ELECTIVE COURSES IN A MIXED GROUP OF STUDENTS: TOWARDS INNOVATIVE TEACHING PRACTICES

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Abstract

The paper focuses on teaching elective courses for first-year students of pedagogical university. What makes these courses specific and challenging, is the fact that they comprise students of various academic areas (majoring, for example, in Linguistics, Philology, Mathematics, Music, Social Studies, et cetera). It means that a teacher has to struggle to embrace cultural and professional needs of the students divided by their majors, but united by the elective course. The authors offer a multi-layered approach towards lectures and seminars during such courses, based on the theory of small groups.

Keywords: Innovation, elective course, the theory of small groups.

1 INTRODUCTION

The dependence of higher education on globalization processes alongside with emerging professions creates the need for some interdisciplinary and at the same time narrowly focused courses. The system of elective courses seems to be designed to satisfy those needs.

The authors developed a course format that seems to fit well with the objectives of the multi-discipline educational process. During the course, students solve practical problems, as if following the well-known Anglo-Saxon formula Don’t give me fish, teach me how to fish (Do not let me fish, better teach me how to fish).

When launching “The Dialogue in Various Communication Spaces” elective course, we could hardly expect that no less than 93 students would select the course that comprised three disciplines, with “Speech Strategies and Tactics”, “Project-based Learning” and “American Cinematography” being among them. Being accustomed to teaching small groups of students (10 to 12 learners), we were challenged by the necessity to deliver lectures for all 93 students and by the fact that during the seminars the number of students will amount to 30 learners. What makes teaching elective courses for first-year students of pedagogical university even more specific and challenging, is the fact that they unite students from various academic areas. As teachers involved in elective courses aptly put it, there exist “limited literature and lack of scientific foundation with which to support the process of merging elective courses into architectural curricula” [1]. Humanities face the same challenge. Therefore, the challenges we faced were both of pedagogical (students from various areas), practical (number of learners) and theoretical nature. Moreover, we were struggling with the question of existential nature, that is best of all expressed by E. Mazur in his key note speech at Edulearn 2018: “How to get every student ready for every class?” [2]. We were to build theoretical background to overcome the challenges and to test the theory in practice. The paper discusses the format we had used for merging such courses with various disciplines in the process of teaching (see, e.g. [3]).

2 METHODOLOGY

Elective courses are aimed at reaching several educational objectives, including forming general cultural competences, introducing students to cultural humanities paradigms, and a number of general professional competences that are relevant in terms of their future profession. The latter comprise, but are not limited to, speaking, writing and research skills, text analysis and some such. These objectives determine the content of the courses. Moreover, the practical applicability of the skills acquired in the framework of an elective course, empowers students with professionally-relevant skills and boosts their motivation (see, e.g., [15]).

There are three main functions of electives in the system of school-specific education. They can act as a “superstructure” supplementing the content of the profile course, or “develop the content of one of the basic courses. The third type of elective courses is aimed at satisfying the cognitive interests of
individual school pupils in the areas of human activity that seem to go beyond the chosen profile” [4: p. 151]. We believe that these functions are equally applicable to university elective courses, “The Dialogue in Different Communicative Spaces” being among them. Such disciplines like “Speech Strategies and Tactics” and “Project-based Learning” develop the content of several basic courses for students enrolled in all areas of training, while the discipline “American Cinematography” is a “superstructure” supplementing, for example intercultural communication major. For students majoring in art education, for example, theatrical art, mastering the basics of project activities and ways to attract the audience through the use of speech strategies and tactics is associated with developing their cognitive needs, while studying American cinematography enriches the content of one of their basic courses.

2.1 Case study

93 students, majoring in Linguistics, Philology, Mathematics, Music, IT and Social Studies, opted for “The Dialogue in Various Communication Spaces” elective course that combines three disciplines: “Speech Strategies and Tactics”, “Project-based Learning” and “American Cinematography”. Practical seminars are preceded by six lectures in each discipline. Paradoxical as it may sound, we argue that to meet the 93 students’ educational, cultural and professional needs, it is relevant to organize lecturing process based on the theory of small groups. During the first lecture, students are encouraged to form ten groups and within these groups they are attributed various roles (a team leader, a vice-chairman, a researcher, an architect, a chronicler, a “working bee”). The groups consist of students pursuing degrees in various disciplines, which encourages them to be involved into a continuous dialogue. The lectures are interactive: every 40 minutes students name the three “quanta” of knowledge. Every group discusses the information they have learnt and after a 5-minute discussion team leaders present the results in front of the audience, or delegate this duty to someone from the group. Importantly, it is not just naming of the new that matters: it is presenting the product of the collaborate discussion that is assessed and evaluated by the teacher and by the students. Being from diverse majors, the students have different styles of and approaches to information processing – the answers they provide vary considerably in depth and width across the groups.

