

CONNECTING STUDENTS AND SHARING THEIR CROSS-CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCES THROUGH PEER LEARNING

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The teaching-learning challenge

Prior studies describe the problems that international students face when studying in a foreign country. As summarised by Pleschová (2020), these include language barriers, problems with adapting to a different culture and the integration into the community of home students. Home and international students often study in separate environments and do not often come into contact with each other, which further isolates international students. They thus have reduced chances to learn from the unique knowledge and experience of their peers.

While acting as a teaching assistant in the European Folklore and Folkloristics course offered at the Faculty of Arts, Comenius University in Bratislava during the COVID-19 pandemic, I noticed that the interaction among students, including among home and international students, was nearly absent. I identified this as the main obstacle to student learning.

Pedagogical method

My response to the teaching-learning challenge was to incorporate peer learning in the course seminars for which I am responsible. Peer learning is an educational practice that provides students with the opportunity to participate in a variety of learning activities, in which they can learn with and from their peers (Boud 2001). To encourage peer learning, I decided to redesign the key course assignment to center upon the delivery of student presentations.

As a student, I prepared presentations for many courses. These presentations were to be followed by discussions, but typically, it was a discussion between the presenter and the teacher. There was rarely time, opportunity or interest from peers to engage in these discussions. To change this, I strived to involve all students in the learning process. Each student had the task to prepare a presentation of one academic text related to one of the course topics. The texts presented at the seminar usually corresponded to the topic of the previous week's lecture. Early in the semester, students had to choose a text from the list of assigned reading, which included texts in English by authors from various European countries in which they describe problematic phenomena related to European Folklore. Students also had the opportunity to choose a text outside of the required reading list (a text in their mother tongue, or from another region or according to their own interest) if it was deemed academic and related to the subject matter of the course. Our aim was to encourage students to choose a text that they found appealing or to which they could apply their current knowledge. If they did not choose a text, they were assigned one.

We provided students with a verbal instruction on how to prepare their presentations and provided them with written guidelines in the syllabus. Presenters were required to raise one or more

questions at the end of the presentation to stimulate class discussion. I challenged students to think of different types of questions. They could, for example, use a picture or a video as a trigger, they could come up with a list of multiple-choice questions, etc.

One seminar lasted 50 minutes, with two students usually presenting for 10 minutes each. In four seminars, after the student presentations, I introduced peer learning in the form of group work as previous studies from the region, albeit from different disciplines, have shown that in-class group work increases student participation (Awuah 2018) and leads to enhanced knowledge (Awuah 2018; Tkaczyk 2018). My aim was to connect home and international students and to create space for the sharing of their intercultural experiences, views and knowledge. I divided students into five groups each made up of home and international students. During the seminars, students worked in the same groups while discussing questions raised by a pre-assigned presenter. They typically had 15 minutes to complete this task. In the final part of the seminar, the groups presented the discussion outcomes and provided oral feedback to the presenter. In those seminars where students were not assigned any group work, students would discuss the questions after each presentation as a plenary.

Part of the group work consisted of each group completing a peer feedback form. Group members wrote down the question raised by the presenter and their collective response to it. The purpose of the form was also to find out if the presentation held their attention, if they heard and understood the presentation well, or if they thought the topic presented was helpful and informative in terms of learning about the European oral tradition. They answered three multiple-choice questions. In addition, the group members had the opportunity to comment on what they liked most about the presentation, what should be improved, or to ask the presenter a question.

In the remainder of this chapter, I evaluate if I succeeded in creating a safe learning environment for communication and knowledge sharing during the seminars, which is assumed to be a pre-condition to successful peer learning (Boud 2001). Second, I explore if peer learning enabled home and international students to establish connections among each other and share cross-cultural examples and knowledge.

The course, the students, and the lecturer

The course European Folklore and Folkloristics provides an overview of narrative folklore genres and selected genres in the oral tradition from different regions in Europe. Attention has been paid to the connections between the transmission of folklore and socio-political processes in Europe, and the related transformation of folklore motives in contemporary culture. Students are assessed based on the individual presentation of an academic text (50%) and a final test (50%). The course spans two semesters and is an elective course for undergraduate students of various degree programmes. The language of instruction is English. In the summer semester of 2021/2022, when the innovation was implemented, we started teaching online because of the

COVID-19 pandemic. After the fourth week, we switched to hybrid teaching. The course was attended by 25 students: 12 were home students and 13 international students from Ukraine (4), Russia (4), Serbia (2), Japan, Turkey and Sweden. Four of these international students joined the course online. Almost all students were from the Central European Studies programme, specifically from the first and second year of the undergraduate programme. Three students were from the Aesthetics programme, each from a different year of the undergraduate programme.

