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**Small Group and Project-oriented Work within the Course.
Implementation and Research.**

Note on the author

Siarhei Liubimau is a lecturer at the Departments of *Social Sciences* and *Belarusian Studies: Preservation and Use of Cultural Heritage* and at the MA program *Visual and Cultural Studies* at the European Humanities University. The courses he teaches are *Sociology of Culture*, *The phenomenon of Tourism in the Perspective of Social Critical Theory* and *Critical Urbanism*. Currently he is writing his PhD dissertation at the Graduate School for Social Research (Polish Academy of Science). In the year 2007 he was one of the founders of the *Laboratory of Critical Urbanism* at EHU, which serves as a platform for scholars and practitioners working in the field of urban studies. In his research he is mostly interested in the spatial forms and practices present in the urban agglomerations on political borders and in the role of cultural industries in contemporary cities.

Abstract

The main idea of this study is to find out whether small groups' problem-based work within the course makes students' learning experience more integrative and project-oriented? In other words, whether in such a context students learn how to link different topics and theories within the course and whether they start to treat knowledge and skills they acquired within the class as something significant for their career building? The research data will be collected primarily from the students' course works (4 reaction papers, a presentation and a final essay of 2500 words) and from focus groups and ethnographic interviews. The research is taking place in the specific context of the Belarusian university (EHU) located in Vilnius, Lithuania.

Background description

I started this project by reading on the issue of integrative learning (mostly from the Integrative Learning Project prepared by Carnegie Foundation and the Association of American Colleges and Universities) and on the issue of problem based learning. Besides I try to retain the agenda of the current debates about so-called 'new' or 'creative' economy and the skills of flexible project-oriented work, which are needed in this new economic configuration.

Context description

I am going to conduct my research in the environment of the fourth (final) year students from the department of *Social Science* at the European Humanities University. There are two tracks at this department: *Visual and Cultural Studies* and *Media and Communication Studies*. My course, *Sociology of Culture* (3 credits), is compulsory for the students of both tracks. Here I find it crucial to make explicit a few context-specific traits of teaching and learning at this institution. First, EHU is the Belarusian University, which was closed in Minsk in 2004 for political reasons and in the year 2005 was re-opened in Lithuania (Vilnius) as a Lithuanian higher education institution. That means that most of the students are Belarusian citizens, who study and live in the foreign country and are supposed to return to their home country after the graduation. Second, the first wave of graduates from newly established EHU will appear only at the end of the academic year 2008-2009 (among others this will be the group of students I am going to work with). That makes it problematic so far to talk about the regularities of the career trajectories of the re-opened EHU graduates. Third, students have classes as intensive blocs and not gradually every week. In the case of my course these blocs will be 17-23.11.2008 and 15-23.12.2008. Such a format is challenging both for the students and for the teacher in a sense that it requires the well-thought strategies of the organization of gradual and fruitful work within the course.

Detailed research question

My research question is whether *small groups' problem-based work within the course makes students' learning more integrative or connected and, in last instance, more project-oriented?* If to relate this puzzle to Hutchings' classification of the scholarships of teaching

and learning then my study's type is visions of the possible.¹ To put this question into a broader social context, I am trying to figure out if small problem-based group's work within the course makes EHU students more prepared to the flexible project-oriented jobs? Here it is important to explain what is understood by the term project-oriented. Within my case study there are two indicators for the project-oriented learning. First, is constructed primarily in the relation to what is called integrative learning, i.e. *the degree to which students connect different topics within the course*. And, second, *their perception of what they have done within the course as their currency, something that can help them in the process of career-building*.

It should be said that this research question is not so much discipline specific (it could be any other social sciences and humanities course and department). However in order to make it more connected to the concrete course I teach (Sociology of Culture) and to act according the first 'P' of Shulman's three rationales of teaching scholarship (professionalism, pragmatism, policy²), I make students' work problem-based. That means that apart from the fact that I divide students into 4-5 groups, each group will have to work on one particular social/cultural problem within the course and will need to learn how to turn this social/cultural problem into sociological problem, i.e. how to approach it from the perspective of sociological theories and approaches they learn. Moreover giving each group a certain problem to work with would be a certain glue, which must keep together the individual students working within a group.