During the seminars, students are divided into three subgroups of thirty learners and they form within those sub-groups yet other groups to work on their home tasks and during interactive seminars. This necessity brings even more students together and diversifies their communication, because those small groups that they have formed during the lectures, differ from those ones they form during the seminars – both in number (5-6 learners during the seminars against 10 learners during the lectures) and major. In more strict terms, it is during the seminars that the students are involved into the practice of working in small groups (based on the theory of small groups).

After the completion of the elective course, the students write reflective essays within their group and submit the essays to the teacher. The questions they cover in their essays include, but are not limited to, reflecting on what was most valuable in their studies, what they would like to correct, how they will practice newly acquired skills and knowledge, and some such.

Within the framework of this paper, we focus on the format we used and on the tangible learning outcomes that our students have acquired.

3 RESULTS

After opting for teaching elective course based on the theory of small groups, we were determined to test the format and to see, whether it will have a practical applicability and whether it will motivate all our students to get ready for every class. We based this approach on the assumption that working in small groups enhances the level of responsibility in students, for each member of the group is responsible for some specific domain and area of the task. Here are some of the results that we present in the form of learning objectives based on B.S. Bloom’s [5] and L.W. Anderson and D.R. Krahtwohl’s [6] taxonomies of knowledge dimensions and cognitive processes.
Table 1. Knowledge Dimensions [6]

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3.1.1 Remembering: Retrieving Facts and Figures

As it has already been mentioned, during the lectures students work in small groups every 40 minutes, remembering the facts they have learnt. After several minutes of discussion, they present the new knowledge in front of the audience. This task has helped us reach several learning objectives that outreach mere act of remembering.

During their first steps in this new format, the learners tried merely to name the facts they have just heard about. Their answers varied from group to group, but were mainly simple in their essence: “we have learnt about Buster Keaton” (during a lecture on American Cinematography), “we have learnt about various accents” (a lecture on Speech Strategies and Tactics). These pieces of information were perceived like patches of knowledge that did not form a fundamental and systemic picture, rather showing students’ cognitive ability to memorize. Therefore, we decided to encourage our students to move up cognitive domain and to start understanding.

3.1.2 Understanding: Voicing Knowledge Quanta

When asked to present the new knowledge in a form of knowledge quanta – meaningful and conceptually relevant blocks of information, the students changed their learning trajectory and started presenting newly acquired knowledge demonstrating understanding. Thus, for example, during the lecture on the key pictures of American cinematography, the students voiced the name of the film together with the values that are in the focus of the film and with the issues the film tackles. The new approach, when the students were encouraged to demonstrate the knowledge of the facts retrieved, as well as the understanding of these facts in the framework of a lecture, triggered a more focused listening during the lecture. The students gave the lecturer their undivided attention and empowered each other for a more effective team work. In this respect, we can say that it was a unique opportunity for students to revise the information and for teachers to check the understanding of that new information.

3.1.3 Applying: towards Analysis

With the flow of time, the students were encouraged to apply the knowledge they acquired and understood. Therefore, in the framework of “Speech Strategies and Tactics” discipline, which was also a part of the elective module, they studied various aspects of written and spoken academic discourse, and were to apply the knowledge they acquired. As a homework, members of each team selected examples of speech carriers of regional dialects, critically analyzed them, which allowed them, firstly, to recognize the subtle accents-markers of poor education, and secondly, to get a kind of “vaccination” against fashionable accents among the youth (for example, qualitative-quantitative reduction of vowels in the unstressed position). Then the students voiced what they did not appreciate in the speech of others (for example, irregular grammatical forms, the frequency of diminutive words et cetera). This task helped them identify what is inappropriate in the speech of an educated person, and raise their awareness of language use. Moreover, they analyzed modern vocabulary, in particular numerous borrowings (coworking, crowdsourcing), based on the book “The Russian Language on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown” by M. Krongauz [7]. The task was targeted at forming a reasoned attitude to the huge amount of borrowed words in modern Russian through the analysis of various neologisms. Thus, non-standard speech manifestations are analyzed, their critical perception is formed, and a conscious attitude towards speech activity is promoted.
3.1.4 Analysing and Evaluating

