

UPED 620 Avsluttende Oppdrag/ SoTL Project Assignment

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How to see ourselves through the students' eyes? Reflections on the challenges of developing student-centred teaching with large and heterogeneous classes

This paper is prepared for the University of Bergen's Program for University Pedagogy (UPED 620) as the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) project assignment. The discussion is based on my experience as course responsible for the obligatory Bachelor-level sociology course SOS 103 *Samfunnsstrukturer i Endring* (Changing Social Structures) in two terms: Fall of 2018 and 2019. I followed the UPED 620 seminars in the Fall of 2018 and learned more on the SoTL techniques and perspectives. This gave me the opportunity to reflect on and try new techniques for student-centred teaching and to see my teaching 'from the students' eyes' (cf. Brookfield 2017). In this paper, I will first outline insights from SoTL that guided my approach. I will then briefly present the changes in Norwegian higher education before proceeding to reflections on my own teaching.

1. Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: An Overview

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is an approach to teaching that is informed by inquiry and evidence about student learning (Hutchings et al. 2011). The originator is acknowledged as the American scholar Ernest LeRoy Boyer and his *book Scholarship Reconsidered* published in 1990 in which he introduced the concept to academic community. Boyer's main concern was 'to address the disproportionate status and reward accorded to research in universities, and the consequential disregard for the importance of teaching' (Trigwell & Shale 2004:523). He proposed that the activities of research and teaching could be put on a more equal footing, leading to greater respect for teaching and increased potential for enhancing the quality of student learning (ibid.).

Despite the variation regarding the nature and principles of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), it is possible to identify its key features as:

- Grounding your work in discipline-specific and pedagogic knowledge and research, normally through engagement with the literature,

- Analysing your practice through critical reflection on your teaching and the learning of your students,
- Disseminating the outcomes of your SoTL work for peer review and public scrutiny in order to further develop it (adopted from Fanghanel et al. 2016).

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) implies a ‘student-focused’ stance to teaching and a more intense focus on the *processes* of teaching and learning. The SoTL process-oriented approach concentrates on the impacts of teaching on the students’ *learning experiences* (Vardi 2011). This implies a ‘paradigm shift’ from focusing on the body of information and what is intended from the instructor, to what students have learned and can demonstrate at the end of a learning experience. SoTL involves an explicit focus on *learning outcomes*. An outcomes-based approach to education is inherently dependent upon the identification and communication of clearly defined learning outcomes, which describe the essential knowledge and abilities that students should possess upon completion of the program or the course.

1.1 Learning outcomes

Learning outcomes are direct statements that describe the knowledge, skills, and habits of mind that students are expected to reliably demonstrate after a learning experience (Kolomitra and Gee 2015). Learning outcomes refer to “ways of thinking and practicing” and the depth and breadth of knowledge, subject-specific skills and know-how that students acquire from an educational experience (Hounsell and Anderson 2008).

Course learning outcomes are usually formed as explicit and concise statements that describe course-specific knowledge and skills a student will be able to demonstrate as a result of their experience with that specific course. Having clear learning outcomes is beneficial for both students and instructors: they help students to know where they stand and what they can hope to gain from following a particular course or lecture. They also allow instructors to design their teaching materials more effectively by acting as a template and make it easier to select a teaching strategy (Kolomitra and Gee 2015).

The SoTL approach to teaching is increasingly adopted in Norwegian Higher Education Institutions (HEI). However, there are contradictory trends that characterize the overall context

of teaching and learning. I will now briefly present changes in Norwegian HE in order to provide a context to interpret my personal teaching experiences.

2. Changes in the Norwegian Higher Education

The Norwegian higher education context has changed considerably in the past two decades. The Bologna process, which in Norway was implemented through the Quality Reform, has had a transformative effect on whole higher education system (Brandser & Sümer 2020). The degree- and credit point system was totally altered to follow the European standard. Important parts of the reform are the introduction of a new degree structure with Bachelor's, Master's and PhD degrees, as well as the transition to the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) (RCN 2019).

