

CHAPTER 13. COMPARING CLASSES WITH DIFFERENT LEVELS OF STUDENT CONTROL WHILE CULTIVATING STUDENTS' INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCES

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Introduction

I have experienced student-centred approach for the first time as an undergraduate student at a business school in Vienna, Austria. While some teachers there approached teaching in a teacher-centred way, the majority of the teachers there employed student-centred methods which taught me independent study skills, allowed me to better develop my critical thinking and communication skills, and made it possible to retain the study material better. Teachers had clear teaching objectives and utilized multiple teaching methods to facilitate student learning. Some teachers also managed their own businesses and brought their entrepreneurial experience into the classroom, giving students the opportunity to work on real-life case studies and to apply their knowledge in practice.

When I began my postgraduate education at the University of Economics in Bratislava, I found myself listening to session-long lectures with occasional assignments at the end of the session and there was little room for interaction or questions. Those classes left me with the feeling that I learned very little and rarely prompted me to reflect on the material covered in the classroom. The contrast between these two very different learning experiences has raised my interest in exploring whether the undergraduate students that I teach respond to those different teaching approaches in a similar manner. In order to find the answer, I designed an experiment where three classes of my students were given different levels of control over their learning while studying the same topics. In this chapter I present the results of the comparative analysis that underpinned this experiment. It revealed modest evidence for the expectation that the higher the intensity is of student-centred activities in the classroom, the higher the level of student satisfaction and retention of information will be. However, this will not necessarily result in a higher level of engagement. I conclude this chapter by explaining why the findings are somewhat fickle in this regard and stress the importance of cultural and educational factors within the learning process.

Institutional and theoretical background

This teaching experiment was implemented at the Department of International Trade of the Faculty of Commerce at the University of Economics in Bratislava during the spring semester of 2019. The sessions I taught were part of the Intercultural Leadership and Communication course,

which was on offer to local students and students of the Erasmus program. The language of instruction was English. The focus of the sessions was to introduce students to intercultural awareness and to develop their intercultural competencies. Since it was the first course session it had to serve as the cornerstone for the later development of intercultural leadership and intercultural communication. My objective was to introduce the concepts of culture and cultural influence, evoke awareness of personal identity and expose students to the notion of cultural relativism.

At the Faculty of Commerce, the majority of the classes are taught using the teacher-centred approach. This approach was criticized for being too passive in terms of student learning, having a low level of teacher innovation and disregarding students' needs (Emaliana 2017). Although the instructivist approach where the teacher transmits information which is then merely absorbed by students is considered to be effective when teaching complex subjects to novices, student engagement is reported to be very low (Roucau 2016). At the same time, the fast-moving pace of our lives shortens the attention span of students and makes them susceptible to being easily bored and distracted, which further reduces the effectiveness of lengthy frontal lectures. In the twenty-first century, due to a turbulent and fast-changing business environment the mere transfer of information will not adequately prepare a student to move toward a successful future. The ability to critically assess and internalize information, the ability to draw conclusions, cross-cultural communication competence, and the ability to work in groups constitute only a few of the necessary skills that are crucial in the field of communication and culture.

In student-centred learning (SCL) the teacher assumes the role of facilitator and invites students to participate in the learning process by relating information to prior knowledge and using that knowledge to engage in discussions with others. SCL puts students in the centre of knowledge construction which in turn improves their motivation, knowledge retention and facilitates a deeper understanding of the material (Serin 2018). Wijayanti and Listani (2018) assumes that two of the core traits of SCL are student reflection and control over learning. However, it is unclear from the literature how much student control is optimal for effective learning. Even though various studies presented by Roucau (2016) emphasize positive outcomes in terms of engagement and predict a higher level of participation (see also Lantis et al. 2010), lower abstention rates and better grades, SCL class sessions do not automatically lead to high engagement levels (e.g. Raymond 2012).

