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Towards successful learning: Controversies and common ground

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Short bio:

Robert studies English and Comparative Literature at Ruhr-Universität Bochum since 2014. In 2017, together with two fellow students, he designed HERMAION, an interdisciplinary student-run lecture course in which the lecturers are students themselves. After the idea received funding from inStudies – a programme at RUB which is specifically aimed at helping students develop their own learning and teaching ideas - Robert and his team successfully organised their first course in the summer of 2018. Because of his involvement in the HERMAION project Robert was asked to become RUB's student representative in the 2018 EUA thematic working group on promoting active learning. He has also presented the project and the underlying vision of peer teaching and learning at the 3rd German conference for student research and teaching, which took place in Bochum in October 2018.

Proposal

Title: The added value of students co-creating HE teaching as seen from the student perspective – a case study from Bochum, Germany

Abstract:

This paper offers insight into the still largely untapped transformative potential of university students becoming actively involved in co-creating not only their own learning, but also the teaching of their peers. It does so by examining the outcomes and implications of HERMAION, a student-run project which was organised at the faculty of philology at Ruhr-Universität Bochum from Autumn 2017 until Autumn 2018. Furthermore, it does so explicitly from a student perspective, based on the belief that student involvement should not end at the stage of implementation of student-run projects, but continue into the evaluation phase and beyond.

Key words: potential, students, co-creation, teaching, peers

The context: Active learning and peer teaching

The so-called shift from teaching to learning has received a considerable amount of attention in the discussion of higher education pedagogy in recent years and has brought about a change in the role many higher education institutions believe students ought to play in their own education. Students are now often asked to be co-creators of learning rather than passive recipients of knowledge. Whether or not the terms active learning or inquiry-based learning or problem-based learning are used to describe this approach, it requires students to play a more active role by preparing flipped-classroom sessions, collaborating in online learning management systems or preparing portfolio assignments of their own choosing. Some programmes, such as the ATLAS programme at University of Twente in Enschede (<https://www.utwente.nl/en/education/bachelor/programmes/university-college-twente/atlas/>), go further than allowing students to take more control of their learning process within a single course and give them a say in designing their own curriculum and employ methods of self-evaluation and self-assessment to give students the opportunity to “own” their educational development.

What all these approaches have in common is their focus on learning rather than teaching. At the same time, however, models of peer teaching also experience a renaissance. While peer teaching as such is hardly innovative and can be traced back as far as ancient Greece (Wagner, 1982), a whole range of new peer-based methodologies have been developed for various educational contexts, including university education. While sometimes peer teaching refers to teachers collaborating as peers, more often it refers to students teaching other students. In most cases these student teachers serve in a subordinate role to a head teacher, i.e. as tutors or mentors. Therefore, this is sometimes also called peer-assisted teaching. Furthermore, the peer relationship is often not one of true peers, as the tutors or mentors tend to be more advanced students. Hence, the term near-peer teaching is sometimes used to distinguish these educational environments from others, in which students of comparable knowledge and skill level teach each other, such as peer instruction – a model in which students teach each other as classmates without any of them being formally appointed tutors. With all these terms around, it does not help that they are sometimes used interchangeably. However, while they may be different in their specific focus, all these peer teaching methodologies are based on the idea that the peer relationship can facilitate learning.

Unfortunately, there is not a lot of research into the effects of peer teaching vs faculty teaching yet, with the notable exception of Rees et al. (2016), who conducted a meta-analysis of studies evaluating tutoring programmes in the field of medical science. They found no significant difference in terms of learning outcomes for the tutees, which is certainly no argument against peer teaching, especially as they also note the profound learning impact on the tutors. That students learn best by teaching other students is also the assumption behind the learning-by-teaching approach known as *Lernen durch Lehren* in Germany, which was first developed with school education in mind but has since been transferred to the context of higher education as well. Meanwhile, Ytreberg and Aars (2015) highlight the role of emotions in peer teaching and learning and the positive impact they can have on learning.

The project: from a focus on student research to a focus on student teaching

Initially, the main motivation for us to develop the HERMAION project (<https://www.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/hermaion/>) was not so much to test a new peer teaching model, but rather to improve the standing and, especially, the visibility of student research at our university, particularly at the faculty of philology, where students write a considerable number of papers over the course of their studies, most notably their B.A. and M.A. theses, but hardly anybody ever gets to read them. While in some cases this may be for the better, we were convinced that student papers constitute a vast and largely untapped reservoir of scientific knowledge. We were also convinced that – apart from the student researchers themselves – it would be their fellow students who would most benefit from making student research more easily available. It is based on this assumption that we decided against focusing our project on gathering and publishing high quality student papers and came up with the idea of a student lecture course instead. Giving students the opportunity to present their own research findings to their fellow students themselves seemed to us the best way to promote student research at our faculty, with publication an optional and subsequent step.

