

Facilitating peer learning in study groups: student experiences

Introduction

The educational programme in pedagogical psychology at the Danish School of Education (DPU), Aarhus University (AU) is a two-year master degree programme admitting app. 250 students each year. However, dropout rates are relatively high and less than 3% complete their studies within the two-year period. Both for the students and for the university it is an economic problem when students do not complete on time let alone the social problems which may be associated with drop out for the individual student.

In 2008, AU published a report concerning student experience with their study environment. It is based on a survey including all students and shows that students at AU generally are satisfied with their studies. DPU, however, stands out with the poorest study environment and the least satisfied students. The education in pedagogical psychology is a case in point being among the lowest scoring at DPU. Factors with strong relation to students' well-being were: the sense of belonging in relation to the subject, sense of having good contact with other students, and absence of loneliness (AU 2008a).

Tinto's interactionist theory of college students' departure has received near-paradigmatic status (Braxton et al. 1997). In this model, academic and social integration are key factors in accounting for student dropout (Tinto 1986, 1993). Academic integration reflects students' experience with the academic system and academic communities whereas social integration can be influenced by factors such as the amount and quality of contacts within faculty members (Tinto 1993), active learning, fulfilment of expectations for college, student involvement, and self-efficacy (Braxton et al. 2000).

This paper presents results from a pilot project at the education in pedagogical psychology at DPU. The project was initiated in January 2009 and the goals were twofold: to increase the students' social and academic integration and thereby increase retention; to achieve this with minimal faculty member involvement. This last point is important, as we see it as a new contribution to the research field of students' social integration.

The project 'facilitating study environment'

The project consisted of three elements: facilitated study groups, a student bar with facilitated activities, and academic identity events. These three elements were chosen in order to address some of the problems highlighted in the analysis of the study environment (AU 2008b). As we wanted to see how much we could change an education dominated by lectures with minimal faculty member involvement, the activities were outside the classroom and none of them were mandatory.

In this paper we report on the facilitated study groups. This part was initiated with a call for potential facilitators among the students. Through a two-day workshop 17 students learned how to facilitate their own study group and to use peer learning (similar to a peer-learning community (Tosey and Gregory 1998)). Groups of 10-14 students were formed and linked with one trained group facilitator. They met one hour before every lecture (in total 15 times) and were guided by the facilitator through 'academic critical' and 'personal constructive' questions relating to the text. 'Academic critical' questions are the type of questions we usually use. These were supplemented with 'personal constructive' questions in order to increase the students' subjective relevancy of the text. All of the activities built on the students' own resources and involved a minimum of faculty member involvement.

For the evaluation, we made qualitative interviews and focus groups interviews with 15 study group facilitators. Furthermore, a questionnaire with both closed and open-ended questions was handed out at the last lecture and had a response rate of 72%.

Discussion and concluding remarks

The project led to a remarkable improvement in the students' well-being measured on a number of parameters as seen in table 1 compared with the 2007 study from AU (AU2008a). Foremost the students experienced a much greater sense of belonging to the study in pedagogical psychology.

Percentage agreeing to the statement	AU 2007	DPU 2007	PP 2007	PP 2009
I feel I belong to a larger community at the study	55	24	21	60
The study has contributed to my sense of academic belonging at the study	74	54	48	69
Generally, my well-being at the study is high	83	69	67	85

The likelihood of social interaction with my fellow students is good	72	32	29	74
In general, the other students are forthcoming	82	78	80	91
I fell lonely – at a daily basis at university	9	16	19	6
I fell lonely – at a daily basis outside university	6	5	5	6
My interest in the study's academic field has grown since I began studying	85	88	90	90
My study has contributed to clarifying what kind of job I would like when I finish my studies	43	33	32	35

AU – Aarhus University, DPU – Danish School of Education, PP – Pedagogical Psychology

While it is important to bear in mind that these results reflect the whole project and not only the facilitated study groups, there is no doubt that some of the improvement is due to the work in the groups. This was confirmed in the open-ended questions. Concerning the positive outcome of the facilitated study groups, the students answered: "Found out that I was not the only person not understanding the text", "got a social network", and "discussing the text gave a much deeper understanding".

During the qualitative interviews, the effect of participating in the facilitated study groups was elaborated. One student was reflecting on the difference between these groups and conventional study groups. In the latter, they were two who "gradually were left behind. This experience I've never had in the facilitated group". She explained that this probably was due both to the facilitation which means that everybody is heard and to the personal constructive questions which means that everybody has something to say.

The project shows how academic and social integration can be achieved with minimum faculty member involvement. This is done by relying on the students' own resources, using peer-learning and facilitating these activities.

References

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