Moreover, student engagement and ultimately student learning, are multidimensional concepts consisting of behavioural, relational and cognitive dimensions (Davis et al. 2012) and should not only be studied through the dichotomous lens of the student- versus the teacher-centred approaches, but should be viewed within the context of the varying degrees of SCL. It is possible that the differences found in the effectiveness of student-centredness, especially when compared to teacher-centred methods, were due to a variation in terms of how involved students

were during student-centred learning activities. Thus, I decided to study the outcomes of classes with different levels of control that students have over their own learning.

The experimental innovation

Teaching the same topic to three different classes offered an opportunity for a quasi-experimental research design to test the impact of various levels of student control over the learning process. In order to do so I designed three classes with different levels of student-centredness reflected in classroom activities and labelled these accordingly as (1) minimally (n=17), (2) moderately (n=14), and (3) highly (n=13) student-controlled. While I assigned the session designs randomly to three classes of students, I had no control over who enrolled in which class. As a result, classes differed in terms of their levels of cultural diversity. The minimally student-controlled class was the most diverse with a high proportion of students coming from a variety of Western countries, while the moderately and highly student-controlled classes had only one and two foreign students respectively.

For each class, the session was split into three parts. The first part of the session comprised a mini-lecture, which I used to introduce social categorization theory, the developmental path that leads from stereotyping to racism and ways in which this can be avoided. An exercise followed the lecture during which students were asked to summarize the information from the mini-lecture by voluntarily answering quiz questions. The exercise was designed to create a climate of freedom of expression and reduce the fear of participation. The content and presentation of the lecture as well as the first exercise were identical for all three classes.

The second part of the session focused on understanding the theoretical development of culture and Hofstede's cultural dimensions, and was concluded by a group exercise designed to explore cultural self-awareness. The exercise was different across the three classes even though all classes included three-to-four-member group discussions. For students in the minimally student-controlled class, the teacher summarised the outcomes of the group discussions. In the moderately student-controlled class, group presentations were followed by group discussions. The exercise implemented in the highly student-controlled class started with individual reflections which were followed by a group discussion and concluded by a presentation of the outcomes to the class.

I introduced the construct of intercultural competence and the pathway for its development in the final part of the session. This was followed by a case study during which students had the opportunity to apply the knowledge that was gained during the mini-lecture. It described two business parties who possessed limited self-awareness from opposite cultures conducting a business meeting but were oblivious to cultural norms and the influence of culture upon their actions. Students in the minimally student-controlled class were separated into two groups and asked to analyse the case study. They later presented the outcomes of their collaboration in front of the class. The moderately student-controlled class was also divided into two groups but each

group analysed the perspective of one business party and subsequently presented the reasons for its behaviour and actions to the class in the form of a role play. At the end of the class the teacher summarized the learning outcomes. In the highly student-centred classroom, each student was first asked to write a short reflection paper on the case study, then participated in the same kind of group discussions and role play as the students with a medium amount of SCL, but with a teacher-led discussion summarizing the learning outcomes of the exercise at the end of the session.

Thus, while each of the three session designs included SCL, the degree of control that students had over their learning differed. I expected that the more control students have over their learning process, (H1) the higher their level of satisfaction would be, (H2) the more engaged they would be with the material, and (H3) the more information they would retain.

Data and methods

To compare the impact of the varying degrees of student control, I collected two sets of data: a student survey *and* classroom observation. The student survey comprised of questions that collected information on both students' opinions (questions one to four) and their actual learning (questions five to eight) (see table 1 for details). Opinion items were measured on a six-point Likert-scale where students were asked to rate their agreement with each statement from 1 ('not at all') to 6 ('very much'). Question one was used to measure hypothesis one regarding satisfaction, the purpose of question four was to evaluate hypothesis two on engagement and questions two and three contributed to the understanding of students' perspectives on their own learning (H3). All opinion related results from the survey were analysed with the help of descriptive statistics (means) and a variance analysis (ANOVA) test.

