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Problem oriented group work in a multicultural setting

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TRY SOMETHING DIFFERENT

Roskilde University in Denmark is a different university. The pedagogy is different, the students are different and the employment rate of the university's graduates is significantly higher than that of most other Danish universities.

Roskilde University is based on the pedagogical concept of problem oriented group work. It is a highly efficient way of learning demanding highly developed interpersonal skills for the student. At Roskilde University the students acquire these skills during four semesters of basic studies. Exchange and guest students, however, arrive with no prior experience in or knowledge of the Roskilde pedagogy.

To this different world we invite an increasing number of exchange and guest students. But even if we find the approaches employed at Roskilde University quite fruitful and more successful than other, more traditional, approaches, such a novel approach is bound to make students insecure, especially since quite a number of the exchange students at Roskilde University have not chosen the university because of prior knowledge about it, but because they want to improve their English.

In order for Communication Studies to make a stay at Roskilde University an interesting and rewarding one, we have initiated a series of courses and activities that are thought to familiarise incoming international students with the learning styles, pedagogy and view on university studies at Roskilde University.

GROUP WORK

On arrival at Roskilde University, most students have experienced group work. So they think they know what it means but they are wrong. This is due to a number of reasons and I will list a few of the most prominent below:

- Group work is not seen as a way to liven up teaching. Group work is the learning principle.

- Group work is not meant to add to the learning curve of the students. Group work is at the centre of learning.
- Group work is not just leading up to the exam, it is an integral part of the exam.
- The semester courses are secondary in relation to the group work. Courses are 12 ECTS each semester, the group project is 18.

Group work is the backbone of Roskilde University. That means that all exchange and guest students will be involved in group work. Currently Communication Studies demands that all students, including all guests, write a project together with a project group each semester. Regular students at Roskilde University have written one group project per semester and this means that when they finally reach Communication Studies they have at least eight group projects behind them.

This leads directly to the first dilemma in the integration of foreign students in Communication Studies. The home grown Roskilde University students are not interested in teaching the exchange students how to do group work and often they will be apprehensive towards collaborating with foreigners whose lack of knowledge of the Roskilde University pedagogy is seen as problematic in the sense that the experiences that the regular Roskilde University student has with group work makes him or her a virtuoso where the exchange student is a novice. So the regular student is worried that he or she will put in a disproportionate effort in the group work while not gaining the reward such work should result in. Also the average Roskilde University student seems quite uninterested in working in the English language. In general, I think it would be fair to say that one of the main problems in integrating Danish and international students is the fact that the Danish students are not as adventurous as the international students, the point being that the Danish students are not on exchange and therefore, quite naturally so, interested in business as usual.

Notwithstanding these problems every semester there are some Danish students who take on the challenge and form groups with the international students, following courses in English and basically making the International Track a truly international experience.

This also means that the groups of four to six students normally consist of students from a variety of cultural and national backgrounds all with different levels of English. This, of course, is not unproblematic in the sense that the different students all have different strategies for tackling the group work. People who are used to speaking English and people who have English as their mother tongue have an advantage over the others. People who have tried this kind of group work before have another advantage. People who are used to much more supervisor/teacher presence find it difficult to navigate in these, for them, uncharted waters that their fellow students seem to command so well.

In order to address this we have upped the supervisor presence quite significantly so that the students that are uncomfortable with the system and feel left to their own devices, are catered for. The supervisor does not, however, intervene more than she or he would normally do.

PROJECT ORIENTATION

There is a subtle, but important difference between project based and project oriented group work. In the former, the problem is defined beforehand, whereas in the latter, the group (i.e. the students) define a workable problem themselves and refine the problem definition throughout the semester so that in the end it reflects the various aspects addressed in the project. This difference is terribly important when it comes to the actual work with the projects, and many students (also Danish students not familiar with the Roskilde University approach) find it difficult to define their own problems like this.

In this process the role of the supervisor is crucial. The supervisor is there to make sure that the quality of the project is not jeopardised and that the group is on the right track.

THE CAPTAIN KIRK PRINCIPLE, OR ‘TO BOLDLY GO WHERE NO STUDENT HAS GONE BEFORE’

When students work project oriented, they are researchers. That means that their learning goes beyond, sometimes far beyond, the learning achieved in course teaching. Quite a significant number of students in Communication Studies at Roskilde University mention, after the completion of a semester’s stay at the university, that now they see what we meant at the beginning of the semester. But in order to get that far in the learning process the students have sometimes experienced some rather problematic crises. Some of them related to the project and some of them related to the group work. Most often the supervisor will be able to resolve problems related to the project, many times the supervisor will be able to resolve problems related to the group work, but only rarely the supervisor will be able to resolve personal antagonisms in the group.

So, even if the students are supposed to come up with a project and a project related problem on their own, they are not just left to their own devices. They are under regular supervision by one of the supervisors assigned to the Communication Studies’ International Track.

This kind of work, where the students basically work on their own with material in which their supervisor is not necessarily an expert, can make students that are not familiar with this kind of work quite insecure and each semester some students start out wondering if studying at Roskilde University is just attending a few courses and not really more than that. What these students realise later in the semester is the fact that it is more than that, much more. How much more is expressed in the ECTS points awarded. The project is worth 18 ECTS points. More than half the semester’s workload. The regular Roskilde University students know this from experience, but there is no way, other than their personal experience, that the exchange student will know this.

In order to address this point, we have introduced a number of introductory courses that try to make the foreign students get a feeling for the amount of work required by

a project. Right now, however, these courses do not give ECTS points and therefore the students are not always too interested in them. Later the introductory courses will give the students ECTS points and we hope that that will give the courses a more prominent place in the students' minds.

POWER DISTANCE

One of the major problems for some of the students arriving in Denmark is the relatively low power distance of the culture. For many students from southern Europe and for most students from East Asia it can be quite an obstacle to use a professor's first name and still behave respectfully towards that same professor. Also it sometimes gives students the false impression that since the professors are nice and informal people, passing exams will be no problem. This conception, however, is not true. While the orals exams are quite informal and might seem like any normal academic discussion, it is an exam and will be evaluated according to academic norms.

Another intercultural problem is that lecturing hardly exists in the Humanities in Danish universities. Most of what we call lecturing will be some kind of dialogic process involving the students as well as the professors. To begin with, quite a number of the exchange students find this way of teaching highly intimidating and when asked for their view on a specific point or problem they sometimes feel that they are singled out and that this can be terribly intimidating.

We have tried to address this problem without jeopardising the culturally based low power distance by quite frequently splitting up the group of about 30 students into smaller groups, thus making public speaking less intimidating.

INITIATIVES TOWARDS A BETTER EXPERIENCE

As I have mentioned above, the problems experienced by exchange students, are addressed by a number of initiatives that are supposed to homogenise the group of international students so that they feel like a group and so that they feel comfortable with the principles at Roskilde University in order to better navigate these unknown waters. These activities and courses will be part of the ECTS count so that the students can have them validated as parts of their exchange upon return to their home universities. The plan is not to give the introductory courses a status of their own, but to have them validated as an obligatory part of the project work. By doing so we hope to be able to make an exchange stay at Roskilde University more rewarding and, first and foremost, less frustrating.

Having said this, I find it imperative to stress that the vast majority of exchange students at Communication Studies, Roskilde University, are very happy about their stay and more than a few of the students originally signing up for one semester end up applying for one more. It is because of this success with the students that we try to improve the quality of their stay by trying to eliminate some of the worst intercultural, organisational and pedagogical mistakes.

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