Students as Content Producers: How Activating Students can Enrich an Online Course

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Abstract: Students want and need to be activated. This will enhance the learning outcome, and engaged students are motivated students. The motivation for joining a course or a study program may vary, it can be extrinsic as when they are looking for study points, and intrinsic as when they need the learning to perform in their worklife. To make the students actively participate in a course may change the motivation from extrinsic to intrinsic. They need to reflect in order to learn, and it is thus important to facilitate for the students to bring their reflections on own experiences in their worklife into the study situation. To use their own experiences to learn and understand the curriculum has proved very useful according to the students. Using and building new learning on their previous experiences is an essential part of constructivist learning theory and not only does it support learning to present ones experiences to other peers, but to also receive feedback on these experiences are also a great support to the learning experience. Fellow students will, when the classes are large enough, to a certain extent have experienced or heard of similar experiences and be able to comment and share their knowledge. The students input to class will also provide the lecturer with material for training on solving cases, and even serve as basis for role playing. Based on the students discussions and comments, the lecturer can make cases that serve as training material for the students. This can be posted online and session for solving the cases may be done online, recorded and be shared with the students that did not have an opportunity to follow the seminars or the online discussions. This paper will present results from several courses on how to facilitate for the students to be content producers and how this has enriched, and enhanced, their learning experience.

Keywords: active participation, ownership, motivation, engagement

1. Introduction

This paper presents the feedback from courses where the concept of Flipped Classroom has been used to not only support student activity, but also to make the students contribute towards the knowledge sharing in the classroom.

The courses that the data are collected from have mainly students that are in a current employment. The courses are online and seminar based and there are three seminars per semester. The students' ages range from approximately 20 years old till past 60 years old.

The students have varying experiences from worklife; some have only limited time and some have worked for several years and for several employers. The experiences will thus be different and this provides a pool of knowledge that will possibly benefit all the students.

Getting the students to provide "content" requires a facilitated process. To share the "content" and to share knowledge also requires facilitation. The learning process is, however, perceived as much more dynamic and the activity required producing the "content" support the learning process.

2. Theoretical backdrop

Here we will present the theory that has informed our undertaking and our study. We also present some thoughts and perspectives of how this influences our business as providers of education and courses, and how this influence the perceived level of service provided.

2.1.1 How adults learn

Adults learn by being involved and engaged (Brookfield & Holst, 2010; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005). Also in a work situation regarding learning new skills or a new trade it is important for the learner to be engaged and active (Filstad & Blåka, 2007). Sometimes the learner needs to be encouraged to learn and also be supported in a development process towards being able to learn. This enablement and empowerment is important in order for the learner to understand and contribute towards the development of the organization. As there are rapidly

changing markets, constraints and environments, the workers need to be able to learn in order to change (Schwahn, Spady, & American Association of School, 2010).

Indeed as John Kotter(2008) states : "Education needs to redefine, reframe, and retool itself *explicitly* around the future challenges, opportunities, problems, and conditions that its students are extremely likely to encounter once they leave the institution." When they leave the institution (the university, university college, etc) they should be in a position to understand and action on challenges, opportunities, problems and conditions in the organization they will be a part of as a worker. This should then also apply to educational activities that adults engage in as workers.

The old paradigm is, however, sometimes prominent for workers in a worklife finishing basic education some years ago. The old paradigm we would describe as being monologue based with a one-to-many lecture with few or no inputs from the students.

Even if the lecturer use examples where the students are able to relate to the situation, it is however something different to contribute with the different issues themselves. To base what is being lectured on the students own input will provide an opportunity for reflection with the student and also an opportunity to build new knowledge on previous experiences (Dewey, 1938).

