

## POST-ITS, CARDS AND SHORT FILMS: LEARNING FROM INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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### Teaching-learning challenge

Whether they are international or not, students differ in how they learn. Andreotti (2012: 240) argues how practitioners must educate a diversity of learner types in ‘complex educational environments, where a number of different variables and perspectives need to be considered’. Such perspectives can include international students with knowledge and experiences acquired in (educational) contexts other than the one in which a university course may be provided. Therefore, in my course covering inclusive citizenship education, I strive to offer space to students to express their own experiences and knowledge about course topics, especially if these experiences are related to their country of origin. Additionally, I aim to design and facilitate the course in a way that these personal perspectives serve as a catalyst for student learning.

### Pedagogical method

Reflections from this teaching challenge are translated into different methods that I use when teaching a course at the University of Vienna, Austria. This study presents three methods that I have found relevant when supporting the learning of international students and the concerns of student-centred citizenship education in general. Student experiences and ideas can be the start and end point of inclusive citizenship education. In this way, as advocated by Kleinschmidt and Lange (2021), students are at the centre of the didactical approach of the discipline.

The first method is introduced at the start of the course. Here, I ask students what they expect to learn and why they chose to take the course. Students are invited to write their answers anonymously on a post-it note and to stick them onto the whiteboard. I then read the post-its and, where possible, cluster them into different themes. Some of the post-its are also specifically selected and discussed with the students. When performed in a face-to-face setting, I simply use a whiteboard and paper post-it notes. In an online learning environment, I use Jamboard, a type of a virtual whiteboard, but any collaborative writing tool can be used.

The second method is also implemented at the beginning of the course. It is inspired by photo-elicitation due to its heuristic potential and capacity to enrich knowledge about other people’s lives, opinions, and knowledge (Lapenta 2011). Starting with a deck of picture cards from a popular board game called Dixit, I ask students to individually pick a card that best represents to them the term ‘inclusion’. I then invite students to share this idea with the rest of the class. While the implementation of this method has differed slightly from semester to semester due to adaptations required for online teaching, the virtual dimension has not represented an obstacle as the activity can be performed with a scanned version of the cards. Moreover, any deck of cards

or photographs coherent with the content of the course can be used. Ideally, the cards should contain abstract illustrations with good evocative power.

The final method typically comes around mid-course, when I encourage students to share their personal perspectives through short films. Indeed, the use of film is no novelty in the field of didactics of citizenship education (Riß 2016). The themes explored by the films are related to the content of the course. As a first step, I extract photos from the short film and distribute them to the students. I then ask the students to team up in pairs to discuss what the topic of the film could be. In an online environment, I send these photos via e-mail before the class and the activity of self-reflection takes place individually. After watching the film, I ask students to explore their perceptions about the film (through a scene, sound or sentence that struck them) and later to discuss the content of the film in plenary. I then discuss with the students their experience of learning through film, allowing them to share insights from their own previous learning experiences. This facilitates a discussion of the differences between the school systems of local and international students.

### **The course, the students, and the lecturer**

I have taught the seminar Inclusive Citizenship Education for three semesters (Winter 2019/2020, Summer 2019/2020 and Winter 2020/2021) to three different cohorts of pre-service upper secondary school teachers. The first was in a face-to-face setting, the other two were online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The seminar is a part of a module of the Bachelor's 'Teacher Training Programme'. Students enrol in the programme to become teachers of different disciplines. The module in which the seminar is offered concerns inclusive schooling, addressing educational barriers and opportunities in the school system, origin-related inequalities, and migration. Due to the transversal nature of this module, and to its position in the general curriculum, the students enrolled in the seminar specialise in a range of different subjects, including History, German, English, and Sports, amongst others.

The three courses welcomed 58 students in total (20 on average each semester). Around one fourth (15) were Erasmus or international students enrolled in their Bachelor degree in Austria. International students were of both European and non-European origin. Erasmus students were only present during the 2019 winter semester, presumably due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In this study, I define international students as those participating in an exchange programme (e.g., Erasmus+) or students who received their prior education in a country other than Austria. Students with a migration history who had already studied in Austria during their primary or lower secondary education are not counted as international students in this study.

In terms of learning objectives, I identified two key areas: knowledge acquisition about inclusive citizenship education (the content dimension) and development of teaching abilities through Project-based Learning and films (the pedagogical dimension). The latter was translated in terms

of learning objectives as communication skills (ability to convey evidence-based ideas and own points of view in discussions) and methodological skills (capacity to identify multiple perspectives and reflecting on the plurality of students' needs and interests in teaching).

The courses were held in English and were worth 5 ECTS credits. The final grade was based on three components: active participation (30%), classroom presentation (30%) and a final essay (40%). While the first two components are related to both content knowledge and methodological skills, the last one is intended primarily to assess content knowledge.

I give the course as a sole teacher. I am an early-career international scholar teaching at an Austrian university. My Higher Education took place in three European countries (Italy, France, and The Netherlands). Before starting my teaching experience in Higher Education, I participated in several intra-European mobilities as an education professional. These experiences contributed to the development of my teaching approach as I was able to experience what it means to be an international student and teacher in a foreign country. This helped me to build a context-based perspective about what teaching and learning mean in different countries.

### **Collected sources of data and research methods**

When analysing the data, I used qualitative content analysis. Schreier (2014) underlines that qualitative content analysis reduces data, it is systematic, and it is flexible. In my work, I proceeded by looking at the complete data set and selected only the information concerning learning and the relations with the country of origin. This allowed me to focus on the data about student learning and experiences.

