

Group Teaching in *Plenum*: Active Learning in Labour Law

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ABSTRACT: In order to maximize active learning and foster the development of legal skills (e.g. the ability to identify legal questions in practical cases, use relevant legal sources, etc.) we combine elements of group teaching and traditional lecture while in *plenum*. In a class of around 100 students (Labour Law at Bachelor level), subdivided in groups of around six, two lecturers conduct case-based exercises in Mentimeter. The students work with their peers within the groups retrieving and interpreting relevant legal sources and discussing the legal questions related to the cases. The groups send their answers to the main screens (through Mentimeter), so that the lecturers can comment providing instant feedback to the whole class and explain the topics more in depth. When necessary, the lecturers alternate the case-based exercises with traditional explanations, also moving from the difficulties encountered by the students.

This method has many advantages and includes several elements related to active learning: cooperative dynamics within group work; exercises inspired by problem-based learning; retrieving of information; a system in which feedback is constantly given to the whole class and students are involved in the process of peer review, which contribute significantly to the development of feedback literacy; a dynamic and flexible nature that might improve the level of the students' perception of learning. The adoption of a digital tool such as Mentimeter enhances the performance of this model, allowing the activation of the students and improving significantly the pace of the sessions.

This paper presents this approach discussing its main benefits and challenges and the most important aspects emerged during our experience in the current semester (spring 2020).

1 INTRODUCTION

In the Bachelor program in *Administrasjon og ledelse i offentlig virksomhet* (Administration and leadership in the public sector), offered at the Faculty of Social Sciences (SAM) at OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University, students are engaged in a number of different fields, among which legal subjects. In this context, it is extremely important to allow them to improve skills such as the ability to identify the main legal questions in a case, to find and interpret the relevant legal sources, and to apply these in relation to a practical situation (cf. Morris 2007, 284).

In the course *Arbeidsrett* (Labour Law), until last year, we used to divide the teaching activities into two different moments: traditional lectures in plenary, and sessions of group teaching, i.e. seminars in which the lecturer would guide groups of around ten students through the discussion of practical cases. This method worked well, and was appreciated by the students, but it was also challenging in some ways. Firstly, it was possible to organize only a few sessions of group teaching during the semester. In addition, from a pedagogical perspective, students need some time to learn how they are supposed to participate to these sessions. In other words, they need time to understand that their active role is fundamental (Lewis and Frkal 2019): the more sessions of active learning they participate to, the better they become in making these sessions work properly.

This is why *dosent* Gerd Engelsrud and I have explored the possibility to adopt group teaching in plenary this year. The aim is to increase the number of hours and topics in relation to which the students can participate to the process of knowledge acquisition through active-learning exercises (Leigh 2007, 309), making these the core activity of the course. This has been the main strategical goal that we have set this semester (spring 2020) for *Arbeidsrett*, which counts around 100 students. In brief, we adopt regularly case-based exercises designed to foster work within a collaborative process that leads towards a deeper understanding of the subject (cf. Grabinger and Dunlap 1995, 6).

This paper presents our experience. In particular, it describes our method and discusses the benefits and the challenges we have encountered so far.

2 THE METHOD: GROUP TEACHING IN *PLENUM*

We planned sessions of four hours each from January to May 2020 (at the time of writing, nine sessions have been carried out). The students sit together in groups of six, in the same classroom. Of around 100 students, usually between 70 and 80 attends, which means that they normally form between 12 and 14 groups. Both lecturers are together in class, in order to maximize interaction with the students/groups.

The core activity of each session is the work with one or more case-based exercises (we have used mostly Engelsrud 2013). We announce beforehand the main topics of each session, so that the students can prepare themselves, studying in advance the relevant chapters and reading the text of the planned exercises.

In class, we adopt Mentimeter to ask the groups questions on the cases. During the first sessions, we started step by step, asking them to identify the legal issues, find and interpret the relevant legal sources, apply the rules in relation to the practical situations, etc. In this way, they could get used to work with legal method when dealing with sources related to Labour Law. After a few sessions, we started to ask them to discuss the legal issues that arise in the cases more independently.

