Improving Employability for Students through Co-Creation and External Collaboration: Experiences and Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents how a ninth semester teaching programme created employability skills among students. During the semester, students were expected to collaborate with a company or an organization to solve a task set by the external partner. The students used their academic and analytical skills and competences as a part of working with the 'product' (pitch and report), which they also delivered to the external partners. The students thus gradually became aware of the competences they used. The collaboration with companies and organizations formed part of and was integrated into the courses taught during the semester. The theories, concepts and themes presented in the instruction during the first part of the semester could be used by students in their collaboration with the external partner, both practically and theoretically. Students worked with external partners for six weeks during the second half of the semester.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we examine how employability skills and real-world tasks mutually inform each other in our ninth semester programme called 'Mobility'. We applied problem-based learning (PBL), which is used at Aalborg University, as the main teaching model. Employability skills are inherent in PBL, we argue, because students are in charge of their own learning (Clausen & Andersson; 2019). This semester was offered to students, who,

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for various reasons, were not able to pursue an internship. In the fall of 2018, we introduced new and different teaching initiatives and exam forms during the ninth semester of the master's programme 'Global Refugee Studies' (GRS) at Aalborg University. The semester consisted primarily of Tourism and GRS master's students. We called this programme the 'Mobility' semester to include the themes, cases, concepts and theories reaching across the disciplines of tourism studies and refugee and forced migration studies. The courses are taught in English, and the majority of students who participate are international students. This creates an intercultural and interdisciplinary learning space. The students come from a variety of different bachelor's programmes, but they have followed both the seventh and eighth semesters at Aalborg University during their respective master's programmes. The challenge in the Mobility semester is that the students are expected to co-create (Thøgersen, 2011) when working together to solve tasks using their different disciplines from the humanities and social sciences. It has been a challenge for us as educators to think across and beyond core disciplines and backgrounds and, at the same time, create a common learning-platform that students could use as basis for their collaboration. We created this common platform during the first six weeks of the semester as we are teaching courses and seminars.

In this paper, we discuss a pedagogic challenge: Is it possible to co-create an active and creative learning process in a collaboration between students, lecturers and external partners, in which the students take an active role and the students' academic competences are visible both for the students themselves and for collaborating partners? The partners in our case were a non-governmental organization (NGO), a start-up company and a municipality. During the semester, we chose to highlight what competences students at a master's programme possess during in-class discussions. More specifically, we let students work in groups on tasks and examples from 'real life problems' during the courses. Students thus became aware of their own academic and analytical competences, which they used in the collaboration with stakeholders outside the university. In this way the student becomes aware that he or she brings knowledge and skills to the collaboration with the company or organization. Consequently, the learning process is not only about how a company works, but it is acknowledged that students bring their own knowledge to the collaboration as well. This learning process supports students' employability, because the student gains greater awareness of the competences they bring forth themselves.

METHODS

This paper presents how we designed, executed and reflected on a semester and its learning processes. We taught the semester ourselves. We have chosen to present the programme using our own experiences and building on data from interviews with students during and after the semester. The framework for the semester is PBL (Kolmos

& Holgaard, 2007; Kolmos, Krogh, & Fink, 2004). We worked with a small start-up company for one week at the beginning of the semester to give the students skills to work with an external partner during a longer process of collaboration later on (see model 1). The teaching and learning process during the described semester was dependent on our prospects of adapting to the expectations of the students and the external partner(s). We used situational supervision (Kolmos & Holgaard, 2007), because the class was quite small (17 students) and we were able to collaborate closely with students. This entailed that we continuously evaluate, interview students and collaborate with them to develop our teaching and research.

THE MOBILITY SEMESTER

It has come to our attention that our students have good skills in building arguments and analysing when writing longer papers, but they lack competences in communicating their skills in forms other than written reports. We therefore included seminars facilitated by the Incubators unit[1] at Aalborg University on graphic presentation and how to pitch an idea in three minutes. We also included this idea in a new form of exam, in which students had to pitch a task/idea in collaboration with their external partner as part of the exam. In addition to the pitch, there was a more academic component of the exam, in which students presented theories and concepts relevant to their task. This was discussed with internal and external examiners at the exam. The requirements for the exam were that theories and concepts were chosen closely connected to the pitch. Furthermore, the students were supposed to reflect on their choices during their work during the semester project and pitch in collaboration with the external partner. Students would thus become aware of their own learning process and how they could build competences, which can be used in their professional career after graduation.