My research questions were the following: How much space did I offer to students to express their own experiences and knowledge about the course topics, especially if these experiences related to their country of origin? How did these personal perspectives impact student learning? To answer the first research question, I used my class notes and observations collected during classes and two different student feedback forms. One form I created and circulated in mid-semester, while the other form is an official survey designed by my institution that students completed at the end of the course. These forms had both open and closed questions. To answer the second research question, I consulted my class notes and the students' essays.

### **Findings**

The first question relates to the space offered to students to share their experiences and knowledge about the course topics. By space, I refer to my didactical choices and choices of methods described above. The data showed that 86% of the 2019 Winter cohort, 67% of the 2020 Summer cohort and 94% of the 2020 Winter cohort either agreed or strongly agreed that the methods and didactical approach were appropriate to the content of the course and relevant to a discipline such as inclusive citizenship education. The relatively lower percentage of the second

cohort is assumed to be result of the shift of the course to an online setting at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. As further explained in the open questions of feedback forms, students valued learning from real-life experiences, whether they were their own experiences or those of other students. They also valued learning from how things worked in other countries. As shared by one student: 'I feel like I learn a lot from listening to other students' experiences in discussions' (Student, mid-term evaluation, 2020 summer cohort).

Another finding concerns students' learning needs. Through my class observations and notes (especially from the post-it note or card elicitation methods) I could see that students were aware of and able to express their learning needs in English (which was not their native language). This allowed me to assess whether they articulated the needs in relation to their country of origin and status as an international student. I noticed that the ability to express and articulate learning needs differed. However, one limitation is that the anonymity of post-it notes did not allow differentiation between the answers of international students and those reported by their home peers. Nevertheless, it still enabled me to understand how students perceived their learning and use these insights when facilitating the class sessions. Students appreciated this, saying:

She took into consideration our needs and interests and formed the lessons accordingly' (Student from the 2020 Winter cohort).

The feedback we gave about halfway through was immediately incorporated in the e-learning methods [...] I really appreciated [...] the amount of space given for discussion and further pursuit of individual interests within the course topics' (Student from the 2020 Summer cohort).

Finally, I found that the short films encouraged students to exchange ideas about different practices that are found in different countries. For example, the students discussed different rights valued in different countries, such as voting rights as well as the right to hold multiple nationalities. These discussions brought an added value to the class.

Listening to peers' perspectives was not only useful for students but for myself as well. This allowed me to better understand their ideas about the course concepts, and in turn, provide more specific feedback while assessing student essays.

This leads me to my second research question concerning the impact of students' perspectives on learning. While evaluating student essays, I assessed how they explained content and methods. This included whether they used their country of origin to clarify their points of view or whether they used it as a case for their essay, when they were given the freedom to do so. As described above, the learning objectives of the course included pedagogical knowledge (knowledge of meth-

ods and didactics) and content knowledge (related to inclusive citizenship education). While only two international students chose their country of origin as a case study, five students used their country of origin in the arguments of their essays. These references were used in a comparative perspective and in one case they related to personal experiences in education systems different than the Austrian one. In these cases, it allowed the students to describe the studied concepts more fully. As this teaching approach is rooted in student-centeredness, it is key that students can also relate studied concepts with their own social and cultural environments. This is a practice that I wish to encourage, especially when teaching international students.

### **Replicability in a different context**

While I consider that the methods and the teaching approach can be adopted for different contexts, the possibility of scaling and replicating them depends on different factors. Firstly, the goals and needs of the teacher and the issues they identify in their courses should be considered. Secondly, this teaching concept and the methods presented are conceived in a specific subject-didactic context, the one of (inclusive) citizenship education. Therefore, the content and subject of the course have to be considered. Thirdly, before implementing these methods, the teacher should start with a self-reflection of their own beliefs about teaching, learning and where does one stand in the teacher-student continuum. Namely, whether teacher-centred or student-centred approaches as described in Print (2012) are preferred and for which purposes. Lastly, additional training about the use of films in teaching would be beneficial.

Here, I would also like to acknowledge the limitations of my findings. One of them concerns the essay as a source of data. While this dataset was used to answer the second research question, the essay was not specifically designed to assess the experience of international students, but rather the course learning objectives. Secondly, one of the assumptions I started with was that I considered students in their heterogeneity beside their international background. I hypothesised that international students did benefit from the methods. However, the collected data did not allow the inference that international students benefitted more of the methods than the rest of the class.

### **Conclusions**

In this chapter, I asked how much space in classes students had to express their own experiences and knowledge about topics, especially if these related to their country of origin. Additionally, I asked how these personal perspectives impacted student learning. To answer these questions, I evaluated the learning of students from my course Inclusive Citizenship Education where I used three intertwined methods: sharing of student motivations and expectations; card elicitation and students viewing short films followed by experience sharing. These methods were found useful

because they activated prior student experiences and knowledge that was then used by international students in learning the content of the course.

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## Summary

International student learning can be stimulated by bringing their own perspectives into the learning process. In this study, I describe how I implemented this idea in a course on inclusive citizenship education. I asked myself how much space students had in that class to express their own experiences and knowledge about topics, especially if these related to their country of origin. Moreover, I was interested in understanding how these personal perspectives impacted student learning. When teaching the course, I adopted a student-centred approach and designed three different methods: students shared their expectations and motivations on anonymous post-it notes, card elicitation and use of short films. This didactical approach and choice of methods are appropriate and relevant to the discipline of inclusive citizenship education because they have at their core students' experiences and ideas. In particular, they allow the consideration of students' learning needs, and give students the chance to explore their interests by relating their learning to their country of origin and their international perspectives.

## Keywords

citizenship education, internationalisation, student-centred learning, teaching with film



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