The team of course teachers was international as well. While I am Slovak, Tatiana Bužeková, the course leader, responsible for course lectures, is originally from Russia. She studied in Russia and Slovakia and taught at a university in the United States. As a lecturer, she is very attentive to the needs of international students and supported my efforts to innovate the course seminars.

Collected sources of data and methods

The data for evaluating the outcomes of this innovation originates from four sources. The opinions of students were very important for considering whether the innovation attained its aims. I collected student views via two research instruments. The first was an anonymous student evaluation form at the end of the semester that included open and closed questions and questions using a 5-point Likert scale where 5 indicated strong agreement and 1 strong disagreement. Out of 25 students, 12 completed the form; 8 were international and 4 were home students. The second research instrument was a peer feedback form. It was filled-out by group members during four seminars in which peer learning activities were introduced. I collected 23 forms.

Next, I invited a peer observer—a PhD student in ethnology from Slovenia—to one of my seminars. Because the observer was from a different country, she could put herself in the position of an international student. The observer's perspective was collected via a classroom observation protocol and a follow-up meeting.

My observations were recorded by means of a reflective journal. I wrote down my observations after each seminar. I focused on the questions raised by students at the end of their presentations - i.e., if the questions stimulated discussion and whether the questions prompted the students to share international views - the engagement of home and international students in group work and in the plenary discussion. The reflective journal also provided me with a space for my self-reflection on the outcomes of the innovation.

I used thematic analysis to analyse qualitative data from the student evaluation form, peer feedback form, the classroom observation protocol and my notes from the follow-up meeting and reflective journal. More specifically, I applied open coding when I grouped citation segments together that had a similar meaning. The data was collected and analysed by the ATLAS.ti software. In the case of the student evaluation form, I used in-vivo coding: based on segments from students' quotations I assigned a new code and linked together all responses with the same

meaning (Kusá 2021). I used descriptive statistics to process the quantitative data from the student evaluation and peer feedback forms.

Findings

Learning environment in seminars

From the student evaluation form, I learnt that students perceived seminars to be a safe place to express their opinions and share their experience and knowledge: the average rating for this question was 4.25 (out of 5). In the group of international students, the average rating was 4.13 and in the group of home students 4.5, which suggests that perceptions of the learning environment of international and home students were similar.

In the feedback form, one international student disagreed that the seminar was a safe place to express their own experiences and knowledge. This student also strongly disagreed with the statement that they enjoyed the seminar and said their group members 'were not interested in [the] discussion at all and I learned almost nothing new'. The student recommended organising seminars in a plenary instead of engaging students in group work.

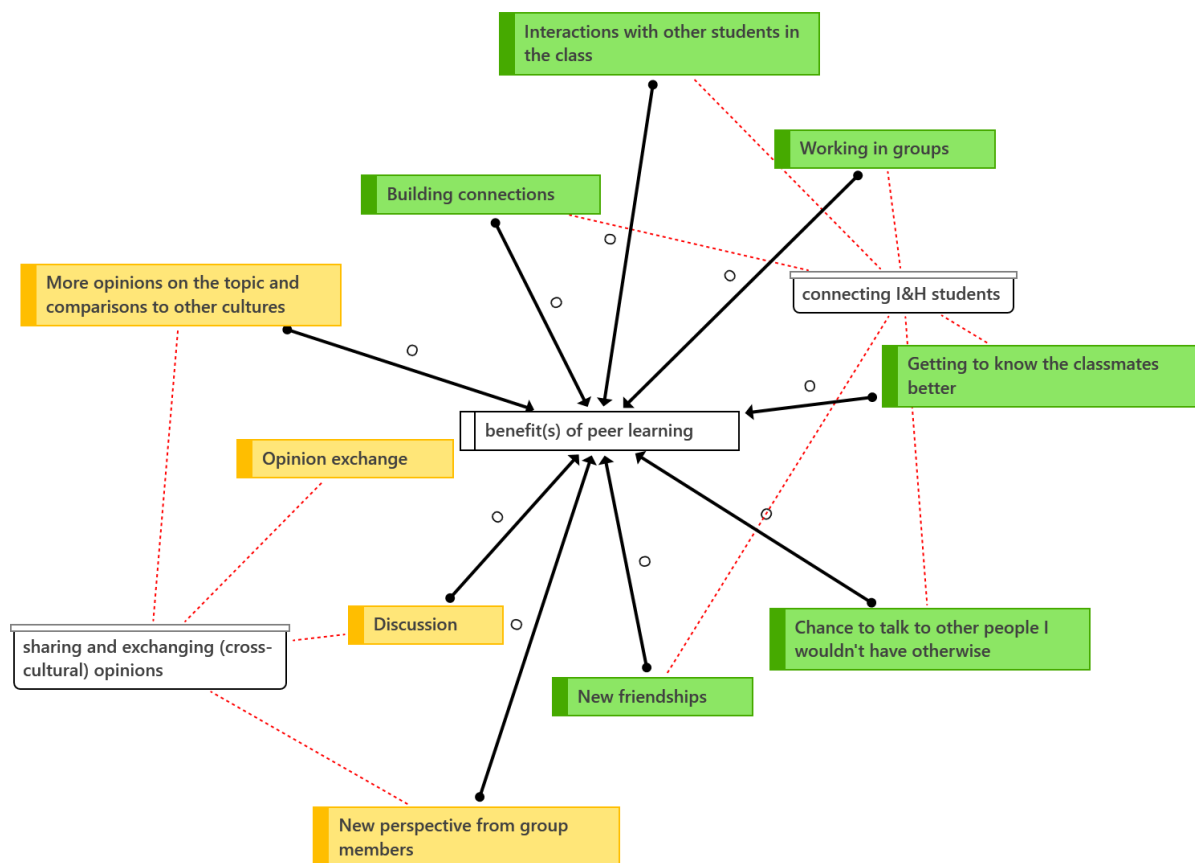
The observer noticed that there were two students who appeared to feel uncomfortable with peer learning and did not interact with ease. My own observations aligned with that. I evidenced two international students to be less engaged in peer learning than other students. They did not speak English well, which was probably the reason for their lack of engagement. On the other hand, the observer highlighted a moment when an international student helped one of these less engaged international students to express their opinions in a discussion about a peer's presentation. According to the observer, the students tried to draw each other into the task. She emphasized this moment also because the students were from Russia and Ukraine, two countries at war at the time. She considered it a sign that the students felt safe in the seminar.