We divided the semester into two parts (see table 1 below). During the first six weeks, the students were following three courses, all at the intersection of Tourism and Refugee/Migration studies. The courses were designed as four hours seminars in which we used different types of teaching. We talked over power points (recordings), especially when the topic involved the presentation of theories. We expected students to have listened to the power points before seminars, and we expected that they had read the texts. The students had a very active role during classes. Either they were supposed to work in groups with tasks, which they would then present to the class, or they were given different cases, on which the students worked during the seminars and later presented and discussed with each other in plenum.

	Module 1			Module 2	
Course Seminars	Pilot project with start-up company Pitch to company after one week Students work in groups and everybody works with the same company	Course Seminars	Course exam	Project process Groups collaborate with a company of their own choice	Project exam Pitch as part of the exam
3 weeks	1 week	2 weeks		8 weeks	1 week (January)
	Interviews with students after pilot week			Supervision	Interviews with students after exam

Table 1. Semester overview.

We used cases and/or examples during class to engage students and to enhance critical thinking. We also gave short (maximum 20 minutes) lectures. These lectures aimed to create tools to involve students, for example by posing questions in the last part of the lecture with ideas for the students to work with in groups. The use of recorded power points allowed students to come prepared for class, be active and contribute with their perspectives on topic and theory. They were able to use the concepts they had prepared for in discussing the cases presented during the classes/seminars to create new knowledge and learn from the in-class discussions. Simultaneously, we created a learning space outside the walls of the university in collaboration with the external partners.

To prepare students to work with external partners for a longer period of time, we chose to use one week of the course period (see table 1) to make a more structured process in which students were asked to solve a task for a start-up company. We established contact with the company before the start of the semester and collaborated with the company to create three tasks, which the students had one week to solve in groups. The students presented their tasks to the company, an external evaluator, the lecturers and each other. It ended up being a very compressed process, which was challenging for the students, because there was very little time to prepare the result. On the other hand, our calculation was that this was a valuable preparation for the longer process later in the semester, when students were supposed to initiate a collaboration with an external partner, get an assignment and deliver a result. In the interviews we conducted after the students had presented their pilot-week results, the students expressed frustration because it was difficult for them to figure out what the task was, how they were supposed to solve it and what the company expected of them. It turned out that we had not succeeded in giving the students enough information in preparation for the week and we had not coordinated with the company to agree on expectations. It was rather demanding for the

organizers/teachers to involve a company in the teaching process. Once the collaboration was in process and the students were working with their tasks, however, they ended up being quite content with the results they created and their presentation to the company.

The teacher's lecture became preparation for lectures along with reading texts by flipping the teaching situation (Herreid & Schiller, 2013; Slomanson, 2014). We used 'talking power points', podcasts, videos and policy papers as preparation for physical teaching. The students were supposed to get acquainted with the material before showing up to seminars, so we did not have to spend time introducing theories and cases, but started right away interacting with students during the seminars in which the students were participating in forming the teaching situation. Students 'discovered' new links and contexts, of which they had not been aware before. We introduced the semester very thoroughly to make students aware that they would not benefit from the seminars unless they were engaged and active and came prepared having read/listened to/seen all material before the seminars started. This was probably possible because we taught a small class of 17students, and we could follow them and sense whether they were engaged in the topics. We also experienced that they saw interdisciplinarity as an advantage, coming from different master's programmes.

The students were required to work with an external partner in module 2 (see Table 1). This could be a company, at start-up, municipality or NGO. The students chose their external partner themselves. Before starting module 2, we had made arrangements with three partners: a homeless shelter, a start-up company and an NGO, to give students access to partners. They could also collaborate with a partner of their own choice. It was important that students began their collaboration with the external partners quickly, because they only had eight weeks to complete the report and solve the task set by their partners. The exam consisted of a discussion of the report and a pitch for instructors and external partners based on a solution to the set task.