Each group can send one answer (one computer per group is connected to Mentimeter). Therefore, before answering, the students within the groups have to discuss and agree on the solution. In case of more complex questions, we move around the classroom. Before all have answered, we keep their input hidden. After that, we show in the main screens the answers provided by all groups, so these can be read by the whole class.

By showing the several answers in the main screens we have the opportunity to comment on them, providing instant feedback to the specific groups, while all students benefit from it. When necessary, we use the main points and difficulties encountered by the students to discuss and explain the topics more in depth.

Normally, after the Mentimeter slide that includes the students' answers, we show one or more slides with our suggested solution. These are often the basis for explaining and analysing the relevant legal provisions.

Sometimes we introduce the main topics of the session with a traditional presentation before asking the groups to work with the cases; in other occasions, we start directly with the case-based exercise (and possibly sum up with a general discussion in the end). It happens that in the same session, for different exercises/topics, we adopt different approaches.

3 THE BENEFITS

This method has many advantages and includes several elements related to active learning: cooperative dynamics within group work; exercises inspired by problem-based learning; retrieving of information; a system in which feedback is constantly given to the whole class and students are directly involved in the process of peer review; a dynamic and flexible nature that might improve the level of the students' perception of learning. At the present stage we have already experienced several of these positive effects.

The main goal we had when developing our pedagogical strategy for this semester was to activate the students. From this perspective, we may say that this method has helped significantly to reach this aim. Adopting case-based exercises, the acquisition of knowledge has not been inert and passive. On the contrary, the relationship between the students/groups and the lecturers has been more of a dialogue within which we give significant space for the students' interaction and participation (cf. Skodvin 2016, 147-149).

As described above, our teaching is inspired by problem-based learning. By working with practical legal cases, which involves also research of data (such as legal provisions), not only the students acquire knowledge by experiencing the «joy of discovery» (Whitehead 1929, 2), but they also develop reasoning and problem-solving skills, in line with the learning outcomes described in the course description. This is done within an environment in which cooperation is necessary «from the beginning to the end of the problem-solution process» (Grabinger and Dunlap 1995, 27), and in which the time used in retrieving information is increased. These aspects should make the learning process more effective (cf. Rohrer and Pashler 2010).

Extremely positive has been also the possibility of providing constant feedback. It is accepted that feedback is one of the most important factors in learning (Hattie and Timperley 2007), since it enhances understanding and reduces the gap between desired aims and actual performance. By reviewing together the answers showed in the main screens, it has been possible for us to provide comments to the groups potentially after each question. Often the comment to one specific answer (given by one of the groups) is relevant to other groups that have reasoned in the same way and give us the possibility to address the topics more in depth. In this sense, feedback given to one may benefit the whole class. In addition, we can mention the fact that, working in groups, the students are constantly engaged in an environment of peer review, which helps the development of student feedback literacy (Carless and Boud 2018).

So far, the method suggested has proved to be quite dynamic. Since knowledge is partially delivered in advance (through reading assignments), the sessions can be focused on the application of knowledge – similarly to what happens in flipped-classroom experiences (Cameron and Dickfos 2015, 101). However, we still have room for addressing topics in a more traditional way when necessary. In this sense, the adoption of Mentimeter is beneficial. The possibility of reading all answers in real time allows to assess the level of comprehension of the class and focus on the most problematic aspects immediately after the students have encountered them.

It seems that this flexibility could enhance the students' perception of learning. If students engaged in more practical activities may have a lower perception of learning compared to those who attend traditional lectures (Deslauriers et al. 2019), the alternation between moments of presentation and group exercises could help prevent this effect.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the adoption of a digital tool such as Mentimeter has enhanced the performance of our original idea. Firstly, digital tools that work as clickers may have great benefits in terms of activation of the students (Martyn 2007; Stowell and Nelson 2007). Secondly, they are able to improve significantly the pace of the lecture. We have experienced that Mentimeter allows to shift from group activities to moments of more traditional explanation without any cost in terms of time. Being not only a clicker, but also a presentation tool, Mentimeter is based on slides. It is perfectly possible – and that we have done – to alternate slides that contain questions/answers with traditional explanations. Thus, Mentimeter makes the sessions more flexible, giving added value to the peer discussions around case-based exercises (cf. Martyn 2007, 72). This is in line with the idea according to which such tools have greater positive effects when combined with cooperative learning (cf. Morling et al. 2008, 49).

