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## **Pedagogical Practice und Scientific Techniques**

### **Report on the collaboration between the students of the University of Frankfurt and the students of the North Dakota University Fargo/ND**

**Astrid Seltrecht and Jenny Frankenberg**

The following report gives an insight into a seminar in which students of the Goethe University in Frankfurt, Germany worked together with students from the North Dakota State University (NDSU), the culmination of which was a co-produced video conference. Each university separately prepared presentations on the topic of public health for this video conference. The University of Frankfurt students were in an Educational Science/Pedagogy (Bachelor of Arts) program, whereas the NDSU students came from a Master of Public Health program. In retrospect, it was found that the processing of the - not genuinely educational science - topics were also profitable for the German students from the Department of Educational Science, as the pre-and post-processing of the video conference promoted both reflective pedagogical practice as well as the development of scientific techniques.

#### **Stronger Focus on Key Skills for Course of Studies Since the European Educational Reform**

Students studying at the University of Frankfurt in the field of Educational Science with the first professional degree in Bachelor of Arts (BA) should gain transferable skills in addition to technical knowledge and competence. Upon completion of studies, and with the “key skills” module specifically provided, students should be able to solve a variety of pedagogical problems methodically and systematically as well as be competent to work scientifically.

Since the European educational reform, special attention has been given to the topic of employability and to the promotion of key competencies. Under the European Educational Reform known as the Bologna Process (1999 to 2010) the awarding of Europe-wide comparable credit points was introduced, so that transferring studies within Europe is now easier than before. In addition, a modularization of course content and with this a related modularization for the taking of exams should facilitate a transfer of studies from one European university to another.

A Bachelor of Arts in Educational Science (Pedagogy) program was introduced at the Goethe University in Frankfurt, Germany for the first time at the beginning of the fall semester in 2008. Within six semesters, the students complete 16 separate modules, for example: the history and theories of education, dealing pedagogically with institutions; dealing with difference; empirical research methods; the main focus of new media; or the aforementioned key skills module.

#### **The Seminar Concept: Acquiring - Transfer - Research**

##### ***Concept and Objectives of the Seminar***

Learning both pedagogical mediation techniques and techniques of pedagogical research require an object and - in the case of research – the posing of a question. Both the promotion and training of interdisciplinary key qualifications for educational practice and scientific research affect learning skills in particular, in addition to the learning dimension of knowledge acquisition. In the specific case of the aforementioned collaboration between American and German students it was natural to deal with Public Health issues, as this constituted the main focus of study in the Master’s Degree program of the American students. Three basic objectives were connected with the main structure of the seminars from the German side: 1) Personal appropriation of health-related issues, 2) Imparting previously acquired content to a specific target group, namely the U.S. students and 3) Social integration into scientific research by means of a conception of a research design.

This approach, which is also particular to creativity-focused training, is characterized by the fact that no results exist at the start, but are worked out during the course of the seminar. The accompanying

uncertainties must be endured both by the students as well as the assistant professors. The intended pedagogical work within teams runs the risk of overtaxing or unwanted group dynamic processes due to the heterogeneity of the students within the groups, the danger of overtaxing or unwanted group dynamic processes. These are risks to be observed and attended to - the main task of the assistant professor is therefore more one of staging, stimulating and advising rather than teaching. Simultaneously, with this approach the difference between conveying an idea and learning will be turned into a positive one. The students must present a topic which they previously had to intensively deal with, under real-life conditions. And lastly the diverging interests of students versus those of assistant professors must be noted: students must attain credit points and grades within the institutional framework and in accordance with examination regulations; assistant professors may sometimes pursue ambitious objectives beyond the actual curriculum: thus in this aforementioned seminar an international cooperation should be strengthened and perpetuated.<sup>1</sup>

### *Course of the Seminar*

The seminar "Scientific Work" took place during the winter semester of 2013 (October 17, 2012 through February 13, 2013) and met once a week for 90 minutes. The students registered or applied for a space in the seminar in advance online. During the first constituent seminar, content and goals as well as organizational concerns were addressed. In the second session, the background of Health Education / Public Health was taught in the form of a short presentation, and secondly techniques within scientific works were introduced.

