



Interdisciplinary pedagogy in higher education

Proceedings from Lund University's Teaching and
Learning Conference 2019

EDITORS: JOHANNA BERGQVIST RYDÉN, ANNE JERNECK, JESSIKA LUTH RICHTER & KARIN STEEN
LUND UNIVERSITY



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Communities of Learning in Times of Student Solitude⁹⁶

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Introduction

In the academic year of 2018-2019, and with a short notice, I became the coordinator of two consecutive courses that were obligatory for second-year students of an undergraduate programme in another faculty than my own. When I studied the first course's structure, I was initially surprised by the low number of contact-hours available to the students. The scheduled contact hours were mostly organized as lectures, with the exception of two workshops and supervision moments. Despite having limited possibility to meet their teachers, once the course started, many of the enrolled students still skipped the non-obligatory moments. Furthermore, the students who attended workshops and lectures were in general passive; they seldom posed questions and hardly engaged in discussions. The overall level of submitted examination papers was also disappointing; with few exceptions, many students had pragmatically scanned some of the course literature or relied on the parts quoted in teachers' power point presentations (Baier et al., 2011).

Based on the rather disappointing experience in the first course, I wondered how I could improve learning outcomes in the second course. How could I design it not for the few ambitious and self-structured students but for the average student as problematised by Biggs, (2012)? How can I create a learning platform for students with different backgrounds and skills? How could I make students read and inspire them to actively participate in the classroom? How could I help them develop core academic skills within the limited meeting hours we had? Actually, why did they have so little contact hours in the first place? Why do we expect students to carry the burden of learning almost alone?

⁹⁶ First version of this paper was written for a higher education pedagogical course at Lund University.

Higher education in transformation

A recent transformation⁹⁷ in the organizational structure of Swedish higher education resulted in a reduction of contact-hours with students (UKÄ, 2018), as well as trivializing of teaching in favour of research, as happened in other European countries (cf. Shapiro, 1997). These radical changes have been accompanied with, and partially legitimized by, a novel teaching and learning philosophy, which criticizes traditional lecture-based teaching as a unidirectional knowledge transfer from teacher to students (Fox, 1983; Trowler, 1998). The new pedagogical understanding argues that, instead, the contact-hours should be used to inspire, train and guide students to become independent self-learners (Bligh, 1998). Students, through developing their “metacognitive processes”, would be able to “monitor and control their own learning” (Ambrose et al., 2010: 6). In this perspective, teachers take the role of facilitators, supporting students in their personal journey of self-actualization. Thus, it is claimed that teachers should leave behind their archaic role as experts of their fields to become educational ‘coaches’ (Kugel, 1993). Since “coaches tend to be happier when they do less and their players do more”, and when “they want to develop their players’ leg muscles they do not run for them” (Kugel, 1993: 322), the logical inference is that with this pedagogical philosophy students can reach the learning goals with less contact-hours.

Nevertheless, the outcomes of this shift in the teaching philosophy is questioned both by students and academics. Students report that, accompanied by reduced contact-hours⁹⁸, they spend less and less time learning while suffering under the pressure of carrying individual responsibility for their higher education. The question is: how can we avoid this pedagogical dichotomy between traditional teaching and self-learning? How can we underline the importance of having social learning settings in the time of student solitude? Is it possible to defend the indispensability of university classroom as a socio-physical place without falling into a nostalgic trap? A plausible and potential pedagogical and epistemological alternative is assembling and reorganizing higher education around ‘learning practices’ instead of focusing on teachers or students.

⁹⁷ Swedish higher education system was not immune to the organizational transformation that happened among public institutions in the last decades (Berg et al., 2003), which involved redistribution and replacement of public resources within nation states, sometimes through privatization, sometimes institutional effectivization and organizational dismantling (Baltodano, 2012; Giroux, 2002; Shore, 2010).

⁹⁸ According to large-scale student survey at Lund University, around half of the students in Faculties of Social Sciences and Humanities claim they have less than six contact-hours a week (Holmström, 2018: 35). Similarly, according to a recent report, Sweden has the least contact-hours made available to university students among European countries (Eurostudent VI, 2018:116).