This decision also meant that we had to shift our focus from the student researchers to the student learners who were going to attend the class – and, more broadly, from student research to student teaching. Therefore, we designed the HERMAION project as an experiment with the course format of the interdisciplinary student lecture course and in June 2017 successfully applied for funding with the inStudies programme (<https://www.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/institudies/idee.html>), which funds student ideas for innovations in learning and teaching.

The key aims of the project were:

- to find enough highly qualified and motivated students as student lecturers
- to secure the inclusion of our course in the curriculum of at least four subjects at our faculty, thus enabling the students of these subjects to receive credit points for attending the class.
- to train the student lecturers and prepare them for the task of giving a lecture to their peers, in order to ensure a high standard of teaching quality in terms of both content and didactics
- to attract students to the lecture and spread enthusiasm about student research among them
- to allow students from different philological disciplines to gain an insight into the neighbouring disciplines and meet students from these disciplines

What set us apart from other current and previous inStudies projects was that in HERMAION the project management and the teaching were both going to be done by students and that we wanted the course to be part of the regular curriculum rather than an extracurricular activity. Being aware that by these aims we were encroaching on the traditional domain of the teaching staff, we enlisted the support of a teacher advisory board (TAB), consisting of three professors from three different philological subjects, even before the project officially began. Their support and counsel proved invaluable in the development of the course and helped us tremendously in securing the institutional support we needed to implement our project as planned. After we had achieved the inclusion of our project in the curricula of the English, comparative literature, Romance languages, German and

Classical Philology departments and had found a promising group of eleven student lecturers by asking teachers to recommend suitable candidates to us based on excellent papers they had written, the actual preparation of the course could begin.

This caused our focus to shift even further to the teaching aspect of our project, as we became acutely aware that we – and that now included the student lecturers – were suddenly university teachers and responsible for a regular course. Because students were going to be able to earn credit points in our class, officially the TAB was responsible for the course, but in practice it was our job to develop the course concept, albeit with their support always available. This new sense of immediate responsibility forced us to re-examine our initial idea of promoting student research and, while not abandoning it, led us to concentrate on converting the student research into course content suitable for a highly heterogeneous group of student learners and on developing fitting didactical methods instead. In this process we were supported by the centre for academic writing and the centre for HE didactics at RUB, which provided workshops for us and the student lecturers that focused on core didactical concepts, rhetorical training and reflection on the research process. Alongside the workshops we also offered individual coaching sessions to the student teachers to support them in the process of preparing their lectures. The final preparatory step was a rehearsal of each lecture two weeks before it was due. These rehearsals were attended by our team, other student teachers and members of the TAB who would listen to the lecture and give feedback to the lecturer.

By the time of the first lecture we had developed a didactical concept for the course that we could present to the students and that gave our course structure and coherence, but it was still a work in progress and constantly evolving. Because we had not been sure whether we would attract enough interested student teachers we had not set an overall topic for the course other than it being a literary studies course. This meant that content-wise initially none of the eleven lectures had much to do with any of the others. On the one hand, we decided to use this as an advantage, because we felt this way we were able to show the course participants what a broad variety of student research exists in literary studies. On the other hand, we grouped the lectures in three blocks with a common theme and also worked with our student lecturers on establishing connections to the other lectures in their block as well as on a common didactical structure. While the student lecturers were free to use a style of presentation that fit them best personally, all lectures also contained a few elements that were in common. They all actively engaged the participants by using an interactive method such as Mentimeter (<https://www.mentimeter.com/>) or think-pair-share, often letting them think about a problem by themselves or in pairs before presenting the findings of the student lecturer or letting them apply something they just learned to a new case. This was aimed at breaking up the tension of the typical lecture setting and at creating a more relaxed and open atmosphere. On top of that, the student lecturers also all reflected on their research process for their fellow students in a so-called “research story”, that explicitly included the difficulties encountered along the way. This was aimed at reducing the hierarchical difference between the student-lecturers and their peers that the lecture setting otherwise establishes and thus making their achievements appear more attainable to the student learners, while also offering practical advice for common research problems.