Table 1. Survey questions used to evaluate the three hypotheses

| Question | Hypothesis tested | Measurement and method of analysis |
|---|-------------------|---|
| <i>Opinion items</i> | | |
| How much did you enjoy the lecture? | H1 | 6-point Likert scale; descriptive statistic and ANOVA |
| How useful do you consider the lecture for learning? How useful do you consider the case study for learning? | H3 | |
| How engaged did you feel during today's session? | H2 | |
| <i>Items about student learning</i> | | |

| | | |
|---|----|--|
| What are the two [three, four, five] most significant things you have learned during this session? What question(s) remain unanswered in your mind? Is there anything you did not understand? Please add any comment regarding the session | H3 | Open-ended questions; see coding scheme in table 2 |
|---|----|--|

The open-ended questions of the survey assisted in evaluating whether more control by students resulted in a higher level of information retention and internalization (H3). Using thematic analysis with an open coding system, I established two main categories: concepts students learned/understood and what they did not learn/understand. I divided the former into four subthemes that related to the actual concepts learned, i.e. mentioned by students: culture, respect, prejudice/stereotype, cultural perspective (see table 2 for a more detailed explanation).

Table 2. The coding scheme for the open-ended questions in the survey

| No. | Category | Description |
|-----|-----------------------------------|---|
| 1 | Understanding of concepts | Sub-categories: Culture – theoretical understanding and impact of it Respect – individuals of other cultures Prejudice/Stereotype – the process and concept Perspective – relative concept of own culture and behaviour of others |
| 2 | Lack of understanding of concepts | Concepts that left students confused at the end of the session |

Finally, in evaluating hypotheses two and three, I also used information from a colleague's classroom observation. The observer did not use any protocol or standardized form to structure the feedback but only discussed her spontaneous notes with me afterwards.

Findings

The initial assumption that the more control students have over their learning, the more satisfied they would be with the learning process (H1) was partially confirmed. Out of the three classes, the one in which students had the most control over their learning had the highest mean score of satisfaction (mean_{HIGH}=5.75), followed by the moderately student-controlled class (mean_{MODERATE}=5.50) (table 3). The lowest satisfaction level was reported by students with the least control over their learning (mean_{MINIMAL}=5.35) In other words, as the number of SCL activities increased, so did student satisfaction. However, the result of the ANO-

VA test showed that these differences were not statistically significant ($F(2,41)=2.25$, $p=0.11$). The assumption about a positive relationship between student control and a higher level of student engagement (H2) was not supported by the results. The classes with the highest and moderate level of student-centred activities had the lowest reported mean engagement ratings at 5.07 each, whereas the least controlled class had the highest engagement level (mean_{MINIMAL}=5.23). Even though the results are not statistically significant ($F(2,41)=0.22$, $p=0.80$), both the observer and I noted that the class with the most control by the teacher enjoyed the highest level of attention, motivation and participation. This was the opposite of what I expected and was possibly the result of the least student-centred classroom having the highest proportion of students who had experience in SCL.