Improving the quality of studies and increased internationalization were the main purposes behind the reform. The new structure represented a radical break with many of the traditions in Norwegian higher education, not simply the structure and length of the studies, but the whole assessment system, teaching, supervision, and student learning.

In the aftermath of these reforms, the number of students in higher education has increased considerably. The growth in the numbers came together with a change in the characteristics and expectations of higher education students. Having a university degree is now the normal practice in Norway. Higher education students are “no longer an elite cohort, but a student body with varied learning needs and aspirations (Vardi 2011: 2). The differing backgrounds of students is a major challenge for university teachers and influence the design and evaluation of university courses.

Alongside the increase in the number of students and growing diversity, there has been a dramatic growth in the use of information technology. Information technologies have become a core part of teaching and hence the learning experience (Vardi 2011). Academic staff need to gain new skills, learn how to use the new technologies and how to effectively incorporate them into their teaching.

A similar development in the higher education sector in the global north is the ‘New Public Management’ approach implying increased marketization and accountability. Academic institutions are increasingly being run according to the principles of private enterprise,

emphasizing profitability, accountability, and productivity (Sümer et al. 2020). Governments seek to exercise control over universities to increase accountability and productivity through the use of ‘key performance indicators’ (Burke & Modaressi 2000).

For many institutions these indicators, emphasizing measurable ‘outputs’ and ‘outcomes’ have ‘flowed down’ to evaluation of their faculties’ and individual academic’s levels of performance (Taylor & Taylor 2003, cited in Vardi 2011: 3). Within this context, academic staff are held accountable for student satisfaction ratings, enrolment numbers, retention rates, and for gathering the evidence for these accountability measures, resulting in increased academic workloads (Vardi 2011).

In this overall context, I will now proceed with a reflection on my experience as the course responsible (*emneansvarlig*) for the Bachelor-level sociology course SOS 103 Changing Social Structures (*Samfunnsstrukturer i Endring*) in two terms: Fall of 2018 and 2019.

3. Teaching sociology for large classes: challenges and reflections

I had a temporary position as Associate Professor at the Department of Sociology, University of Bergen, in the period August 2018-December 2019. In this period, I have been responsible for several courses, both at the Bachelor and Master levels. I was formerly employed at the same institution: as a PhD fellow (1997-2002); Postdoc researcher (2003-2006) and Associate Professor (substitute) 2006. This gave me the opportunity to observe and reflect on changes in the organizations of the courses and attitudes and behaviour of the students within a rather long timespan. In the Fall of 2018, I was responsible for the course SOS 103 *Changing Social Structures*. The overall aim of SOS 103 was to introduce central concepts and theories on the economic, political, social, and cultural developments in modern societies. This is an obligatory course for sociology Bachelor students who normally take the course in their third semester. The course is also taken as part of 1-year sociology study and as ‘free credits’ by other students from the Faculty of Social Sciences. Due to this, the students following the course are heterogeneous and vary with respect to their former experience as university students as well as their reasons for taking the course. While some of the students take the course in their first semester at the university (and find it rather difficult), some are more experienced students with a general knowledge of sociological theory.

3.1 The learning outcomes and evaluation techniques of the course

The aim of the course is formulated as follows in the course website:

“The aim of the course is to provide an introduction to the central concepts and theories on the economic, political, social and cultural development of the modern society” (<https://www.uib.no/emne/SOS103>, my translation)

The course is comprehensive and ambitious, covering various themes such as the formation of modern states, historical accounts of class and gender relations, bases of modern welfare states, the concepts of citizenship and globalization.

Learning outcomes of SOS 103 are formulated as:

- 1) To acquire the knowledge to use sociological concepts to investigate:
 - different historical forms of industrialization and capitalism
 - colonialization and imperialism
 - class processes and changes in women’s societal positions
 - the character of the modern state
 - globalization

- 2) To attach these general characteristics of the history of modernity to the development of the modern Norwegian society.