Finally, we also had to develop an assessment concept for our course together with our teacher advisors. Initially we had planned to use a multiple-choice exam as the sole assessment method, because it seemed the most practical solution, as we didn't want to force too much extra work onto the TAB and because this was the method used by most other lecture courses at our faculty. However, we were not very happy with this solution, because it meant that our assessment was not very well aligned with our intended learning outcomes or our learning activities. Moreover, given that our student participants required different numbers of credit points depending on their subject, we had to find a way to allow some participants to earn more credit points than others. As a solution we came up with three essay assignments, one for each block. All students had to complete at least one of these. In the essays, the students had to recount what they learned from a lecture of their choice, draw connections to at least one other lecture in the block and, if possible, also reflect on their own research experiences in the process. The essays were assessed by a TAB member and given a pass-mark, if deemed of sufficient quality.

Evaluation of the course and the project

According to all criteria initially defined when submitting the project for funding, the project was successful. We found enough students, who were all highly competent and very motivated and put in a lot of effort into their lectures as well as into supporting their peers. The course was included in the curriculum of five departments at our faculty and was selected by 77 students, of which 60 signed up for the moodle-course and 40 handed in essays and participated in the exam. 39 students from three departments passed the course and earned credit points. The lectures were regularly attended by 30-40 students, without any attendance requirements in place. The workshops and the coaching, especially the rehearsal lectures, were also a success, as perceived by the student lecturers themselves as well as by the TAB and the project team.

Reflecting the shift from research to teaching detailed above, the most important group to evaluate the course were the student participants. Overall, they evaluated the course positively, giving it a score of 4.7 of a possible 5 for giving them insight into student research and 3.9 for insight into other philological subjects. 3.9 was also the score when they were asked whether they had received inspiration or motivation for their own research projects. A score of only 2.8 for meeting students from other subjects indicates the area in which we underachieved the most. When asked how this particular aspect could be improved, the participants suggested the use of even more interactive methods as well as various ways of pairing people with their peers and letting them collaborate or even assess one-another. Of the interactive methods employed, the digital tool Mentimeter was the clear favourite with a score of 4.6, while the more traditional think-pair-share only received a score of 2.9. The content of the course was also evaluated positively, with a score of 4.7 for it having been interesting for their studies and 4.3 for it having contained a "research story" element. When asked what they were most likely to remember from the course, they stressed the enthusiasm of the lecturers as well as a more confident attitude towards the typical struggles of research. The students were also quite happy with the essay assignments as the main form of assessment and with a score of 3.9, they indicated that the essays helped them reflect on what they learned in the lectures.

We then also asked the students to tell us what they thought the biggest difference to a “normal” lecture had been. They highlighted the fun and more relaxed atmosphere, the interactive elements, the lower age-gap – resulting in a higher degree of identification, the diversity of the topics and lecture styles and being on equal footing with the lecturers, whom they apparently considered to have been more open, more honest and more motivated than “normal” teachers. The participants saw the added value of student teaching in the inspirational and motivational potential, in the new and refreshing lecturing style and in the practical tips from peers and in giving students the opportunity to try out teaching.

Conclusion: Towards more co-creation of teaching

The success of the HERMAION project has not only served to underline the benefits of peer teaching methods, but in going beyond the usual framework of peer teaching at universities, which in most cases is limited to some form of peer-assisted teaching, it can serve as a blueprint of what the co-creation of teaching can add to the active learning paradigm. It can serve as a second pillar of co-creation along with the co-creation of learning, with the one being focused on the individual learner and the other on the learner as a teacher of peers.

In the HERMAION project we experienced the power of peer relationships in teaching not only between the lecturers and the students, but also among the lecturers as a community of practice and between the project team and the lecturers as well as the participants. The relationship to our teacher advisors was also a special one, as they treated us much like near-peers themselves. All people involved, including the teacher advisors and the people giving the workshops, learned from the process, but as the project team we probably learnt the most, as we continuously developed our idea further.

That tremendous learning experience could have been enough for us, but we believe that the greatest value of our project is that it shows that it is possible for students to actively change their learning and teaching environment and that it can be students, too, who establish co-creative processes at a higher education institution. While we are now heading into a second year of HERMAION, another student lecture course, modelled on ours, is now already being organised at the faculty of protestant theology. We are confident that the course format of the student lecture series and, even more so, the concept of co-creation of teaching can successfully be applied to many more contexts at our institution and elsewhere in the future, thus giving more and more students the opportunity to actively shape their learning and teaching environments.

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