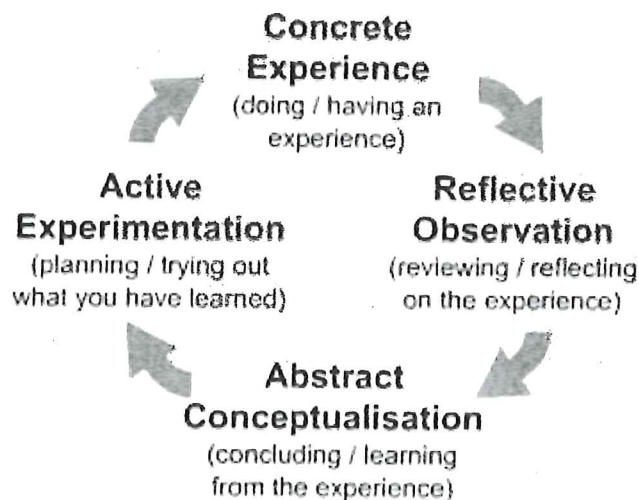This also supports Kolb's experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984).

Concrete Experience
(doing / having an experience)

Reflective Observation
(reviewing / reflecting on the experience)

Abstract Conceptualisation
(concluding / learning from the experience)

Active Experimentation
(planning / trying out what you have learned)

Figure 1: Kolb's experiential learning cycle (from: http://www.simplypsychology.org/learning-kolb.html)

They will have an experience in their worklife that they may reflect on and conceptualize during class and then bring the experiencing back into the organization. They will thus have the opportunity to guide their reflection and conceptualization by fellow students, lecturer and theory from the different courses they attend.

However, the being able to share and present relevant experiences also needs to be learned. As in e-learning, the five stage model of Gilly Salmon(2012) it is possible to deduct some enabling and empowerment. In the stages 1 – 3 and 5 it is all about forming an environment that accepts and demands learner input. Both in welcoming and encouraging (stage 1) it is important to "set the standard" for how the students are to engage in the education. In the socializing stage (stage 2) it is possible to facilitate for the students to mingle and familiarize themselves with others that may or may not have similar experiences. In the Information exchange stage (stage 3) is where the students are to learn how to provide their own experiences into the learning material. Supporting and responding (stage 5) follows a facilitating process of knowledge construction (stage 4). The students need to reflect and create their own understandings both themselves and in cooperation with fellow students. The supporting and responding will be more of guiding the students forward pointing out the different theoretical strands that debate their issues – all within the frames of the learning objectives of the course.
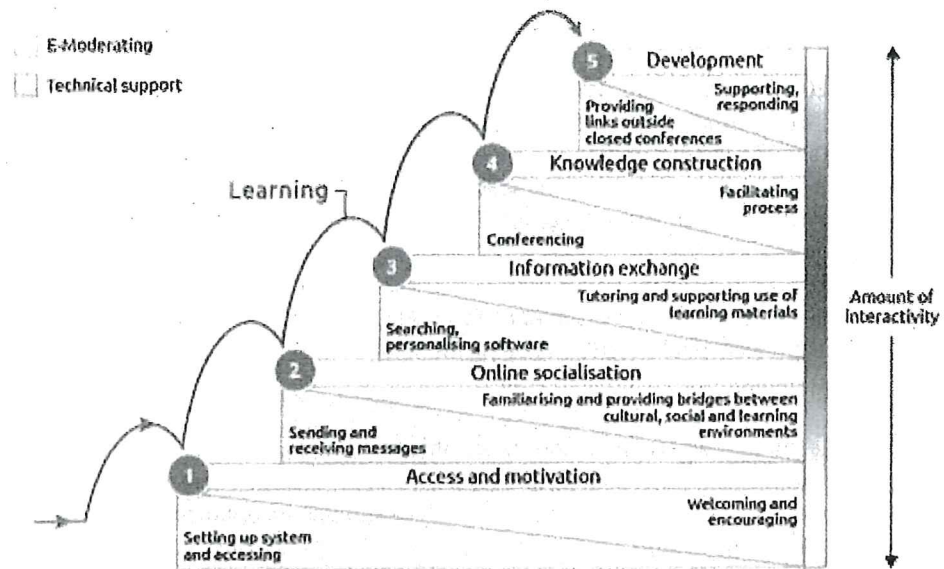
Figure 2: The five stage model (from: http://www.gillysalmon.com/five-stage-model.html)