In the framework of “Project-based Learning” discipline, the students learnt how to organize and conduct various projects; they studied diverse forms of presenting research results. Students were encouraged to analyse, among other aspects, various posters from IATED conferences poster sessions. They were focusing on visual aspects of the posters, as well as on their contents. Moreover, as a part of their homework, they invented various nominations for the posters based on their analysis and selected the best posters. It is obvious, that this task could not but involve evaluating and creating. It was extremely stimulating to find out that the same set of posters offered to two groups with different learning styles, was assessed differently and different nominees and poster-champions were selected. Thus, for example, the students who are prone to analytical approach to learning, focused mainly on the contents of the posters, while the students with a predominant visual thinking, ranked the most beautiful posters first. Therefore, the same poster was assessed differently across the groups. By the end of the lesson, they offered a formula of the best poster and came to the conclusion that the rule of the golden mine works here as well: a visually beautiful design with meaningful and relevant research results make an ideal poster.

3.1.5 Creating

The next step in the framework of “Project-based Learning” discipline was creating their own posters. It was a chance to celebrate everything they had learnt, for through the posters they presented the results of their research in effective presentations, successful job interviews, successful thesis and course paper presentations and some such. As far as the students major in diverse disciplines, it was important to empower them with skills that would be relevant across disciplines and professions, so that the research they did was relevant cognitively and professionally. This is why, the learners were encouraged to select topics for their posters that would meet educationally meaningful needs if every students. Therefore, the mentioned above topics were selected (a successful job interview, the fundamentals of an effective presentation and others). The way they worked in a team, presented their results in a form of a video presentation and, simultaneously, in a form of a poster, shows that they have achieved all the goals that were inscribed into the learning objectives of this part of the elective module.

As a part of “Speech Strategies and Tactics” discipline, the learners mastered slam format strategy [8], which is gaining popularity in the academic community and implies the development of skills in an exciting and accessible way to talk about the results of a research in front of the audience for circa 15 minutes. They also studied the principle of cooperation and the communication postulates of G.P. Grice [9]: the learners selected a promotional video as a homework and analyzed it for violation of these rules. When creating their own presentations, they were aware of these postulates and tried to avoid violations of these rules. As a result, students acquire the skill of critical analysis of speech patterns, as well as the principles of their creation.

The following two lectures deal with the features of the written discourse [10], in particular, typical punctuation and spelling errors are analyzed (homework: analyze the article by L.V. Scherba on Russian punctuation [11], identify three key points). Knowledge gained in its implementation will be useful to students when writing a course study, and for solving professional problems in the future [12].

Within “American Cinematography” discipline students created video presentations in their groups and presented them during the seminars to their colleagues. They watched various films that were united by the topic or by the genre, by the message or by the issue they tackled and analysed the film on the basis of the functions of the protagonists (based on the theory developed by V.Y. Propp [13]). Moreover, the students analysed the soundtracks, the play of light and shade, or chiaroscuro, and the effect the director and operator created, as well as the way it influenced them as viewers. The learners also wrote their reviews on films. In case there are two filmed versions of the same story, they compared these two films – and therefore made their first steps in diachronic analysis. One more step towards a better understanding of a film was comparing the book the film was based on and the film itself. They analysed the making process of the film (based on the interviews with the director, the author of the book and the composer), read the book and analysed, why some characters were added, how they add to the overall message and so on. Through this, the learners approached the shooting process, the “anatomy” of the film and tried to understand, analyse, apply, evaluate and create simultaneously.
4 CONCLUSIONS

The research has shown that the approach based on the theory of small groups is effective when speaking of lecturing a group of 93 students. The responsibilities being shared by the members of small teams, triggered the learners to focus on what was being said and helped them concentrate on the new information. Moreover, a collaboration within the group empowered the students to revise, retrieve the facts, to select the most relevant pieces of information and to effectively present it. The research has shown that 97% of students succeeded in their elective course as well as in other disciplines, for they acquired the anatomy of the learning process – when revision and retrieving meaningful knowledge quanta create a fundamental basis for knowledge acquisition. This approach also contributes to the understanding in academic environment which is crucial for effective learning and teaching (see, e.g., [16]). Students’ reflective essays have shown that their self-esteem was boosted during the course. We attribute this to synergetic effect that project-based learning creates [14]. Moreover, polished speaking skills also add to the fact that students feel more confident [15].

As a matter of fact, our students did get ready for every class and proved to be oriented on the learning process.

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