Practice Theory and Learning

There is no single, coherent, formulated ‘practice theory’, rather the body of literature accumulated around the concept of ‘social practice’ represents one of the recent significant turns in the social sciences, and a shift in the priorities of conducting research and analysing research material (cf. Schatzki et al., 2001; Reckwitz, 2002; Warde, 2005; Shove et al., 2012; Spaargaren et al., 2016; Hui et al., 2016)⁹⁹. Reckwitz (2002) locates practice theory within the category of ‘cultural theories’, and asserts that cultural theories position themselves in-between rationality-based, individualist accounts, and norm-oriented, deterministic perspectives. The common ground among practice theory scholars, then, is emphasizing the key position of practices in organizing and making sense of the social world as meso-level phenomena. Different practice theory approaches have the shared “belief that such phenomena as knowledge, meaning, human activity, science, power, language, social institutions, and historical transformation occur within and are aspects or components of the field of practices” (Schatzki, 2001: 11). Thus, they argue that studying social practices is fundamental for understanding and making sense of the social world (Reckwitz, 2002), rather than studying individuals or social structures. Accordingly, focusing on social practices provides the opportunity to move beyond traditional dichotomies, such as structure vs agency, mind vs body, or teaching vs learning as dualities embedded in social practices (Giddens, 1984). Some practice theory scholars particularly underline routinized activities; thereby they also give importance to notions of practical understanding, embodied learning, skills and competences in organization of social practices (Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1984; Reckwitz, 2002; Shove et al., 2012).

⁹⁹ A social practice is generally defined as associated activities and events aligned by different elements, components, or linkages, such as teleo-affectivity, understandings, rules (Schatzki, 1996), background knowledge, emotions, things, motivations (Reckwitz, 2002), understandings, procedures, engagements (Warde, 2005), or materials, competences, meanings (Shove et al., 2012).

Communities of learning practices

Since the 1990s, a pedagogical perspective has gradually emerged, inspired by the notion of ‘communities of practices’ within practice theory literature (cf. Lave, 1996; Wenger, 1998; Jarzabkowski & Whittington, 2008; Reid, 2011; Buschmann & Alkemeyer, 2016). This perspective can also be framed as ‘communities of learning’, and it specifically underlines the social and embodied aspects of learning:

Within the ‘family’ of practice theories, research in the field of learning and education addresses concepts of socialisation, habitualisation and embodiment. These concepts have the advantage of bringing often neglected bodily, pre-reflexive and non-linguistic processes to the fore, thereby avoiding the reduction of learning and education to cognitive processes and the acquisition of propositional knowledge (Buschmann & Alkemeyer, 2016: 9, 10).

The communities-of-learning perspective criticizes the fact that higher education institutions typically presume that learning happens through solely individual and mental processes, based on assumptions derived from psychological and cognitive theories (Wenger, 1998). However, according to this perspective, “being human is a relational matter, generated in social living” and, thus, “theories that conceive of learning as a special universal mental process impoverish and misrecognize it” (Lave, 1996: 149). Hence, the communities-of-learning perspective, instead, advocates a pedagogical understanding, in which students acquire academic qualities through a “process of facilitating the circulation of school knowledgeable skill” by participating in social learning settings (Lave, 1996: 96). Here, participation refers to becoming a member of an academic community through actively being part of shared learning and teaching practices together with students and teachers (Wenger, 1998).

Underlining the importance of social and communal dimensions as well as the embodied skill transmission and co-learning (for a similar discussion, see also Barrie, 2007), this pedagogical philosophy can be regarded as a credible alternative to hegemonic pedagogies of lecture-based traditional teaching, which fosters rigid, hierarchical, unidimensional knowledge transfer, and self-learning, which promotes isolated individual knowledge acquirement and self-actualization.

Finally, this philosophy also has implications for inter- and transdisciplinary learning contexts, which proliferate in contemporary higher education institutions (Park & Son, 2010). Since the ‘communities of learning’ perspective highlights the importance of co-learning among peers, distinct student backgrounds and skills become resources for knowledge production; instead of seeing them as a challenge to be addressed, they are celebrated as assets for learning (cf. Lattuca, 2002; Borrego & Newswander, 2010).

Making a Community of Learning

After my disappointment in the first course, which I described in the beginning of this chapter, and receiving complaints from students due to the anxiety they experienced and the high rate of failed papers, I decided to make some serious changes in the structure of the second course, which started three months later.

In this course, I attempted to apply the philosophy of ‘communities of learning’ pedagogical understanding by, first of all, increasing overall contact-hours particularly through introducing more seminars, workshops, and supervision. The logic behind this was to increase the opportunities for social co-learning, where students can learn together through ‘doing’ (cf. Schank et al., 1999). Acknowledging learning as a dynamic ongoing process, I framed learning and teaching moments¹⁰⁰ in the course as verbs – as practices, namely: ‘peer-learning’, ‘discussing’, ‘searching’, ‘applying’, ‘analysing’, ‘grading’, and ‘writing’, which are deliberated below (for a similar way of framing, see Macdonald & Twining, 2002).

