

PEER LEARNING ACTIVITIES THAT ENCOURAGE PARTICIPATION: MAPS, MUSEUM PROFILING, AND TREASURE HUNT

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Teaching-learning challenge

Since its inception, European Museums and World Heritage Sites has been a course that relies heavily on student contribution. However, the engagement level has not been as high as I expected. First, home students seem to not travel enough around Europe or when they travel, they do not visit museums. The presence of international students can remedy this issue, if they are willing to share their experiences. Second, students—home and international alike—lack sufficient motivation to prepare for and participate in class even if one third of their final grade comes from the combination of homework and in-classroom contribution. Therefore, I decided to redesign the course by introducing peer learning, strengthening internationalisation and fostering relationships between students of different origins. In this chapter I show that peer learning activities can help raise the levels of student interest in and engagement with the course content.

The course, the students, and the lecturer

European Museums and World Heritage Sites is offered in the Department of Archive Studies and Museology at the Faculty of Arts, Comenius University in Bratislava. The course was originally designed for Museology and Cultural Heritage students (MA level) to help them feel more secure in using English in their field. It has, moreover, been offered for students in the Central European Studies programme (BA level) and so far, they have formed the majority of students. It was first introduced in the Winter 2019 semester, for a mixture of home and international students.

The course covers different European countries each week, focusing on their museums and heritage sites. Course learning outcomes include students becoming familiar with different types of European museums and heritage sites, explaining the development of the museum phenomenon in Europe, defining the term ‘museum’, and improving student attitudes toward museums in general. Assessment has been based on two presentations delivered during the semester (10 points each), in-class contribution and homework (10 points).

In the Winter 2021 semester, sixteen students signed up for the course, twelve of them from Central European Studies and four Erasmus+ students. The class was comprised of five home students and eleven international students including seven from Ukraine, two from China, and two from Singapore. Of the eleven class sessions, six were held face-to-face and five classes were online. Some adaptations were necessary when we switched from in-person to online teaching.

Pedagogical method

In line with the student-centred approach to teaching, I view learning as an active process in which students should actively participate (McLeod 2019), and thus be closely involved in the process of the construction of their own knowledge (University of Waterloo 2022). Classroom interaction is among the most used instructional strategies. Discussion is a great tool that we can use to facilitate learning, but it is still not the norm in every classroom (Howard 2015). The understanding of effective teaching and how it ties to student engagement is constantly evolving as well, even more so now when there is an ever-bigger push toward online teaching due to the outbreak of the pandemic (Barkley 2010).

While I made discussion an important part of this course from the beginning, I have come to realise that discussion needs to be more focused and structured. Therefore, in 2021 I introduced a set of new activities: a map exercise, museum profile, and treasure hunt, which combined peer learning and internationalisation to improve student participation. Peer learning was selected because of its potential to promote a safe, open environment where everyone can participate and share their opinions (Barkley 2010).

During the introductory class, I divided students into groups, provided each group with a map and asked them to mark their home country and the countries of Europe they have visited. This was followed by a group discussion about the visited countries and student experiences there, as well as about the countries they would like to visit. We worked with the maps during the first two classes, so that everyone had a chance to participate. The maps served as an icebreaker and also a reference point for me when we talked about a particular country during later classes: it showed me which (if any) students had visited each country and I could call on them to comment. Of the newly introduced activities, I relied on the map the most, referring to it in every class.

The museum profile activity was based on the 'I like... museums' initiative and the use of visitor profiles to help personalise a museum visit (Simon 2010). Each student got a card on which they filled out their (general) interests and the type(s) of museums they enjoy visiting. Then they discussed the responses in pairs. When the activity was used in the first class, it aimed at helping students to get to know each other, find their voice and stimulate their curiosity. Seeing students' interest in weird museums (Tibballs 2016), I modified this activity and asked students to suggest an unusual museum their peer might find appealing based on their interests. This was to show students that there are museums of all kinds and no matter what you feel passionate about, there is probably a museum that addresses your interests.