Problem posed this way makes my study conceptually close to what is called integrative learning, i.e. the strategies of teaching and learning, which facilitate students' matching of the knowledge they acquired in one particular class with the information and skills they gain from the other classes and the other sources of the information. In Richard Gale the most prevalent pedagogies, which make such a way of getting and using information possible are service learning, problem-based learning, collaborative learning, and experiential learning.³ In the case of my course it will be problem based learning and collaborative learning. Quoting Gale, it will be "a pedagogy that asks students to work in small groups to investigate and solve teacher designed real world problems in the discipline they are studying".⁴

¹ Hutchings, Pat. "Approaching the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning". Available online: <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/files/elibrary/integrativelearning/index.htm> [downloaded: 25.09.2008]

² Shulman, Lee S. "From Minsk to Pinsk: Why A Scholarship of Teaching and Learning?" in *The Journal of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*. 1:1, pp. 49

³ Gale, Richard A. "Fostering Integrative Learning through Pedagogy". Available online: <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/files/elibrary/integrativelearning/index.htm> [downloaded: 25.09.2008]

⁴ Ibid.

Here it is important to note that usually SOTL scholars talk about macro-scale of cross-disciplinary integrative learning.⁵ In my research I limit integrative learning exclusively to the ways, in which students make connections between the topics and readings within one course, while the issue of making connections between different courses and the different sources of information remains marginal. Here it is worth saying that the idea of linking courses within one program is pretty persistent at the department, where I am going to conduct my research. However this idea rather lacks deeper understanding of what actually happens in the classroom and in the period when students are supposed to prepare to the work in the classroom. My research aims precisely at dismantling this smaller scale of integrative learning through experimenting with the single course design.

Evidence of student learning

Ross Miller writes that the most popular types of the assessment of students' integrative learning are papers, projects, presentations and portfolios.⁶ In order to analyze the first indicator I gather data through the collection and systematic analysis of student work. These are four reaction papers, one presentation in class and one final essay of 2500 words.

While analyzing students' written tasks I focus on the five related aspects of these tasks. First, *the breadth of the information collected about the real world problem* students are working with (I look at the number of the sources and the thickness of the information students are giving before proceeding with their analysis and solutions). Second, *the depth of the reception of this information* (I look at the ways students are presenting this information, whether they just quote sources one by one in order to give an impression that they were working with the sources or they are critically taking this information, showing strong and weak points of different sources, their inconsistency or analogical thinking). Third, *the breath of the use of sociological theories* (the number of academic publications from the syllabus readings students quote). Additionally I will count the publications, which are not in the syllabus, but quoted by students. Fourth, *the depth of the use of sociological theories* (I look at the ways students work with the course readings, if they just show that they are acquainted with this or that theory or also juxtapose different theories, critically showing why and how a particular theory can be applied to a particular social/cultural problem). Five, *the*

⁵ Huber, Mary Taylor. "Fostering Integrative Learning through the Curriculum". Available online: <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/files/elibrary/integrativelearning/index.htm> [downloaded 25.09.2008]

⁶ Miller, Ross. "Fostering Integrative Learning through Assessment". Available online: <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/files/elibrary/integrativelearning/index.htm> [downloaded: 25.09.2008]

intensiveness of the dialog within the groups manifested in written tasks (I analyze whether each individual student from each group grounds his/her standpoint in relation to the standpoints of other group members made explicit in the presentations and discussions). The assumption is that each aspect of students' learning should be gradually improved during the time of the course (November 2008 – February 2009). The other regularities of students' learning in real world problem related small groups will be documented in a form of field notes.

The data concerning students' presentations will be also gathered in a form of field notes. Here I am going to map the communication structure during class presentations. In the moment of 7-10 minutes presentation and 3-5 minutes discussion I am going to focus on what happens on three different scales: *the scale of small group* student is from (whether people working in one group are the most motivated discussants when someone from their group makes a presentation), *the scale of the entire group* (how do the members of the other groups react when someone makes a presentation), and *the scale of all the people in the class including teacher* (what kind of role students give to their teacher in this structure). Here it is also important to say that I assume that this scalar structure will mutate during the semester and these mutations will be analyzed in the final report.