My own reflections noted in the journal suggested the same: that the seminar was a safe learning environment. During the entire summer semester, we did not encounter any conflicts or tensions. Mixed groups of home and international students worked together with no visible problems. The course leader seems to have contributed to this sense of safety: she spoke to the students about the war in Ukraine and shared our and Comenius University's official position declaring help and support for the students affected by the conflict. The seminars were mostly held in a pleasant atmosphere with students sharing their diverse views, experiences, and knowledge in their groups and plenary discussions. Only in one case, I observed a confrontation of opinions between a home and an international student. Finally, this too is an indication of a safe learning environment, where the expression of contradictory perspectives in front of peers is accepted.

Results of peer learning

In their evaluation forms, students acknowledged that their groups were made up of peers of diverse cultures, mother tongues and fields of study (score 4.33). They thought that the diversity of the group members enabled them to obtain new knowledge via class discussions, and/or gain new perspectives on the topics, even if the score (3.33) indicates that they did not consider their learning gain very high. A thematic analysis of the benefits students saw in peer learning revealed two main themes: (1) international students felt connected and (2) peer learning stimulated the sharing of opinions informed by students' diverse cultures. Home and international students referred to both types of benefits, where the first was mentioned more frequently (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Benefits of peer learning according to student' feedback



In the student evaluation form, six students answered an optional open question to detail what they had learned while engaged in peer learning. One student saw in peer learning an opportunity to meet new people. Two other students stated that they realised 'how diverse cultures can be' and had learnt new information from the presentations. Three students mentioned acquiring such transferable skills as teamwork, patience and presentation skills. This aligns with the themes from the thematic analysis presented above.

From the student evaluation forms it is also evident that 75% of the students thought the preparation for the presentation of an academic text was effective in acquiring knowledge relevant to the course while the follow-up discussion had value for approximately 40% of the students. In the peer feedback forms students indicated that the topics of the presentations were definitely (12), probably (7) and maybe (3) informative and helpful when learning about the European oral tradition.

The observer and I found that the topics of the student presentations were very diverse and included a lot of cross-cultural information and specific examples related to the course subject from different time periods, countries and regions. Students thus had plenty of opportunities to acquire diverse knowledge. The observer appreciated that the students could choose the topics of the presentations based on what interested them. As an example, the observer mentioned a presentation by a home student with an interest in video games who interpreted a text on gender and genre in video games closely related to the issue of folklore in popular culture. I noticed that students who had chosen an academic text based on their own interest and/or knowledge of the subject matter presented it significantly better. This had a positive effect on raising peer interest in the topic, which then stimulated lively discussion.