In this way they become co-producers of knowledge. Similar to what happens learning wise in Action Research projects, the students become not passive receivers, but active contributors towards increasing understanding of the curriculum. In Action Research the workers are co-producers of knowledge and co-generators of solutions for the organization (Greenwood & Levin, 2007). The co-generative Action Research model is shown below and even if this explains the co-generation of knowledge in an Action Research project, it is possible to draw some similar lines. For example, the students will still have to state the problem definition or their experience (their "problem"). Then it is about mutual reflections with fellow students and lecturer. Where the figure differs is about "the acting". However, this is possible to solve by for example creating role plays that simulate a situation where this is possible to act through. It is important to state that this is just that; a simulation. The learning and reflection upon the activities are, however, important for a learning situation such as a simulation.
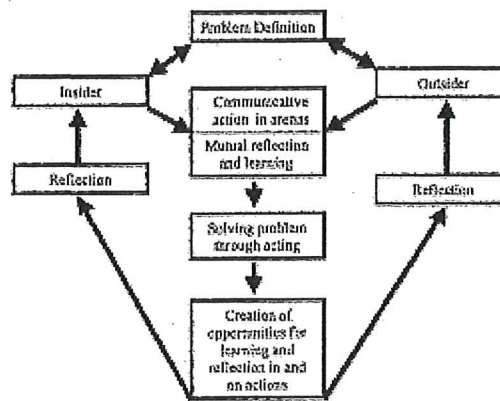

Figure 3: "The cogenerative action research model" (Greenwood&Levin, 1998)

By inviting the students to bring forward their own experiences, it is also possible to extract some *tacit knowledge*. Tacit knowledge is knowledge that is difficult or impossible to verbalize. In order to make the tacit knowledge explicit, it is important to socialize according to Nonaka and Takeuchi (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Their SECI-model of how to make tacit knowledge explicit and also explicit knowledge tacit, is presented in their works on how learning for innovation takes place in Japanese companies.

By socializing it is possible to articulate enough to make the knowledge explicit and by connecting and combining the knowledge, new and extended understandings and knowledge can become a part of the students' knowledge base by internalization. By making the knowledge applicable to own situations, and also by practicing – as e.g. in simulating - it is possible to make this knowledge a part of the students' tacit knowledge.
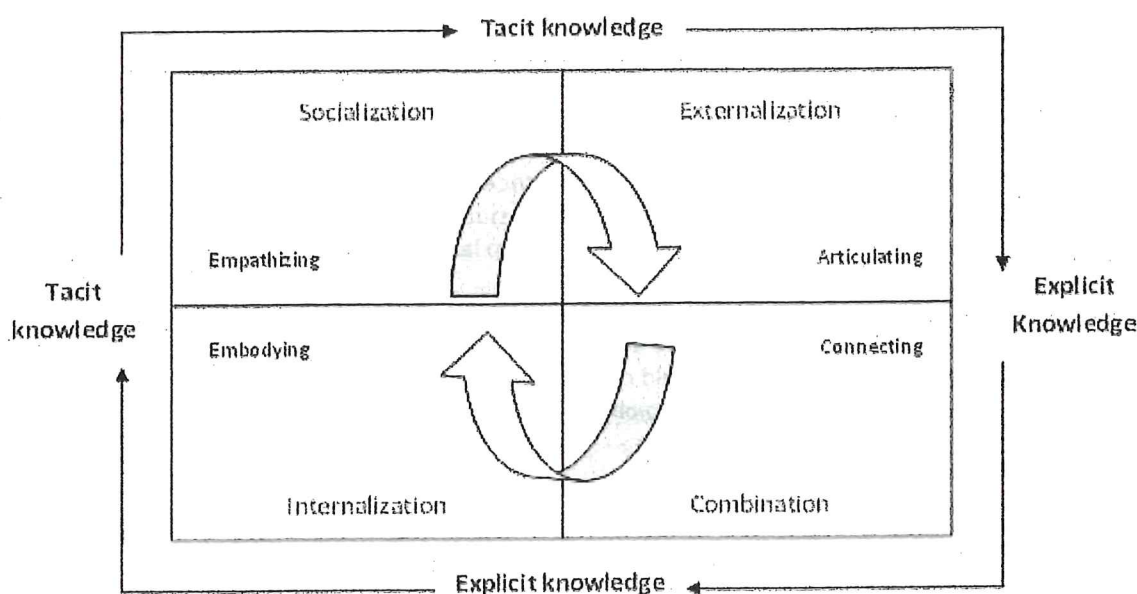
Figure 4: The SECI model (from: https://sites.google.com/site/teacherknowledgeexchange/km-to-promote-learning/strategies-and-models/seci-model-for-knowledge-creation)