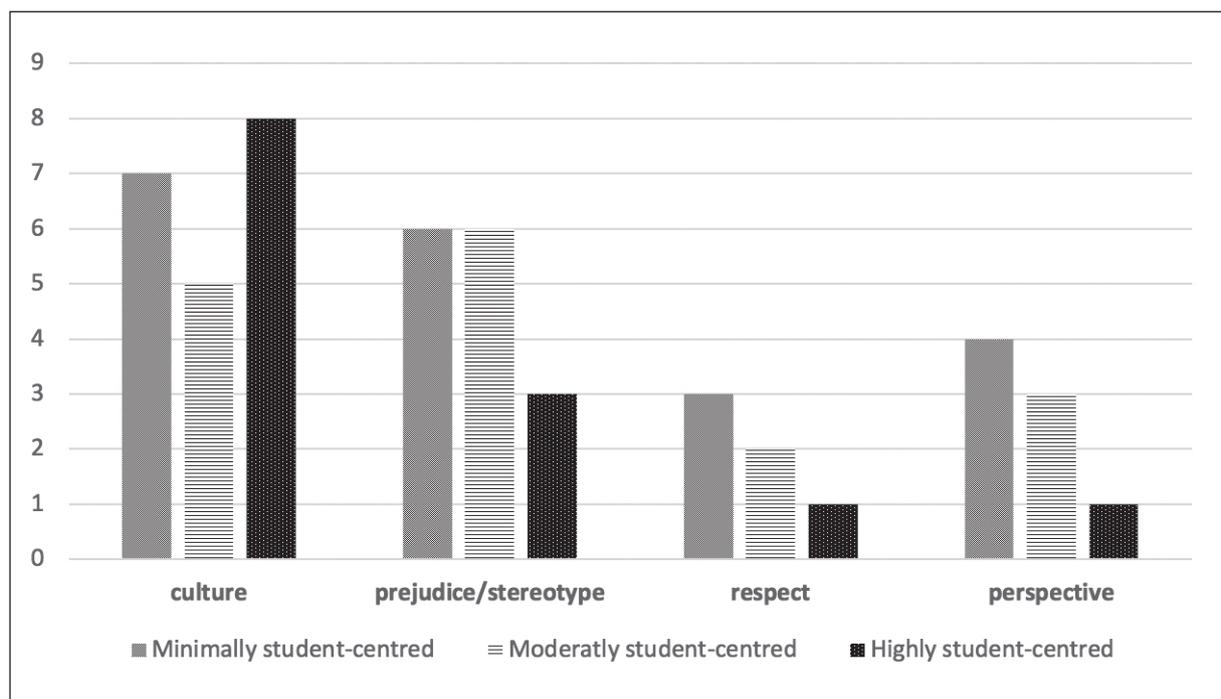
Table 3. Descriptive statistics for opinion items in the survey according to the level of control students had over their learning

| | N | Mean | SD |
|---------------------------------|----------|-------------|-----------|
| <i>Satisfaction</i> | | | |
| Minimal | 17 | 5.35 | .49 |
| Moderate | 14 | 5.50 | .65 |
| High | 13 | 5.76 | .44 |
| <i>Engagement</i> | | | |
| Minimal | 17 | 5.23 | .70 |
| Moderate | 14 | 5.07 | .86 |
| High | 13 | 5.07 | .96 |
| <i>Usefulness of lecturing</i> | | | |
| Minimal | 17 | 5.53 | .62 |
| Moderate | 14 | 5.57 | .75 |
| High | 13 | 5.08 | .95 |
| <i>Usefulness of case study</i> | | | |
| Minimal | 17 | 4.88 | .75 |
| Moderate | 14 | 5.14 | .61 |
| High | 13 | 5.38 | .95 |

I found only partial evidence in regard to the assumption that the more control students have over their learning, the more information they retain and internalize (H3). As expected, upon being asked how useful they found the case study for their learning, the highly student-controlled class reported the highest level of usefulness (mean_{HIGH}=5.38) compared to both the moderately and minimally student-controlled classes (mean_{MODERATE}=5.14; mean_{MINIMAL}=4.88). However, also in this case the results of the ANOVA indicated that these differences were not statistically significant ($F(2,41)=1.3, p=0.27$). Nonetheless, both the classroom observer and I found the highly student-controlled class not only better at presenting more sophisticated perspectives, but also displayed a deeper level of internalization of concepts when working with the case study. They had applied the various cultural dimensions outstandingly when analysing the case study and, as a result, produced the most convincing justifications and more culturally sensitive perspectives on the behaviour of the business parties. This was also in line with my expectations.

The logic of this investigation suggests that, if active learning is to be found most useful by those who are exposed to it at the highest level, then lecturing should influence those who take part in the least amount of student-centred learning. The minimally student-controlled class did score (mean_{MINIMAL}=5.53) higher than the highly student-controlled class (mean_{HIGH}=5.08), but not higher than the class where students had moderate control over the learning process (mean_{MODERATE}=5.57) although the difference was small. Not surprisingly, a comparison of the differing means did not render statistically insignificant differences ($F(2,41)=1.07, p=0.19$).