According to the observer, peer learning achieved its purpose because students worked together in mixed groups of home and international students, offered constructive criticism to each presenter, and exchanged opinions. This aligned with the results from the peer feedback form and the notes from my reflective journal. Peer learning activities stimulated discussions that helped students to learn about the European oral tradition. The questions raised by students at the end of their presentations played an important role in this. When the question was open and well formulated, it encouraged students to share diverse experiences and knowledge. For example, the question ‘Do you think that diversity and representation in video games matter? If yes, why?’ made students to talk about the diversity of archetypes and their representation not only in video games but also in other areas of popular culture. If the question was closed and/or did not ask students to explain their opinion, it rarely encouraged the sharing of knowledge. For example, the question ‘Did you know who Mary Magdalene was? Have you seen the movie the Da Vinci Code?’ barely resulted in any discussion. In this case, the groups briefly replied that they had heard of Mary Magdalene and had seen the film.

Peer learning was not only evident in group work but also in plenary discussions after the presenter posed questions to the audience. For example, the question ‘Do you know any other terms for rusalki¹ or their features from your folk tales/traditions?’ encouraged an international student to mention the Swedish term and how the creature is represented in Swedish oral tradition. How-

¹ In Slavic folklore, the rusalka (plural: rusalki) is a female mythological being usually associated with water, death, and sexuality (Dynda 2017).

ever, apart from this student, no one else answered the question. I assume that if students would have worked in groups, more students would have joined the discussion as was the case in other classes when students were engaged in group work.

Replicability in a different context

I can see no major obstacles to introducing peer learning via group work in courses in a different discipline, class size or grade as this pedagogical method is relatively easy to design and calls for no additional costs. At the same time, I think this pedagogical method would be well applicable to a class without international students, too. Group members could search for information in full-text databases or open access resources for academic studies, books, etc. This would give students the skills that are essential for their studies. For example, the teacher can bring books and encyclopaedias related to the topic of the seminar to the class or take the students to the library where they can search for information. In this way, students would have the opportunity to search for information in academic literature that is directly related to the curriculum.

For those who think of trialling this pedagogical method in other courses, I would recommend drawing student attention to the content of presentations and to emphasize that the seminar is a place also to practice and improve students' presentation skills. This may help to learn also from those peers with less advanced presentation skills. Including guidelines for presentations in the syllabus, examples of well-prepared student presentations, and mixing more advanced and beginner presenters could help students to improve their presentation skills while attending the seminar.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I showed how peer activity built around student presentations resulted in a novel learning experience for the students of my European Folklore and Folkloristics class. The interaction among home and international students was instructive for their learning. As I demonstrated, a safe learning environment, which is a necessary precondition for a successful and positive peer experience, was ultimately achieved. Peer learning in the form of group work and plenary discussion in course seminars produced the sharing and exchanging of cross-cultural opinion, as evidenced by student and observer feedback and my reflective diary. However, only group work succeeded in establishing numerous connections between home and international students.

Despite the effectiveness of the innovation, I would make a few changes when teaching the course again. First, I would encourage students to choose an academic text for their presentation following their own interest and I would explain the benefits of this based on the experience from teaching this cohort. Second, in addition to sharing knowledge, I would emphasize skills development more strongly. There were notable differences in the quality of student presentations. Students will need to know how to prepare for and deliver their presentation effectively. Further-

more, students need scaffolding in formulating the questions for discussion as these are crucial in catalysing group discussions, and thus, peer learning. I would prepare detailed instructions, and if necessary, learning activities, and would demonstrate in an early seminar what a good presentation is with a follow-up discussion about good presentation practices. The above changes would support the learning of future students greatly.

Third, I would facilitate group discussions in several ways. The observer and I discussed the ways for helping the students who were less involved in peer learning. The observer suggested inviting students to contribute more frequently during the seminar, including calling them by name and asking other group members to draw them into the discussion. I am also thinking of assigning roles to individual group members such as note-taker, discussion moderator, and group spokesperson. They can switch roles during the semester. In addition, I am thinking of designing a short questionnaire specifically enquiring into student' perceptions of group work directly after its introduction or during the semester in order to monitor their experience more closely and be able to react to potential issues quickly. Finally, I would not use group work for the entire semester, or I might mix group members. When students worked in groups for the third class, I observed that the students' enthusiasm for group work and participation in discussion had decreased.

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Summary

This chapter discusses a peer learning activity used in the European Folklore and Folkloristics course for undergraduate students, designed to address the lack of interaction among home and

international students. The key course assignment, a student presentation of an academic text related to one of the course topics was modified to include the requirement for students to raise questions at the end of presentations to stimulate class discussion. Discussions were conducted in small groups. The results from evaluating the outcomes of the new course design show that peer learning allowed home and international students to establish connections among each other and share their diverse views and knowledge.

Keywords

class atmosphere, group work, (peer) assessment, student presentations



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