4 THE CHALLENGES

In implementing this method, we have experienced several benefits, but we have also encountered some challenges.

A first challenge is related to the use of Mentimeter, despite the positive role played by this tool in our pedagogical approach – as described above. We are aware that our strategy and the resulting method should not be identified with the specific digital platform adopted. However, while preparing for the specific sessions, sometimes we have felt obliged to include certain types of questions in order to make the use of Mentimeter work in relation to that specific case-based exercise. Especially in the beginning, it is easy to be dazzled by the digital tool to the detriment of the bigger picture. If, on the one hand, Mentimeter allows a high degree of flexibility that helps achieving the learning outcomes planned for the specific sessions; on the other hand, this flexibility is lost if we are not able to let go the digital tool when the situation suggests that it is time, instead, for a more traditional activity.

Another challenge is the possibility that the very beneficial aspects of active learning might be seen by some students as negative factors. Firstly, the flipped-classroom nature could be limited in practice when part of the class (i.e. some of the members of the groups) does not study beforehand. This would be experienced as negative especially by those students who, on the contrary, prepare themselves before the sessions. Moreover, the discussion-based activities could be seen as less beneficial than a traditional presentation: it is reasonable to assume that some would prefer to listen to the more authoritative explanation given by the lecturer rather than discuss with peers. The model discussed in this paper is designed to be flexible and adapt to different expectations and needs. However, as explained above, it is essential not to fall into the trap of a crystallized approach where the flexibility that allows to shift between exercises and explanation is lost.

In our experience, it seems that the students have been generally satisfied with the manner we have implemented group teaching in plenary this semester – at least this is what emerges from the high level of attendance, for example. However, finding a satisfactory balance between traditional methods and active learning might be a challenge. What should prevail, the well-structured presentation of didactic material that traditional lectures allow (Burgan 2006), or the benefits of active learning through case-based exercises? The safe environment where the students can listen to an expert on the topics, or the benefits of engaging in discussions with peers?

Finally, the physical environment might be a challenge as well. It is extremely important to use a classroom where it is possible to conduct the interactive activities that this strategy entails. Research has shown that the physical environment in which lectures are carried out may influence the achievement of student learning outcomes and that technologically enhanced environments may have positive effects on student learning (Brooks 2011). In our experience, we have used a classroom with enough space for all the groups, which, however, was not specifically designed for active learning. Although it has flat floor, so the desks can be organized in groups, the desks are not meant to be used in groups as we have done; thus, we are obliged to spend extra time to prepare them in advance (e.g. the day before the session). Moreover, only two main screens in the front are available, whereas several screens around the classroom would have been much more effective.

5 CONCLUSION

This paper describes the teaching approach that we have adopted in the course *Arbeidsrett* at OsloMet in spring 2020. This peculiar model is characterized by the combination of elements of group teaching and traditional lecture in *plenum*. Our strategic aim has been to adopt a system that fosters active learning, in order to contribute to the development of legal skills, without losing the possibility to adopt more traditional teaching methods.

It is worth mentioning that implementing this method has required a great effort. Preparing for the sessions takes more time than what is normally needed for a traditional lecture on the same topics, since, in addition to putting together the theoretical material, it is necessary to design the exercises and plan the alternation between the different possible activities. Moreover, this model entails that the direction of the sessions – i.e. the specific topics to be discussed in depth – are not entirely pre-determined, since feedback and explanations are based on the concrete answers provided by the students.

Nevertheless, not only the benefits of active learning are well documented by scholars (see e.g. Freeman et al. 2014; Freeman et al. 2011; Deslauriers et al. 2011; Haak et al. 2011; Michael 2006); but we have already experienced this semester significant positive effects. Although the implementation of this model has presented also some challenges, it is possible to conclude that the further development of this approach is worth pursuing. Overcoming these challenges will be the main strategic goal when developing the sessions for next year.

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