Peer-learning

For the examination assignment, I asked students to write a group paper, for which I instructed them to write and sign a group contract serving as internal guidance in case of potential conflicts and discussions (Dolmans, et al., 2001). Additionally, I organised group supervision meetings to discuss and peer-review the papers-in-progress. Finally, before submitting their group paper, students also prepared a group presentation. In these peer-learning moments (Boud et al., 2004), students developed their academic vocabulary, conflict-solving skills, and analytical capability. Moreover, they also learned to be academic bodies (cf. Wacquant, 1990), in the sense that they embody their enhanced cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), through practicing academic speech, and by having the chance to observe and eventually imitate and incorporate each other’s and my gestures and mimics performed in academic situations. Hence, we formed a temporary academic community by participating in these activities together in shared time and space, in interaction and in negotiation.

¹⁰⁰ Some of the formulated learning practices were further elaborated in the following academic year of 2019-2020.

Discussing

In order to address the problems concerning the reading of course literature and inspire classroom participation, I introduced text-seminars (Feyes et al., 2005). Students answered assigned questions on key course literature in written form, and submitted their texts prior to the seminar discussion. During the seminar, they first discussed the questions in pairs, then in larger groups, and finally as a whole class together with the teacher. The introduction of text-seminars helped them acquire the academic skills of reading and understanding literature, and in particular, of discussing texts. Taking part in discussions inherently requires some social skills, and it is important to create opportunities for such practice while designing a course (Parker, 2001). The planned phases of discussing the questions first in pairs, then in larger groups, and in the class with the teacher, also helped students develop slightly different discussion skills, scaling up from more private to public. In all, it ensured that every student participated in the practice of discussing.

Searching

Searching for relevant literature of their choice was one of the challenges I posed for the students. For that purpose, I invited a librarian to lead a practical workshop, in which students watched and practiced the search for literature by using google scholar, Lund University's own search engine, databases, and keywords, in order to find high quality, relevant scientific works. Obviously, academic knowledge is developed and produced in dialog with and against existing academic productions, in relation to 'the-state-of-art'. While we design courses as teachers, we provide this possibility through assigning high quality literature to students. However, searching for and finding relevant literature is a skill to be gained – and just like other academic skills, it is best learned by doing and doing together (Ren, 2000). Thus, the workshop in particular helped students gain skills to navigate among vast academic works under the practical guidance of an expert.

Working

Within the frame of the course, I organized a study visit in order to link the often abstract academic discussions and literature to a concrete case, where students observed and discussed the 'backstage' of an international company, including its layout and organizational structure. In addition, on another occasion, a guest lecturer was invited to tell students the story of establishing a company from scratch. Students also received a 'work duty' to critically investigate company's social media accounts, and compare

them with rival companies. The first learning moment helped students to bodily experience the labour and spatial organization of a major company, in addition to enjoying the possibility to listen and question first-hand statements. In the second learning activity, they had the chance to apply the skills and knowledge they gained during the course in a ‘real-life’ situation, by working (Jarzabkowski & Whittington, 2008).

Analysing

One of the workshops I organized for the course was about analysing an empirical text together in groups, and discussing the outcomes with me, in which they also had to chance to see how I analyse a text as an academic. On another occasion, the digital presence of different actors was analysed by the students together with another teacher, in a digital ethnography workshop. Since the course assignment was based on analysing empirical material, it was crucial to develop students’ analytical skills (Corti & Bishop, 2005). Giving a lecture on analytic methods and applying these techniques to concrete cases, as well as having the opportunity to compare their analysis process to that of experienced teachers, helped students develop this important academic skill – analysing, at least on a fundamental level. They did it through participating in a social learning activity together, thus through being part of a ‘community of learning’.

Grading

Additionally, I organized a workshop on grading, in which students received a student paper from previous years. After quickly reading the paper, students graded it according to the shared grading criteria and a template, and wrote feedback for different parts of the papers. At the end of the workshop, students made comparisons with each other regarding how they graded and commented, and discussed their reasonings before learning the paper’s actual grade and seeing the teacher’s comments. It is a common complaint that solely written documents cannot truly communicate what is asked and expected from students (cf. O’Donovan et al., 2006). Through grading actual papers written by previous students, students familiarized themselves with the grading criteria and template in detail, but also by comparing their grading practice with each other and with the teacher’s, they achieved a better understanding regarding how their work would be assessed. Thus, this workshop and the transparency provided around the grading of papers also helped the learning practices of writing and peer-learning.

Presenting

As a small part of their examination, I asked students to prepare group presentations, for which they were allowed to use a presentation media. In this way, they were required to work on and test their public presentation skills, which might include the preparation of written and visual presentation material, constructing arguments, and communicating key points. Evidently, the preparations were created in a group setting. Students were also expected to answer possible questions from the public, which necessitated formulating thoughts in the moment. Presenting is also by definition a social learning practice; in order to make an academic presentation one needs an audience. However, it is also much more direct, instant, and intensive than writing; it helps students crystalize their thoughts and arguments, and develop a coherent narrative (Craig & Amernic, 2006). In addition, by asking (or witnessing how the teacher asks) and answering questions, they could also develop their embodied discussing skills.

