

CHAPTER 7. LIFE AFTER ACADEMIA: PREPARING STUDENTS FOR SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION

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Introduction

Based on my experience as both an instructor and an international relations officer at the University of Economics in Bratislava (EUBA), I have realised that one of the significant challenges that our students face while on student mobility abroad is working in groups. Their earlier education did not equip them with the necessary skills to be able to function in groups effectively. Additionally, students do not have the know-how for preparing and delivering a good-quality presentation. Their idea of a good presentation rests merely on using PowerPoint slides. Besides, students are often asked to present individually and never as a group. Therefore, I decided to introduce an innovation in my teaching that combines group work and presentations.

My rationale for introducing group work to prepare and deliver presentations in my European Union (EU) Enlargement course was that working in groups helps students explain, summarise, apply, analyse, synthesise and evaluate certain topics. It also allows them to practice essential social, problem solving and communication skills (SAW Program 2007). These skills are not only directly related to the principles and values of the University of Economics in Bratislava (Code of Ethics 2018) but are also necessary to succeed in any working environment.

To assess the impact of this approach, I mixed qualitative and quantitative data collection methods, used during three class sessions. The data support all three of my hypotheses: the introduction of group work into classroom activities created a positive environment, made students interested in learning about the EU, and facilitated their learning, including both fact-base knowledge and skills development. I also gained significant insight regarding both research and teaching design that I shall address at the end of the chapter.

The context

Courses at EUBA are either lecture- or seminar-based. According to Slovak legislation, only those with a PhD degree are entitled to lecture, leaving PhD students to teach seminars. The teaching content is set by the course supervisor, especially the lectures. Seminars tend to follow the structure of the lectures but can be altered by the seminar instructor, PhD students excluded. Seminars typically encompass working on case studies, writing seminar papers or essays, and making individual presentations. Classroom interaction between students and instructors is usually one-way, teacher-to-student communication and students often complain about lectures and semi-

nars being alike. Courses are evaluated in the following way: forty per cent of the final grade is earned during the semester for attendance, participation in class and completing various in-class and/or homework assignments. The remaining sixty per cent comes from the (usually written) final exam. To successfully pass the course, a minimum of fifty-one per cent is required overall. As a PhD student, I have taught three seminar sessions in the EU Enlargement seminar-based course. This is a three-ECTS credit, compulsory elective course¹ within the International Trade Management Programme at the Faculty of Commerce. The course was offered during the Autumn 2017 semester in English to non-native English speakers in the final year of their Master's degree studies. It is comprised of ninety-minute seminar sessions with up to twenty-six students divided into two seminar groups.

Group work and education

My teaching innovation focused on the development of presentation skills through group work and was rooted in the observations that (1) student presentations often suffer in quality and that (2) students are not taught how to prepare and deliver high-quality group presentations. The importance and development of group work in (higher) education, including making a good presentation, have been abundantly researched and debated (e.g. Friedmann 1989; Colbeck et al. 2000; Oswal 2002; Lotan 2003; SAW Program 2007; Koh et al. 2009; Allen 2012; Hammar Chiriac 2014; Magogwe et al. 2015; Lavy 2017; Naseem and Fleming 2018). Susskind and Borchgrevink (1999) define a student group as 'a collection of two or more individuals assembled for a common purpose, share a temporal exercise [...], and interact with one another yet remain independent in some form or another'. It is important to distinguish working in a group, or group cooperation, and working as a group, or group collaboration. The former encompasses students sitting together working on the assignment individually. The latter is the true gist behind group work, representing a synergy effect emerging from the aligned abilities of group members to achieve a shared goal (Colbeck et al. 2000; Lotan 2003; Hammar Chiriac 2014). My students, thus, could ease into group work by moving away from working individually through cooperation and toward collaboration.

Group work and its application in the curriculum is an incentive for learning and teaching (Friedmann 1989; Colbeck et al. 2000; Hammar Chiriac 2014). To be successful, Allen (2012) suggests encouraging a classroom culture that supports collaboration and group work, and that has structure and tasks, including strategies that foster group work throughout the semester. Teaching the course in a language other than the students' native tongue makes it even more important to provide an environment that supports positive feeling and develops students' motivation to learn (Shor 1992). Therefore, I put great effort into creating a welcoming environment, for example by encouraging students to participate, or by giving away small prizes to motivate them to learn and

¹ An obligatory course for a minimum credit value chosen according to the students' personal preferences.

excel in presentation and group work skills on issues concerning EU enlargement.

