

THE EMOTIONAL CHALLENGE OF SUSTAINABILITY EDUCATION

Auður Pálsdóttir
School of Education
University of Iceland

THE CONTEXT

In universities, as in other educational settings, power relations between students and instructors are usually not in favor of the students. In student-led or student-driven education these power relations are subject to scrutiny when the appropriate nature and level of influence are considered. Thus student-driven education does not only aim at increased student participation in decision-making but also that students are able to determine what and where to have a say in terms of assessment. In discussing participation in learning, Læssøe (2010) distinguishes between token and genuine participation, pointing out that power and dominance exist in participatory educational thinking. The distinction between token and genuine participation is sometimes likened to the distinction between top-down versus bottom-up participation. In the former, the instructor takes all-important decisions giving students limited influence on his/her learning. In the latter, the student interest would be leading. Læssøe (2010) explains that although there are good reasons for this distinction, there is a risk of the simplistic conclusion that top-down is bad and thus bottom-up is good. When enhancing student participation the goal is not to hand the entire responsibility over to students but rather to value decisions shared between teachers and learners, which should be assessed and strengthened.

In this case study, student views from two courses run at the School of Education of the University of Iceland are subjected to critical scrutiny. Both are part of the teacher education programme at bachelor level and focus on social science teaching in compulsory schools. Both courses are based on defined learning outcomes in the university course catalogue and are allocated a defined number of lessons. Both courses are designed to be interdisciplinary.

INCREASING STUDENT INFLUENCE IN TWO UNIVERSITY COURSES

The rationale for student-driven higher education is to put the student at the center of the educational process. Emphasis is on guiding students to see themselves as both producers and consumers of knowledge with opportunities of applying what they have learned.

Based on learning from the preparation phase of the ActSHEN-project and its first phase of execution, a focus on a participatory and collaborative education approach for sustainability was planned in the two courses under scrutiny. This focus rests on the ActSHEN principles *Pedagogy* and *Student influence* being two of four principles

identified at that time by the team as important aspects of student-driven higher education enhancing sustainability.

The two courses took place in separate academic years, one in the spring term 2014 (Sustainability and Habitation: Teaching about Iceland's past and present; 10 ECTS, 33 students) and the second in the spring term 2015 (Countries and history; 10 ECTS, 17 students). Both courses are for second and/or third year students on the BEd-degree in Education. Both courses included integration of the subjects geography, history and religious studies. In the first course students met three teachers, but mostly the two that were at that time responsible for the second course. In both courses students were informed that the course was part of the teachers' own research of their work and they would be asked their views throughout the course. Both courses were constructed in five phases, three on campus (or on-line) and two interactional phases (where all students come to campus and participated in class). In both courses 1/3 of students were on-campus learners and 2/3 were long distance learners.

THE PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

Using Basil Bernstein's (2000) discourse on pedagogy, the organisational structure of the courses was partly provided by the teacher, but intentionally students were confronted with lack of clear didactic authority encouraging them to be actively involved in what and how their learning were constructed. Thus, in the beginning of both courses students were presented with the learning outcomes of the course and asked how they would like to achieve these learning outcomes. The work was done in groups. They were further asked what type of assignments would help them to achieve these competences, what these should deal with and in what format. Then they were asked how they would like to show their competence in these areas. Using students' ideas the teachers presented a draft schedule for students to review. Then, in collaboration with students, time was roughly allocated for each part of the course. Both courses worked with sustainability issues on the local and global level, issues related to the environment, the society and the economy.

The assignments negotiated between teachers and students included reflection papers on the readings for each phase of the course, creation of a teaching plan on a topic selected from the course and designing an exam for school children about topic(s) of choice emphasising argumentation and using Bloom's taxonomy. The final exam included choices of topics to work with within a frame/structure presented ten days before the exam.

THE RESEARCH APPROACH

The experiences of students and two teachers in these courses are analysed. In the first course the data on the student experience was generated through an analysis of class discussions four times during the term; results of a regular University on-line student course survey; a group-interview with volunteer students from the course; an interview with one of the main course teachers; and the personal diary-notes of the

course coordinator. In the second course the data on student experiences was generated through analysis of two focus group interviews with volunteer students from the course, results of a regular University on-line student course survey and personal diary-notes of the course coordinator.

Critical questions were used to explore student influence on their learning. This enabled them to engage in 'interactional spaces', building their consciousness through reflecting on and reinterpreting their own experiences as a context for learning to develop their own vision. Constraints and contributors of student influence on their present and future learning were identified.

THE MAIN LEARNING

Results indicate that students and teachers were pedagogically and emotionally challenged by the approach used, with implications for their conceptions of pedagogy.

The student views and responses can be categorised into two themes. First, student feelings and the role of feelings in learning became an evident part of the individual learning experience. Most students became insecure about what demands were being made of them. The approach was in some respect unfamiliar to them and clear indicators of frustration became evident in questions from students, their comments and feedback to teachers.

Second, the students challenged the emphasis on handing part of the pedagogical authority to students. They asked if it is in principle right and/or fair that students at bachelor level influence what and how they learn in HE. Some stated that the role of the teacher is to decide and students' role to do what they are told. In the first course examples of anger became evident but as the course went on the approach used became more appreciated. Few students appreciated the challenge of less clear didactic authority in the beginning. These students mentioned the value of facing the practical challenge created by teachers to engage students, and suggested that if we want more student engagement they must have influence on what and how they learn. That requires blurring the relations between teacher-student roles.

The teacher views came from two perspectives. The course coordinator was a formal participant in the ActSHEN project and led the pedagogical approach tried out in both courses. The other teacher, who is close to retirement, was willing to try out the approach proposed even though he expressed insecurity about not knowing the whole structure before meeting the students for the first time. At this initial stage of the pilot, he viewed his role as the source of knowledge for students and explained how teachers should summarise main points of knowledge for students to learn. Repeatedly emotions at work came to the surface together with issues related to the role of teachers not just in education in general, but specifically in Teacher Education. In ongoing discussions between the teachers about the approach used in both courses it became more evident than ever that assessment is a crucial part in all pedagogical design. The role of assessment is possibly underrated or undervalued, at

least with respect to how well students have achieved the learning outcomes stated at the beginning of the course.

In conclusion, the range of responses from participants on the two courses and teacher reflections indicate the need to recognise and work with emotions in learning and teaching. Despite early doubts students became committed to the approach and questioned traditional positions of knowledge and power and control in the roles of students and teachers within Higher Education. It also raised the questions of what type of Teacher Education we want to offer and how we use interactional spaces between teachers and students in developing students' own vision.

REFERENCES

Bernstein, B. (2000). *Pedagogy, symbolic control and identity. Theory, research and critique*. Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield.

Læssøe, J. (2010). Education for sustainable development, participation and socio-cultural change. *Environmental Education Research*, 16(1), 39–57.

<http://doi.org/10.1080/13504620903504016>