COLLABORATION WITH EXTERNAL PARTNERS

Working with external partners requires extra efforts from the instructors. As an instructor, you have to create a framework for the collaboration so it becomes manageable for the students to work outside university and lecture rooms. Students are concerned about format and exams, and it is very important that they have all the information they need to create an inspiring process for the students during the rather short amount of time they have for solving tasks, preparing their pitch and writing the report. Working with external partners contributed to giving students a chance to solve tasks meaningful to them. They contributed with their academic knowledge and their experience with project management acquired during their work with other university semester projects written

in groups. We have therefore tried to make it clear to students that they already had competencies that could be used for cooperation with external partners. At the same time, we were careful to brief our external partners about what they could expect from the students.

The students could use the skills acquired from the pilot week working in cooperation with an external partner, as well as knowledge they had obtained in the more theoretical parts of the semester and in the visualization seminars to reach a new level of co-creation (Thøgersen, 2011). They contributed to create new ways of developing a semester project in collaboration with the external partner and many different competences were used. We argue that this contributes to the creation of skills that can be used to create employability.

Our experience shows that students gained a better understanding of their own competencies and skills by working with an external partner. They realized that they could use their knowledge in collaboration with external partners to solve the task on which they were working. Our students cooperated with three types of partners, as mentioned earlier, and they received different tasks, such as suggestion the organization of a human resources department for a start-up, making a promotion video for an NGO and developing a strategy for coastal tourism for a municipality. During the interviews after the exam, the students pointed out that was important to them that we already had put some work into finding interesting and interested partners to work with.

EVALUATION

We have done the Mobility semester four times in the form described in this paper. We have evaluated the experiences over the years with students, both through university evaluation surveys and through interviews with students. From our qualitative interviews with students and external partners, we can see that students have achieved a different degree of engagement in the collaboration with external partners than they had before. One of the reasons for this could be that students were given the opportunity to contribute with solutions that the company needed. We acknowledge that it would have strengthened our paper had we interviewed the participating partners with whom the students collaborated, as this would have informed our arguments claiming that the students contributed with solutions. On the other hand, we saw that students' ideas and solutions were implemented by some of the organizations, such as the municipality who wanted a strategy for coastal tourism.

Another observation from our work in the Mobility semester was that our work with different teaching and learning methods, new formal collaborations with external partners and new exam forms (students are pitching their ides at the exam) created a foundation for reflections. From our qualitative material and from our encounters with students

generally it appeared that they appreciated the initiatives presented at the semester. By changing the format for the exam and connecting directly to the solution of tasks for external partners, students felt a connection between academic and practical work. This is something they can bring with them when leaving university and applying for jobs or presenting ideas in different settings, and it adds to their overall employability.

CONCLUSION

Our point of departure for the work with the ninth semester Mobility programme was whether it was possible to co-create an active and creative learning process among students, instructors and external partners in which students' skills and academic competences became visible for both students and for the collaborating partners. In this paper, we have shown how students have acknowledged new insights into their own skills and competences. They 'discovered' that they have gained knowledge from their university studies that can be applied and used in settings and situations outside the university. This was done, in our case, by working in interdisciplinary groups of students from different study programmes and working with external partners from, in this case, an NGO, a municipality and a start-up company. At the same time, we were able to use our Mobility semester and the students participating in it as data for our own research. The students have, of course, given their consent to be part of our research, which is a longer study of PBL in different settings. We have used our research to implement new initiatives in our teaching in an organic process of testing, adjusting and co-creation with students, and we continue to work with developing new teaching initiatives.

The knowledge and competences that students obtain from participating in the Mobility semester can in many ways be compared to the experiences and skills students who do an internship build. In our programme, we tried to create a semester that gives students who do not (or cannot) pursue an internship the opportunity to work with an external partner. This allows Mobility students to work with an external partner in a process that has some elements of an internship, but in which we combine practical work with more theoretical classes and seminars during the first part of the semester. In our experience, this format is rather demanding of the teachers/instructors, because they have to establish a framework that covers the different parts of the semester, and they have to reach out to external partners to get them onboard in the process. It does, however, create an interesting and inspiring space for learning and teaching for both students and instructors, and once a workable structure has been built, it can be re-used in different forms in future semesters.

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[1] Incubators at AAU is a unit that helps students form their start-up company while studying at the same time.