(<https://www.uib.no/emne/SOS103>, my translation)

The aims and learning outcomes of this course were pre-set and I could not make any changes. In retrospect, and based on the insights from the SoTL approach, I think that these learning outcomes are too abstract and should be reformulated in light of the SOLO-taxonomy (Structure of the Observed Learning Outcome) as developed by John Biggs (See e.g., [//www.johnbiggs.com.au/academic/solo-taxonomy](http://www.johnbiggs.com.au/academic/solo-taxonomy) and Biggs 1999).

The readings (compendium) for the course include a book and a collection of articles and book chapters (Approximately 900 pages in total). The lectures are organized as 12 double-lectures (2 hours per week; followed by 2-hour voluntary seminars in small groups). The students can register for organized seminar groups led by master’s students. These students

receive specific assignments related to each lecture and can discuss course topics in smaller groups.

The obligatory activities to receive credits (15 ECTS) for this course included a term-paper (ca 2500 words) and a home-exam (2500-3000 words). In the middle of the semester, the students receive 2 alternative topics for their term-paper. They first submit a first draft on which they receive comments (either from the course responsible or seminar leaders). They then submit a second version which must be 'satisfactory' (*godkjent*) to gain the right for the final exam. Students who do not submit a mid-term paper cannot take the final exam. The final exam is designed as a home exam. The students receive 3 alternative topics and choose 1 of them to write an essay, using the course literature. They have 7 days to complete their assignment and submit it electronically.

As I mentioned earlier, the aims and learning outcomes of the course were already set when I took over the responsibility. However, I could make some adjustments in the lecture plan and minor changes in the reading list.

3.2 Reflections on the challenges of student-centred teaching in big rooms

In both 2018 and 2019 Fall semester, around 150 students registered for the course but only around 80 followed the lectures and seminars actively. The lectures took place in a large auditorium (named 'The Egg' due to its special architecture) which has capacity for approximately 400 students. The students tended to sit scattered in the room, most of them preferring the seats in the back. This physical environment limits the possibilities of 'seeing' the students individually and establishing one-to-one relationships to them.

I had to lecture on a platform, using a microphone and showed my power points on the large screen behind the platform. There were occasional problems with the IT system which had to be resolved by technical assistance. These physical conditions demand a familiarity with the system and the first lectures were exceptionally stressful to make everything work smoothly.

I had 9 of the 12 double-lectures and administered the other tasks of the course (preparing seminar questions; supervising seminar leaders; preparing topics for the term-paper; commenting on the term-papers; approving term-papers) throughout the semester.

A general characteristic of the enrolled students was a great heterogeneity: while a few were full-time students, following both the lectures and seminars actively, a larger group appeared as having other involvements (either other studies or demanding jobs) and thus following the courses remotely. The course had an internal website where I posted the lecture notes, the lecture plan and an “*arbeidshefte*” (work plan) which included course objectives and learning outcomes; formal requirements and general advices regarding the term-paper, as well as former exam questions. It was also possible to publish general announcements and communicate with the individual students through this website.

Although the lectures generally went fine, it has been a challenge to activate students and keep them concentrated. There were very few who dared to ask questions and many preferred to take on a passive role.

Reflecting on some of the problems I encountered the first time I lectured (Fall 2018), I made some changes in the course plan and my own teaching in the following term (Fall 2019). I started breaking-up my lectures more often to give the students time to think and reflect on their own (or with their fellow students in small groups).

The different techniques I tested to activate students were 5 minute “discuss with your neighbour” questions; short films (5 to 10 minutes) related to the topics at hand and varied use of power point files (with more pictures/cartoons and less text). I also started asking more questions related to their experience with the former lectures and especially with the writing process of the term-paper and decided to have a mid-term evaluation to receive their concrete comments. This was inspired by the SoTL approach I learned more about due to my participation in the UPED seminars and especially the focus on student engagement and the importance of ‘becoming a critically reflective teacher’ which involves an attempt to see ourselves through students’ eyes (Brookfield 2017). Collecting personal data from students is a good step to accomplish this. As Brookfield claims:

Researching students’ perceptions of our actions and words alerts us to problems and mistakes that otherwise we might miss. It also tells us what’s working and why. This, in turn, means we can make more accurately grounded decisions about how and what to teach (Brookfield 2017: 99).