For the treasure hunt, I used an online interactive tool called Flippity that allows students to create their own scavenger hunts ('Make your own virtual breakout' 2022). As a reflection on past lessons, students had to answer ten conceptual questions about museums and heritage sites and add their own opinions about the museums covered (Vargová 2021). Using random assignment to groups of three via the Microsoft Teams breakout rooms function, students had

to search online for clues to a series of riddles concerning the museums and heritage sites of a particular region and discuss the assigned questions. The activity was used once and only online to reinforce earlier knowledge and reflect.

The above activities made internationalisation, that is, 'the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education' (Knight 2004), more explicit in the course. Internationalisation has always been a feature of this course by focusing on museums around Europe and incorporating the experiences of all, including international, students. The new, more structured peer learning activities put an even stronger emphasis on students' diverse experiences. This also allowed international students to feel more comfortable to contribute to class activities even when their travel experience was limited. Often simply talking about museums and world heritage sites in their home country was enough for them to meaningfully contribute and connect with their peers.

When introducing the three peer learning activities, I expected that students would (H1) consider the class content and new activities appealing and beneficial for their learning, and (H2) become more active during the classes compared to students who took the same course in the previous academic year; and finally that (H3) the level of engagement would be equally high among home and international students.

Sources of data and methods

As for the data collection instruments, I used five sources. First, students filled out an anonymous minute-paper after every second face-to-face class (three in total, with 36 responses). I used survey cards with questions about what the students found appealing, what they took away from the session, what they would like to hear more about in the future, and whether or not they found anything irrelevant. I asked them to focus on two areas: the main activity and content of the class. When we switched to remote teaching, I prepared an online version of the form using Padlet, though I only ever received two answers there.

Second, I kept a teacher's diary in which I listed my expectations about how each class will go and how the students will behave with regard to the activities before each class. After each class I evaluated my expectations based on my observations during class and made other notes that I deemed relevant. I again focused on the categories of content and activity. The entries were usually approximately half a page and often took the form of bullet points.

Third, I tracked the level of student engagement during peer learning activities, and participation in the discussions about selected countries. I could analyse the level of participation from a comparative perspective as there was similar data available from the previous semester, which I used when evaluating the second hypothesis.

Fourth, peer observation of one of my online classes was conducted by a colleague from my department, who—as a PhD student—took the class the first year it was offered. Therefore, she was able to compare the class pre- and post-innovation. She filled out a classroom observation sheet, writing comments during the class, and we met afterwards to compare her observations with my perception of the class.

Finally, I used results from two versions of the end-of-semester student evaluation form. The university's standard eight-question survey asks students to express their opinion on the course and suggest improvements, which can help the teacher identify problematic areas and improve the course. However, the standard evaluation form is generally underused by students, as was the case in this course: only seven students completed it. This semester, my course was also part of a pilot study aiming to design a new, more comprehensive evaluation form with 22 questions. This new form was more fitting for my purposes as it paid more attention to engagement and peer learning. Five students completed this form. As both surveys were anonymous, it is not possible for me to tell whether or not the two questionnaires were filled out by the same students.

I used mixed methods of analysis, where most of the comparisons between this and earlier iterations of the course were measured qualitatively. For yes/no and multiple-choice questions in the surveys and the classroom observation form I used descriptive statistics.

Findings

As for the student perceptions of the course and peer learning activities, my expectations were confirmed (H1). Based on the answers from the minute-papers, students unanimously found the classes appealing. There was not a single comment in the section where they were asked to identify irrelevant information. Out of the 38 responses, only four expressed the need for further clarification of certain points, asking about the selection process of the presented museums, if the museums also offered virtual tours, or wanting to know more about some museums. The students mainly described what sort of information they found exciting, which gave me insight into what to pay more attention to in future classes.