Group work also represents a direct answer to the needs of the labour market, which demands both an educated and skilled work force (Colbeck et al. 2000; Koh et al. 2009; Lavy 2017; Naseem and Fleming 2018). Even when abilities within the group vary, evidence for the multiple benefits of group work are many: it leads to flexibility (Friedmann 1989), improved social interaction and higher motivation (Colbeck et al. 2000; Koh et al. 2009; Hammar Chiriac 2014), lower stress and anxiety level due to social support (Koh et al. 2009; Lavy 2017), and learning and problem solving through collaboration and utilisation of the group's competencies (Colbeck et al. 2000; Hammar Chiriac 2014). The positive impact extends to instructors, too, who welcome the atmosphere of interest and eagerness (Friedmann 1989).

Applying group work to presentations represents one of the essential instructional approaches because students need to go through the process of planning, preparing and delivering a presentation, which emphasises the importance of independent learning, group work, interaction and communication in the successful learning of presentation skills (Magogwe et al. 2015). Contributing to the class by *doing* makes students more alert, perceptive and interested, which results in better understanding and potential inclination to learn more.

Based on the abovementioned, I had the following expectations about the impact of my innovation:

Hypothesis 1: The innovation – i.e. group work – takes place in a classroom environment that is supportive of learning via collaboration.

Hypothesis 2: Preparing presentations in a group has a positive impact on students' interest in learning about EU enlargement.

Hypothesis 3: Student learning, including knowledge and skills after collaborative group work, is noticeable.

The innovation

My innovation was implemented through three seminar sessions and in both seminar groups. The first session introduced students to group work through the shared task of creating a poster to evaluate the EU enlargement process in general and the controversial case of Turkey in particular. I chose poster-making as the first output of group work activity because it required neither computer skills nor equipment, which allowed students to ease into group work.

The second session gave an explanation and demonstration of a good presentation by pointing out how to avoid the most frequently experienced problems in presentations. Students started with reading the assigned text about EU enlargement and the European Neighbourhood Policy, on the basis of which they then prepared a PowerPoint presentation. They needed to include the title, table of contents, introduction, core of the topic, conclusion and sources in a maximum of ten slides. The third session also encompassed making a PowerPoint-based group presentation

but this time summarising the compulsory reading on possible alternatives to the enlargement of the EU.

During the sessions, students were divided into two or three groups. I monitored their activity and, when necessary, answered their questions and offered encouragement. Each session concluded with a debriefing that combined oral feedback from their peers and instructor. Students of the non-presenting group(s) assessed the presentations based on a two-question peer evaluation rubric and were expected to share their comments afterwards in a constructive manner.

Data collection and methods

I collected data from three sources. First, I relied on the method of reflection-in-action (Giaino-Ballard and Hyatt 2012). I observed student activity and behaviour during sessions with attention to both positive and negative developments, resulting in qualitative data.

Second, student opinions were collected through a short questionnaire (SQ) after each of the three sessions using exactly the same open-end questions: What is your opinion of today's seminar session activities? What part of today's seminar session do you consider as particularly beneficial? What changes would you like to see in the future? Of the twenty-six students registered for the course, during the three seminar sessions seventeen, nineteen and twenty-two students filled in the SQ, respectively.

Third, at the end of the fourth session (which included film watching), students were asked to fill in a long questionnaire (LQ) with the aim of evaluating potential student progress in acquiring group presentation-making skills. It included a mixture of dichotomous and Likert scales and open-end questions (table 1). All twenty-six students completed the LQ.

Table 1. The long questionnaire

Questions	Answer options
Indicate the effect of the session(s) on your knowledge of the EU enlargement process by circling the most accurate answer:	No effect Minimum effect Some effect Major effect
How do you perceive the effect that the previous four seminar sessions have had on the quality of your presentation skills?	No improvement Minimum improvement Some improvement Major improvement
During the session(s) I have perceived the instructor as (one answer only):	Insignificantly student-oriented Modestly student-oriented Moderately student-oriented Very student-oriented

What do you think are the most positive outcomes of the sessions?	[Open-ended question]
What do you think are the most negative outcomes of the sessions?	[Open-ended question]
Would you recommend this and/or similar types of seminar activities to your younger peers? Explain your answer:	No. Yes. [Open-ended question]

Results

The first hypothesis about the presence of a supportive classroom environment for learning through collaboration was confirmed. 80.8 per cent of students found the instructor very student-oriented, while 15.4 per cent perceived the instructor moderately and 3.8 per cent modestly student-oriented. None of the students answered that the instructor was not student oriented (LQ). Similarly, when students were asked whether or not they would recommend the course to their peers (LQ), the majority (92.3 per cent) responded positively. They explained their position with the fact that students were encouraged to speak up in a friendly and supportive atmosphere.²

In line with the statistical data, I witnessed that students eagerly participated after they overcame their disbelief that they needed to engage in an activity, group work, with which they had no experience. With each new session student-to-student communication improved and group work evolved from cooperative to collaborative. Leaders and followers emerged in the groups and students' verbal and non-verbal communication progressed from initially timid and insecure to outspoken and confident. Instructor-student communication also changed: the primarily one-way, instructor-initiated conversations were replaced by two-way communication where students did not shy away from either initiating the interaction or answering the instructor's questions.