3.3 An “old-fashioned” Mid-term Evaluation

To learn more about the student experiences with this course, I carried out a mid-term evaluation in a traditional way, asking students to write down what they experienced as positive and as negative in the lectures, using pen and paper. 64 students participated in this mid-term evaluation which took place in the last 15 minutes of Lecture 6 (25. September 2019).

All the students who followed the lecture that day answered the questions. I asked them 3 questions:

- 1) *What did you experience as positive with the SOS 103 lectures this semester?*
- 2) *What did you experience as negative with the SOS 103 lectures this semester?*
- 3) *Which topic would you prefer to write your term-paper on (choose two of the following four topics and briefly write why?)*

Most of the students replied briefly. A few of them used this opportunity to come with detailed reflections. One had to sit for an extra 10 minutes to complete his/her evaluation, which involved a questioning of attitudes towards LGTB students (due to the terminological choice of one of the guest lecturers). This was not directly related to my lectures but apparently the student wanted to use this occasion to communicate his/her views. This can also be a sign that students have few opportunities to provide direct feedback on issues that involve and interest them.

All the students wrote a few sentences on both their positive and negative experiences. The heterogeneity of the group was reflected in their answers. On the positive side, most students thought the lecturers were well-prepared. My lectures were praised as well-structured. The students had formerly requested to have the lectures notes posted the day before. Following their request, I started making the lecture notes available for student the evening before the lectures. This was reported as highly positive. In general, the students found the use of power point files informative and helpful for structuring their own preparations.

On the negative side, most students found the reading load as too demanding and the tempo of the lectures as too fast. Many voiced a need to reduce the extent of readings and the need of ‘slowing down’ some of the lectures. Some of the students complained that the book was ‘too old’ (from 1996). Some also requested more readings in Norwegian.

In the same evaluation, I asked the students to select two of the four possible topics that they will receive the term-paper assignment on. This was thought as a means to give students a feeling of having a say in their obligatory assignments. In the following lecture (after the evaluation), I informed the students about the two topics that received the most votes and that they would receive assignments related to these fields. This resulted in a higher satisfaction as was reflected in the final course evaluation.

The Department of Sociology uses a standard evaluation form for course evaluations. The form includes questions on students' evaluations of their own efforts, as well as their satisfaction with the lectures, seminars, and obligatory activities (term-paper). In general, these evaluations have low turn-over rates: In both 2018 and 2019, less than 20 % of the students returned the evaluation forms. This factor limits their value for 'measuring' general student satisfaction. Still, they provide a general view on expectations and experiences of the students. As Brookfield (2017) also asserts, while the end-of-term standard evaluations are one source of useful data, they are "irrelevant in terms of daily pedagogy" (ibid: 98). Striving to see what we do through students' eyes is at the heart of student-centred teaching and this is potentially better accomplished by regular, more direct interaction with the students. I argue that the 'old-fashioned' mid-term evaluation I used provided me more useful information on the varied student experiences than the end-of-term questionnaire.

My mid-term evaluation had two main purposes: hearing what the students experienced as both positive and negative with the lectures; and giving them a *voice* in the determination of the assignment theme of the term-paper. The end-of-term evaluation showed that 89 % of the students experienced writing the term-paper as "highly beneficial" for their learning (while this rate was 79 % the former year). I believe this is an indicator that involving students more in some of the decisions about the course increases both their involvement in their own learning and resulting satisfaction.

4. Concluding Notes

Taking SoTL seriously demands a continuous effort to analyse our teaching practices and evaluate student experiences. Seeing ourselves through the students' eyes is challenging especially in large and heterogeneous classes. In the context of this paper, I tried to demonstrate that even more traditional techniques, such as 'pen & paper evaluation' discussed above, can

offer good knowledge into students' experiences and provide a basis for reflectively adjusting course practices. Awareness of how students are experiencing learning is after all "the foundational, first-order knowledge we need to do good work as teachers" (Brookfield 2017: 99).

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