The students expressed increased interest in unusual museums such as the Museum of Icelandic Witchcraft and Sorcery, the Dog Collar Museum (UK), and the Beijing Museum of Tap Water (seven responses). They wanted to learn more about the history of the discussed museums and/or their collections (six responses) and said that the classes had inspired them to want to visit the museums or heritage sites (eight responses). This is most encouraging, as it meets one of the course learning outcomes. Also, the pilot end of semester survey responses suggested that the course helped broaden student horizons when it comes to museums and that it offered enough opportunities for contributing to learning activities (five responses strongly agree/agree). The students also felt engaged in class (five responses strongly agree/agree) and felt part of a learning community (four responses strongly agree/agree). When asked for suggestions, two students

expressed the opinion that even more activities could be introduced. As for the regular survey, both respondents found the course appealing and would recommend it to others.

Student engagement was also found to be higher than in the previous year (H2). Students were more active in the discussions. Although the composition of the student body was different—slightly more students took the class in 2021 (n=16) than in 2020 (n=13) and in 2021 the ratio of international to home students was higher than in the previous year (11:5 and 7:6, respectively)—valid comparisons are still possible. Nine out of thirteen students (69%) contributed in 2020 at least once, with twenty-one recorded instances of student activity. In 2021, both numbers were higher: fourteen out of sixteen students (87%) contributed in class at least once, with twenty-seven recorded instances of student activity.

While a similar comparison with the previous academic year is not possible regarding peer learning given that all such activities were newly introduced, making the 2021 course naturally more interactive in this respect, it is possible to look at student engagement in the innovated course. The observer noted that between 26%-50% of the class session consisted of peer learning activities. She found that the level of engagement during these activities was medium, which was higher than during other activities. Indeed, I made a note in my diary that students were most active during the peer learning activities or when specifically called upon, and rarely asked questions or commented on their own. Most of the student activity happened when we began discussing a new country and before we delved into particular museums. Occasionally they volunteered to share information without prompting if the discussed locations triggered their memory. For example, when we talked about Venice as a cultural heritage location, one of the students shared her carnival experience there.

However, there were discernible differences between the levels of engagement in the various activities. It is clear from my teaching diary that the map caught the students' attention from the beginning and they would not have minded spending even more time on it. One response from the feedback form even stated that 'we should have more activities like the first one'. Of the peer learning activities, the map was received most favourably and it turned out to be the most useful in the long run.

Working with museum profiles encountered less enthusiasm from students initially: when given the choice between working with these profiles or researching weird museums, they chose the latter. Nonetheless, it resulted in lively discussions in the end, too. The modified iterations of this activity garnered better responses from the students. All in all, the museum profile exercise strengthened the overall idea that 'museums are for everyone' by piquing their interest in new, unusual museums. Therefore, the activity has potential as a peer learning tool, it just needs a more careful design.

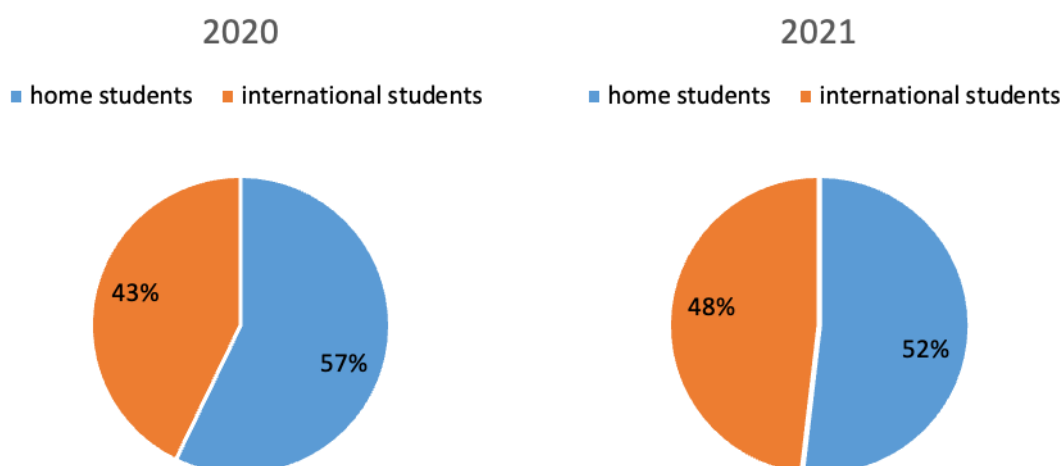
The treasure hunt elicited mixed reactions, which was, at least partially, due to the level of interaction between the members of each group. In some cases, it helped spark discussion, but some