For the analysis of the second indicator I employ the methods of group interviews and ethnographic interviews. Group interviews will be conducted twice: at the beginning of the year and at the end of the year. These will be traditional focus group interviews: one moderator and 10-15 respondents. Here the question for the researcher is how students connect the information and skills they acquired in the particular university course with their imagined or already actual [postgraduate] careers. Here I planned six questions, which would facilitate the discussion needed for gaining appropriate data.

First, why students have chosen this particular university for getting their degrees? What is specific about it? What kind of expectations students have had? Which of these expectations were met and which were not?

Second, are students happy with the kind of diploma they will get (this particular university and this particular department)? Do they think that the diploma of this department will help them in finding jobs? If yes, why? If no, why?

Third, were students working part-time while studying or part- / full-time before they were enrolled at EHU? If yes, what kind of jobs were those? Do students want to continue with these jobs?

Fourth, what kind of associations do students have with the word ‘work’? What are the attributes of work? How can they describe the work they want (what kind of duties, place, schedule, domain, salary, etc.)? Some examples?

Fifth, which skills acquired at the university might help them to find the kind of job they want? What will be/are the first steps they are going to make when will start looking for a job?

Sixth, do students know the term ‘project-oriented work’? What kind of attitude do they have to it?

Besides ethnographic interviews-conversations related to these questions will be conducted throughout the semester and will be documented in field diary.

Preliminary findings

It can be said that the strategies of problem-based learning are resting on the assumption that students are to acquire not only substantial knowledge in their field, yet also to know how to apply this knowledge. Brownell and Daphne, who studied the implementation of problem-based learning within graduate management program, write that for the student teams, which faced the concrete real world problem this problem was “the stimulus for subsequent learning”.⁷ Further on they talk about three specific outcomes of such learning: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. Here cognitive outcomes are those, which increase knowledge, behavioral outcomes are those, which increase implementation skills, while affective outcomes are those, which increase awareness and sensitiveness.⁸ Taking into account that this is only my first attempt of doing the research on small groups’ problem-based learning and that EHU students are initially less real world oriented than graduate management students at American University I would focus only on the aspect of cognitive outcomes.

In this respect and basing on my experience of supervising practice/‘praktika’ (it was structured precisely as project-oriented group work, yet supervised mostly online) of students from the department, where I am going to conduct my research, I would talk about three preliminary marginal findings. First, for the students from this particular department and this particular university group work is an unusual and rather painful experience: existing teaching

⁷ Brownell, Judy and Daphne A. Jameson. “Problem-based learning in Graduate Management Education: An Integrative Model and Interdisciplinary Application” in *Journal of Management Education*, vol. 28, 2004, pp. 560

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 562

and learning structures do not leave much space for the communication between students and make it difficult for them to negotiate what they are doing when teacher is not a central character of this process. Second, students have very vague understanding about the mechanisms of building their future careers and hardly conceive the work they have done in the classroom as one of the steps in this process. Third, students have problems with organizing their time for the work on their projects outside the classroom and therefore a strong presence of teacher (in the vein of this project this is the role of the flexible curator, moderating group work and commenting on its results in the classroom) is needed.

Public presentation of research findings

As far as I understood the main outcome of this research project will be an academic article, where I analyze the results of my study. Besides it, I am going to discuss the interim results of my research with the colleagues from EHU and the other universities from the region (Lithuania, Russia, Ukraine, etc.) at the winter session of HESP Challenge Seminar at the European Humanities University *Visual Studies of Immedia: Exploring the Postmodern Immediacy of Mass Media*. It will take place in Vilnius in January 2009 (more precise dates are not available yet). Teaching media and visual studies is one of the main issues of this seminar and apparently I will get floor for presenting my findings and insights publicly. Moreover the results of this research will be discussed within the *Laboratory of Critical Urbanism* which was recently launched at EHU and serves as the platform for scholars and teachers interested in urban studies. Here it would be necessary to say that those university teachers, who are engaged in this laboratory have also an interest in different approaches to project-oriented work both within and beyond the academia. In this regard the results of my research might become one of the catalysts for the work of the entire laboratory.

Project's schedule

30 November 2008 – The pilot version of data analysis

15 December 2008 – Problems, questions, worries, further expectations

15 January 2009 – Annotated bibliography

1 April 2009 – Literature review section and the final version of data analysis

30 June 2009 – The first draft of final paper

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