Figure 1. Learning outcomes based on open-ended questions



The qualitative component of the study shed light on information retention in the three classes and (see figure 1) provided details on the key learned concepts indicated by students in the open-ended questions. Since the learning objective of the session was to introduce culture and cultural self-awareness, the subcategory of culture provided the most significant information about student learning and other subcategories were treated as positive by-products. The most highly student-controlled class made the highest number of comments relating to the objective of the session and the fewest comments about related concepts. The moderately and minimally student-controlled classes exhibited similar trends: in both, students focused on culture and prejudice/stereotypes, but more importantly more frequently mentioned concepts that were by-products rather than those that correspond with the intended learning outcome.

When it comes to issues that students did not understand, they did not mention any concepts discussed in the session in response to the question. Across the three classes, only three comments in total referred to topics not related to the learning objective. For example, even though we discussed globalization in the context of interculturalism, one student noted that he did not understand 'whether globalization was good or bad', which was not the point of the discussion. One student failed to grasp the benefit of learning about interculturalism complaining that 'it's all common sense and why do we even need to learn this'. All in all, the number of responses to the questions that aimed to uncover what students did not learn/understand were not sufficient to adequately evaluate the third hypothesis.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have analysed the effect of differing degrees of student control over the learning process and anticipated that the more control they have, the higher their levels of satisfaction, engagement and learning would be. I have found scant evidence to support these assumptions. That is, more student-centredness is not automatically more beneficial to learning. However, these results may have occurred due to a variety of reasons; one of which might be the small sample size that was used. This could be remedied in the long term, for example by executing several iterations of this experiment.

The findings were most convincing regarding student satisfaction and perceived learning as measured via the usefulness of the case study. Satisfaction is sometimes considered to be a learning outcome in itself and is understood to influence the learning process and enhance student motivation (Elliot and Healy 2001). In addition, the positive relationship between the level of student-centredness and its perceived benefits to learning provide support for SCL. Both findings suggest that the experiment was worthwhile and the issues it uncovered deserve further attention.

The little evidence for engagement and the lack of a clear pattern in the usefulness of lecturing can point us to the right direction toward improvement. First, if the level of engagement is con-

sidered to be a direct reflection of – and a measure of – assessing active learning in the classroom (Lee et al. 2019), then the engagement levels being highest in the least student-controlled class is troubling. This may have resulted from differences in terms of the makeup of classes. Namely, members of the student-controlled class were all from Central and Eastern Europe and they might have been little accustomed to active learning techniques so that they considered this form of learning as not being engaged in learning but perhaps rather a form of classroom entertainment. In this case, the meaning of and attitude toward engagement could differ regionally based on the educational background of students, which would require the need for a different approach to measure the concept and design of classroom activities.

In the latter, path dependency could be an important factor to consider: since the majority of classes in this region are conducted in a teacher-centred manner, students are used to being guided by the teacher and feel more comfortable in that type of learning environment. Introducing sudden and unfamiliar student-centred learning activities could present the student with frustration and an inability to guide themselves, leading to lower engagement. In this case, it would be pertinent if I prepared students better for learning via SCL either by introducing it gradually or extending the innovation over several or all sessions. Better instructions and possibly fewer exercises might also prove to be useful. It is also possible that the learning of the various concepts requires varying levels of student-centredness. For example, intercultural competence may be best learned in a highly student-centred setting, whereas understanding cultural dimensions and the concept of cultural self-awareness is best studied in a much less student-controlled context.

All in all, a study that was built around teaching intercultural competence should emphasize the importance of controlling for cultural diversity in today's multicultural classrooms. The majority of especially older studies of teaching and learning tend to focus on the learning experience of nationally and culturally homogenous classes of students who often sit in American or Western European classrooms. More recent studies have started to add the perspectives of other regions. However, as multiculturalism, student mobility and permeability of education systems increase throughout Europe and the world at large, it is crucial to know how effective the various teaching and learning approaches and methods are when the classroom includes students of very different educational, ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

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