It is thus also about making the learning *situated*. By inviting the students to co-produce, and by discussing and also role-playing it is possible to create a learning arena that the students find relevant to their own work-situations. The students will thus form similar to "Communities of Practice"(Lave & Wenger, 1991) in their work with the assignments. Some of the students will be in the inner circle of the sphere of legitimate peripheral participation as they possess more knowledge about a problem and can be viewed as "experts" and some will be in the outskirts of the circle and be what Lave and Wenger may call "novices". This will of course change by the change of topics.

2.1.2 The flipped classroom

The concept of "The Flipped Classroom" (FLGI, 2016)is no longer new, but the development that this paper is exploring, is towards looking at this as a way of bringing the students in as content providers, and how this can support the relevance of the education for their worklife.

The "flip" is thus going from a "lecturing one-to-many" paradigm to a "lecturer as an advisor, facilitator and moderator"-paradigm. Within this process lie the empowerment, reflection processes and encouragement needed to be able to contribute as a student.

The first "flip" in the study program was so successful, that a development of the concept was the next logical step

2.2 The business perspective of educational services

From the perspective of universities as providers of tailored educational services, the relevance for the work life tends to be seen in conjunction with an investment of time and money. In the cases where the employer pays for the education, the expectations towards relevance and learning in the sense of change in behavior are enhanced. From a fiscal point of view, each students' personal mastery is of little relevance. However, knowledge is acquired in order to stay updated with the current research and the recognition of educating the workforce will provide the organization with knowledge that may support an ever ongoing change process to survive in a competitive market.

That the students then can bring the organizations issues and challenges into the education in order to look at possible solutions and ways of e.g. organizing the workflow, the production lines, etc., will support the relevance also for the organization. Facilitating reflection processes in order to support the students development towards

being reflective practitioners (Johns, 2009; Schön, 1987, 1991) is desired as this will support the understanding of what can be best practice for their organization. Optimal use of resources may support the development process needed in order for the organization to stay in a market.

There are expectations from students and employers regarding usefulness for the worklife when the employer is paying for the education. This is supported by students often choosing to write thesis that is related to their own worklife. Some studies are thus tailored for the paying employer. One example is the study "Innovation in public sector" developed for Fagforbundet. In the exam the students are expected to use their own experiences from worklife. This contributes to a learning and use for both student and employer and may be used back in the organization to form new strategies and support double loop learning within the organization.

In fact, when an education is ordered and payed for by the employer, there is a certain expectation of competency building that should support the core activities of the organization. What is ordered, should also be delivered, which means that the education should contain central elements from worklife where the students resource and experiences is maximized in order to obtain maximal learning outcome.

2.3 Facilitating student input

Facilitating the student input thus require an understanding of how adults learn, how one can utilize the students own experiences and how to empower the students in order to be able to share their own experiences. The facilitating can start with an introductory discussion on adult learning, and it is important to obtain a mutual understanding of how the "lecturing" will be undertaken based on this knowledge. The "one-to-many" should be reduced to a minimum. The "one-to-many" lectures can be viewed at home, or in the office, and then the time spent together in the classroom should then be used for individual and mutual reflections, group work and possibly also simulations. Short introductions of different themes can be presented before the class, and then the reflection processes can take place. Based on the students input towards the topic, the lecturer can make assignments based on this input. This can thus be solved in groups similar to Communities of Practice and discussed and played as a role play in a plenary session. The reflection processes during, and also after, is important, as the aim is to make the students learn but also bring the learning back to their organizations. It is important to support their way to becoming *reflective practitioners* (Schön, 1987, 1991).

3. Method of inquiry and data analysis

This paper is based on data collected from field notes and group interviews from two classes, both in the study program "Knowledge Management" at The Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, Rena. The program is a 30 ECT program that is adapted to worklife as it is on half time; 15 study points per semester (as opposed to 30 ECTS on a full time study). The courses are net- and seminar based. There are three seminars during a semester in each course.