The second hypothesis, which expected that preparing presentations in groups would make students interested in learning about the EU, also received support. When asked to list the most positive outcomes of the innovated sessions (LQ), some students stressed that they developed 'a stronger interest about the topics of EU politics and administration'. Answers given on the SQ provided further support: several students described both the second and the third sessions as 'interesting' due to stimulating and challenging topics and collaborating in groups with previously unknown peers.

This corresponds strongly to my observations that focused on students' verbal and non-verbal cues. The sessions were carried out at the very end of the day, and many students were tired, clearly looking forward to the end of classes. Yet, when asked to interact with their peers during

² The 7.7 per cent said they would not recommend the course to their peers because they did not see the added value as they had already taken the European Union course during their bachelor studies.

the group work, they gradually overcame their exhaustion. Students seemed to grasp the benefits of group work as they were able to share and debate their understanding of the reading material and divide tasks according to their personal preferences. A lively and positive competitive buzz developed between the groups. Because they presented together, rather than having just one designated speaker, the feeling of collaboration intensified, and group members mutually encouraged each other. This resulted in a more equally shared and generally increased level of participation in comparison with my previous years of experience with the seminar. Peer evaluation offered students additional opportunities for learning and helped maintain their attention and interest.

The third hypothesis concerning the positive impact of group work on student learning also received support. Responses to the question about the impact that the three innovated sessions had on their knowledge (LQ) showed that students perceived these sessions as contributing to their knowledge of the EU enlargement process: 26.9 per cent of students saw them as having major effect and 73.1 per cent said that the sessions' impact on their knowledge had some effect. No students answered either 'no effect' or 'minimum effect'.

Answers to the already cited questions on the positive outcomes of all sessions that included group work (LQ), and on the most beneficial aspects of each session (SQ), revealed what the students saw they were learning. A few mentioned content-related items such as acquiring a lot of new and interesting information about EU enlargement, facts about the EU, new vocabulary, and new knowledge. They praised group work for helping them comprehend the topic and reading material.

There was a very strong focus on skills development, too: as one student put it, 'the course taught not only theory but also very practical tasks/skills'. Students specifically highlighted improvements in skills such as cooperating with peers, knowledge sharing, time management, and using their English for practical and academic activities. Several students brought up how the exercise improved their presentation skills. Indeed, when directly asked about it (LQ), 38.4 per cent of students perceived that seminar sessions resulted in major improvement in the quality of their presentation skills, 46.2 per cent felt some improvement, while 15.4 per cent perceived their improvement as minimal. No students said that their skills did not improve at all.

However, improving their skills did not come easily to them. They looked stressed during presentations: their voices and hands were shaking, and they had timid body posture. Additionally, the lack of active English proficiency diminished students' self-esteem, which they noted as negative outcomes of group work and presentations (LQ). Their confidence was improved through peer and instructor evaluation during debriefing, allowing presenters to gain information on their strengths and learn how they could improve in the future. The increased confidence was evident from the more relaxed body posture and facial expression but especially from their decreased reluctance to present.

Conclusion

In this chapter I presented the evaluation of a teaching innovation that equipped the students with valuable knowledge and improved their presentation skills, which was applied on the grounds of group work. Enhancing their ability to collaborate with peers and to prepare and deliver an effective presentation will serve them well when competing on the labour market even with a higher education degree at hand.

Implementing the innovation taught me valuable lessons both about its realization and evaluation. As for the former, even though I was aware that the students' English skills were not the best, I felt somewhat unprepared for the differences in their English skills and for their low self-confidence when it comes to communicating in English. These shortcomings were evident not only during the presentations but also in their commonly not completing the assigned reading ahead of class time. In the future, I would like to focus on helping students improve their critical reading skills and gain confidence using their English by preparing different types of activities, teaching them how to read effectively, and possibly assigning material that uses simpler English structures.

Finally, I realized that what is practical for teaching purposes is not always beneficial for a research project that evaluates the applied teaching methods. For example, teaching two parallel groups of the seminar originally prompted me to design a quasi-experimental research. However, several things made its implementation infeasible: first, there were not enough students registered for the course to conduct a reliable statistical comparison of the treatment and control groups. Second, it was very difficult to justify why I would teach one group of students with a method that I consider inferior. Lastly, to increase participation students could change between the two seminar groups, which made contaminating the control group unavoidable. Nonetheless, I plan to conduct similar pedagogical studies once I am in a position to test a larger pool of respondents because similar studies at EUBA, and at any university, are necessary for the university management to understand and successfully address challenges related to student skills development. I find this vital not only for students but also for the university's reputation.

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