds.): *University Teaching and Learning*. 2 ed. Samfundslitteratur 2019.
- Rienecker L, Von Müllen R, Jørgensen PS, Ingerslev GH: "Activities in and between teaching sessions". In Rienecker L, Jørgensen PS, Dolin J, Ingerslev GH (eds.): *University Teaching and Learning*. 2 ed. Samfundslitteratur 2019.

von Müllen R. “Teaching activities in the Social Sciences”. In Rienecker L, Jørgensen PS, Dolin J, Ingerslev GH (eds.): University Teaching and Learning. 2 ed. Samfundslitteratur 2019.