At the third session, the students began theme-specific, independent work. Due to the size of the Seminar - 60 participants were admitted, 53 received a certificate of achievement at the end - five working groups were formed. Each group examined one of the following topics:

- Health insurance in Germany
- From the assuming pregnancy to the child's first birthday - health care for pregnant women and infants in Germany.
- Availability and the usage of medicinal products in Germany
- Home-Tests in Germany
- Nutrition – Medical and educational offers/choices for all ages in Germany

For this purpose, the small groups began organizing themselves by discussing responsibilities and allocating tasks. Within a total of five team sessions the focus was on research work; gathering and communicating results; preparing memos; clarifying open questions; planning further tasks: and preparing a presentation with the most important information and correlations. After a mutual exchange of presentations between the working groups from Germany and the American students of NDSU, the presentations were discussed in a meeting of both teams and questions were prepared for the joint video conference. In this first section of the seminar the students became acquainted with a range of health-related topics, reviewed research results, came to grips with the form and content design (didactic reduction) of the presentation and prepared the upcoming videoconference, all with a complete interconnection of perspectives. What questions are to be expected from the students of NDSU; beyond the presentation, what should we convey within a discussion?

The 90-minute video conference took place on December 5, 2012 from 7pm until 8:30 pm German time. After a presentation by the American students regarding the health care system in the United States issues were discussed, such as the meaning of the concept of Obama Care, or how high health insurance costs are for the students on both sides, which resulted in stimulating discussions. This video conference offered the opportunity to learn presentation, moderation and discussion techniques under real-life conditions, posing new challenges once again under online conditions.

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank Prof. Mark Strand and Prof. Elizabeth Erichsen (NDSU) very much for their willingness to participate in this experiment. Together we gained a lot of new valuable experiences in university teaching.

From the German viewpoint, the video conference marked not only a high point in the course of the seminar but also represented a change in perspective. Whereas until now it had been about opening up issues and acquiring knowledge, this knowledge should now be taught with the help of presentation techniques. The students thus switched rolls from one of learner to that of teacher. At the end of the video conference or more specifically a few days later, and retrospective of the first half of the seminar, the changeover from pedagogical action to educational science research was accomplished. Based on the previously developed themes the aim should now be to derive relevant educational science questions. Behind all this is the challenge for the science novice, posed time and time again, of formulating a topic, scientific question, explanation, theoretical foundation and methodical procedure each compatible with one another in a research design. An attempt was made during the sessions that followed and in the respective working groups, to develop research designs with the aid of a fact sheet on scientific research. Subsequently, the research concepts were presented in plenum and discussed with constructive criticism. A final session which was devoted to the review of the seminar, completed the course

### **Reflection on the Seminar Concept and Implementation from a German Perspective**

Through a three-part structure of appropriating – communicating – researching the seminar attempted to promote both educational action (transfer) and academic work (research). Topics/themes for the working group were therefore predefined to create a common basis for the development of research designs. The challenge for the students was to deal with pedagogical and educational science techniques alongside the acquisition of new knowledge. These learning requirements - or even learning impositions - gain a special relevance once again when viewed against the backdrop of taking students' interests into account. Because in this seminar it wasn't about written reports as proof of performance. In comparison with other seminars it was definitely one that required a higher labor input. The inspection of the prepared presentations and questions brought relief, however, even before the video conference. The backdrop for this "guided" discussion shaped if nothing else, the interest of the participating teachers not to let this collaboration fail. From the perspective of the German students and their teacher, it was precisely the teamwork beyond the confines of their own seminar which helped provide the participants with new experiences and insights. In retrospect, these positive effects put into perspective the increased workload of this seminar for the students.