groups worked in silence treating it more like an individual task. This was corroborated by the peer observer who suggested that the online nature of the class might have been responsible for this. However, I have found that this exercise not only helped with engaging students and reviewing important course content, but also encouraged students to search for additional information on their own.

Home and international students' classroom activity was slightly more balanced in 2021 than in 2020. In 2020, five out of six (83%) home students participated at least once, while only four out of seven (57%) international students did the same. However, in 2021 all five (100%) home students and nine out of eleven (82%) international students were active, reducing the gap between the two groups from 26% to 18%.

The difference between the two groups in the frequency of average contributions in class during online teaching was much smaller in both 2020 and 2021 but still favoured home students slightly. The shrinking of the gap from 2020 to 2021 meant the home and international students' levels of contribution were close to equal in this regard. In 2020, twelve out of the twenty-one recorded instances of student activity were by home students (57%) and nine by international students (43%). In 2021, both figures were higher: fourteen out of twenty-seven instances were of home student activity (52%) and thirteen of international student activity (48%) (see Figure 1). Therefore, support for H3 is mixed. While the gap between home and international students closed, perhaps due to a more explicit consideration of internationalisation, the contributions of home and international students were not in parity in all respects.

Figure 1. Comparison of frequency of activity of home and international students during online class sessions



Replicability in a different context

The peer learning activities used in this course can be used in other contexts as well, only with slight modifications to fit with the content of the course. They can be particularly effective in courses that enrol students from disciplines close in topic or approach to museology, such as archaeology, anthropology, international relations, history, sociology, and even geography, and that mix students from a variety of fields. Making use of students' personal experiences brings the somewhat distant material closer to their own lives, which is a viable method especially in those disciplines that seem detached from the digital age of the 21st century. All three activities described in this chapter can be adjusted easily. For example, many online resources offer tips on how to incorporate maps—which proved to be the most popular and effective activity—into courses (cf. 'Digital mapping...' 2022; 'Interactive maps for the classroom' 2022; 'Virtual field trip apps and websites' 2022).

Conclusions

All in all, the results confirm two out of my three hypotheses. The students thought the course was appealing and found the new peer learning activities engaging, especially when they were properly stimulated. The students gained a foundational understanding of the typology of museums and cultural heritage, as well as tips for interesting locations to visit. Regarding internationalisation, they could also talk to students from different countries. The data also point to an increase in student activity when compared with the previous academic year. This is at least partially a result of the newly introduced activities. The expectation that home and international students would be equally active did not receive full support; although engagement was about equal during the online classes, home students tended to participate more often in discussions than their international peers when the full length of the course is taken into account. I find this intriguing and worth exploring more in the future as there is a good potential for further internationalisation and perhaps identifying a difference in internationalising face-to-face and online courses.

As for the newly implemented peer learning activities, the use of the map proved to be the most successful and I will definitely keep using it in the future. I believe the other two activities have their value as well, but the design needs to be improved and adapted to better suit the class. I have already been able to incorporate some of the student feedback into my classes, for example by introducing digital content from selected museums and pointing out innovative programmes they offer to visitors. I hope that these changes will further increase student engagement in future iterations of the course.

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Summary

This chapter evaluates the redesign of the non-compulsory European Museums and World Heritage Sites course that aimed to encourage student participation among both home and international students via introduction of peer learning activities. The new course design was informed by the concepts of active learning, peer learning, and internationalisation, and introduced maps, museum profiling and a treasure hunt as classroom activities. The results show that peer learning activities increased student engagement during classes and boosted student interest in the topics, including heightened motivation to visit museums.

Keywords

group work, museology, student engagement



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