There are approximately 70 students enlisted on what we can call "course 1" and approximately 30 on "course two", a total of approximately 100. The seminar attendance is approximately 50 % in average on course 1 and 60-70 % in "course 2". The groups they form in "course 1" consists of between 3 to 5 persons. The groups in "course 2" are from 2 to 4.

In the first seminar they learn not only the curriculum, but also about how adults learn, and about the expectations of their input.

The second seminar is more intense as the students then meet much more prepared, most of them have watched the prerecorded material, and thus it is possible to organize the input into group work and assignments.

The third seminar is similar to the second, but with a summing up and evaluating status of their learning as well as how relevant the discussions, the group work, the lecturing (mini introductions to each theme) and the assignments, and how well all of this have contributed towards their learning outcome.

Interviews are then conducted with groups of students and with individuals (Creswell, 2003; Dalen, 2011; Postholm, 2010). The data from the interviews are categorized and interpreted. Examples of categories are "ability of combining knowledge with work experience", "sharing experiences", "experienced enhanced learning

outcome" and "relevance to own worklife". These categories emerged from the unstructured interviews with the students.

There were also taken field notes during the seminars. These are also a part of the data material.

Member checks (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) have been done in order to secure reliability and validity of the data. The member checking has been in the form of discussing the results from the analysis.

4. Results from analysis

When analyzing the data this is becoming clear that the students, once gotten accustomed to the concept of "flipped classroom" and being contributors, embrace this way of learning. The vast majority claim that sharing and discussing issues from own and others workplace, contribute very positively towards an enhanced learning outcome.

They report on getting progressively better at reflecting and combining knowledge with issues at their own (or others) workplace. Some also claim that they are able to utilize the learning outcome directly in a job situation.

The field notes support their own reflection about their progress as getting the students to share and discuss is easier the second and third seminar. However, this may also be due to the topics that we discuss in the different seminars. The connectedness to each theme may vary. However, the major observation is that the students find it easier over time to share and discuss with peers.

To be able to bring their own issues forward and discuss them with peers is also more and more appreciated as the study program progresses. The students sometimes also want to discuss with the lecturer first in order to get help anonymizing an issue, as this is sometimes difficult. However, sometimes this discussion is taken with peers in the course and then brought up in the plenary session.

The importance of the student input towards the seminars is thus invaluable. Instead of the lecturer spending hours to produce cases, the students provide the content for assignments and group work. It supports the learning outcome and it enhances the relevance of the study program as it provides the students with something that is perceived as useful for their life back in their organizations.

Having the students as co-producers of content has also enhanced the learning and learning opportunities for the lecturers. It enriches the knowledge base of the lecturers to learn about different issues and to assist in the process of combining theory with a solution. It widens the amount of examples and also to facilitate discussions between the students are interesting as similar issues may arise in these discussions.

5. Conclusion and further research

The conclusion from the collected data is relatively unanimous; student content supports an enhanced learning outcome and an increased level of relevance. Flipping the classroom not only support the learning outcome, but it also provide the students with relevant education to use back in their organizations.

The students claim to be able to bring the learning back in their organization and report on the importance both for themselves and their organization.

Also the lecturer learns from the students and is provided with an extended database for discussions and issues tied to the theory being lectured.

5.1 Further research

We will seek to do an investigation with the students' respective organization in order to see how the students organize and utilize their new knowledge back into their organization. This project will also include establishing if and how the organizations utilize their employees' new knowledge.

Even if the organizational development rests on the individuals knowledge and capabilities (Filstad, 2010; Irgens, 2011), there is no guarantee for the knowledge to be utilized by the organization. There are several examples of initiatives of learning activities that had little or no effect on the organization (Filstad, 2010). Some research

claim that internal educational initiatives have better effect with regards to organizational change, than external education (e.g. in universities) (Irgens, 2011). Since this whole undertaking is based on utilizing students own background and experiences from worklife, it is interesting to determine if this adaption to a wider extent than "ordinary" classroom education can contribute towards organizational change or organizational learning.

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