Writing

In order to assist students in their writing process I invited a pedagogist who led a workshop on academic language and writing, during which students discussed and evaluated different forms and styles of texts. Thereafter, students listened to a lecture on how they were expected to structure their papers, including detailed instructions concerning the content of different parts. In addition, I increased the number of supervision occasions and durations. Finally, a couple of days prior to submission date, I organized a 'community' writing-day, inviting the students to write in the classroom in structured sessions and pauses. However, students were allowed to ask me questions *in situ*, whenever they wanted, while they were actually busy with writing. Academic writing is typically seen as an individual practice, and it is often done in seclusion. By organizing these workshops, it became possible to provide a social and communal setting for writing (Kent et al., 2017).

Discussion

Structuring the course through the abovementioned social learning practices, that is peer-learning, discussing, searching, working, analysing, grading, presenting, and writing, I could co-create a temporary learning community with the students and other teachers despite the fact that we had different disciplinary backgrounds, where fundamental academic skills were circulated, absorbed, and embodied. Students showed more enthusiasm towards to course, their participation slowly improved both

qualitatively and quantitatively, which was also visible in the papers they wrote, and the course evaluation survey they filled out. On the other hand, increasing contact-hours, asking for enhanced student engagement, and introducing additional learning practices aiming to improve various academic skills also created an imbalance in regards to the course's position in the programme structure of the bachelor's degree. Consequently, some students complained that the course was too demanding and intensive compared to other courses they took which gave the same number of higher education credits.

Applying a teaching and learning perspective inspired by practice theory and the communities of practices literature, this course experience accentuated the indispensability and significance of contact-hours with students and teaching staff, without solely relying on traditional lectures, or a unidimensional, cognitive knowledge transfer. Yet, it also illustrated that the individualistic self-learning paradigm, where teachers are downgraded to 'coaching' students in their 'self-actualization journey', ignores the sociocultural and bodily dimensions of learning. However, another implication was that although pedagogical experiments and advances in an individual course might enhance learning outcomes for the related course and advance our accumulated pedagogical knowledge, it is important not to forget the institutional context and the overall programme organization. Thus, it is crucial to create platforms for broader pedagogical discussions and gradually aim for improvements at a more structural level.

Conclusion

The erosion of teaching's importance in favor of research (Berg et al., 2003), together with changes in the money allocation system for universities in Sweden (UKÄ, 2018), led to reduced contact-hours. In the meantime, the responsibility of learning shifted from teachers towards students by the means of celebrating self-learning, despite the alarming reports pointing out decreasing engagement and growing anxiety among students (cf. Holmström, 2018). In order to address these pedagogical challenges in such an institutional context, I relied on a relatively new social pedagogical understanding, 'communities of learning', while re-designing a course. Within this literature, the social and cultural aspects of learning are emphasised, along with their embodiedness (Lave, 1996; Wenger, 1998; Buschmann & Alkemeyer, 2016). In the course, I introduced or extended seminars, workshops, and supervision moments, thus increasing the total number of contact-hours, and I formulated learning moments and skills as active verbs, or as 'learning practices'. The adjustments led to better learning outcomes, higher quality student papers, and improved overall student engagement.

On the other hand, the changes I implemented generated also an imbalance among the courses in the bachelor programme in terms of requested student engagement.

The ‘communities of learning’ pedagogical perspective proved to be promising, however, further discussion and implementation in higher education is needed, since practical applications of the pedagogical philosophy is rather limited (O’Donovan et al., 2006). Likewise, a more theoretically informed engagement is required with more recent ‘practice theory’ literature to be able to nuance the formulation and analysis of learning practices, through for instance incorporating material and affective dimensions in the discussion (cf. Reckwitz, 2016; Strengers & Maller, 2018). As noted earlier, this perspective also has implications for inter- and transdisciplinary educational situations due to its emphasis on co-learning in social arrangements, in which students’ and teachers’ distinct cultural and disciplinary backgrounds, as well as their embodied skills, are appreciated and operationalised as learning assets (cf. Borrego & Newswander, 2010). Yet, similarly, further application and a more refined discussion is a prerequisite in order to explore and to assess the potential of the ‘communities of learning’ perspective in inter- and transdisciplinary higher education (Lattuca, 2002).

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Interdisciplinary pedagogy in higher education

This is the proceedings volume from the 7th biannual *Teaching and Learning Conference at Lund University*. The conference theme, *Interdisciplinary pedagogy in higher education*, is very timely as we see a steady increase, not only in interdisciplinary research and full teaching programmes, but also in new interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary courses and components in more traditional disciplinary education at Lund University. The conference highlighted some of the many challenges and opportunities of interdisciplinary education where educators meet students with different disciplinary, cultural and geographical profiles. In this volume, the authors share the thoughts, experiences and learning they presented at the conference.