

TEACHING POLITICAL SCIENCE AS A PROCESS OF COLLECTIVE REASONING: THE MOTIVATIONAL VALUE OF WORKING GROUPS WITHIN AN INTERNATIONAL SETTING

INTRODUCTION: EVOLUTION OF COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES AND TEACHING STRATEGIES

The notion of teaching as one-sided transfer of information is clearly outdated. But what does it imply? What does it mean that “teachers do better to ask good questions rather than to answer questions in a definitive manner” (Friesendorf, 2004: 3)? And how does the shift in teaching strategies relate to the rapid development in communication and computing technologies? In this paper, we try to give at least partial answers to these questions, based on our experience with group work.

We build our argument on a presumption that group work is a potent tool for motivating the students. We also claim it is especially useful in an international setting where it can serve not just the purely educational but also broader social goals. Thirdly, as we have discovered and tested, the new communication and learning management instruments allow all of us to make such an international cooperation a feasible supplement to the more traditional teaching methods.

In our paper, we start with a general evaluation of the means and ends of group work, followed by an assessment of suitability of this teaching strategy. We then continue with an analysis of our empirical experience in the *ForPol Online* seminar, and conclude with an outline of challenges those who decide to utilize group work in their teaching most likely will have to face.

WHY GROUP WORK? MEANS AND ENDS OF COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

We can roughly distinguish between passive and active approaches to learning. While passive approaches assume that students learn by receiving and assimilating knowledge independently from others, active or constructivist approaches presents learning as a social

process (Björck, 2004:25). In this sense, the learner constructs knowledge by formulating ideas into words. These ideas are constructed not only through individual reasoning but in particular through communicative reactions of others. That kind of peer-to-peer interaction, structured within working groups, is known as collaborative learning.¹ This learning approach implies a model of interactive teaching, which differs fundamentally from the traditional one-way knowledge transmission (Harasim, 1990).

Collaborative learning has become an important trend in higher education, mirrored especially in the widespread use of computer-based learning systems (see Koschmann, 1996). But learning within groups is not only a response to the rise of internet-based “network society” (Castells, 1996). It is primarily convincing through its pedagogical effects. As studies show, collaborative learning “tends to increase motivation and satisfaction within the learning process in general” (Björck, 2004:26).

Hereby, we can distinguish between *cognitive*, *psychological-emotional*, and *management-related* effects on students. The *cognitive* effects result from processes of self-explanation, where different knowledgeable members benefit from each other. Collaborative learning also combines various styles of learners, confronting the group members with different perspectives on the same subject (Bremer, 2000)². *Psychological and emotional* effects are expected to create a favourable climate to learning. Working with peers reduces uncertainty, helping to find their way through complex tasks (Harasim, 1990). But it is also a challenge to one’s self-image, forcing to reflect one’s view and role applied in the group. What we call *management-related* effects are social skills which are fundamental for the increasingly team-based professional environment. Within groups, students need to organise their work efficiently and independently from the teacher. They have to fulfil given tasks within a clearly set deadline which trains them to reduce the complexity of facts and to share responsibilities within the group.

But the described model of learning also challenges the role of the teacher. As Carell and Herrmann (2005: 78) state: “Teachers become in that process a facilitator, a coach who carefully prepares and accompanies the process of collaborative learning and who gives feed back”, where necessary. For those who favour the traditional “frontal” approach of teaching, that might be an uncomfortable image. Therefore, let us take a look at what we call “academic cultures”, asking under which conditions it makes sense to implement such a tool.

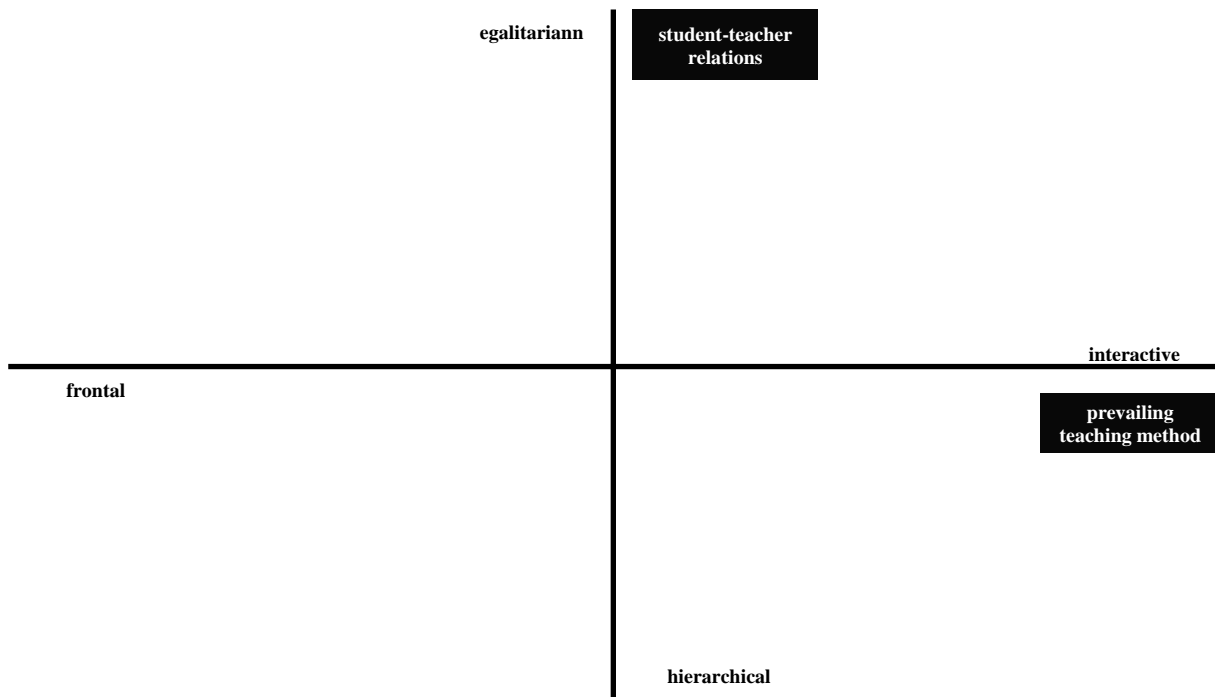
¹ Carell/Herrmann distinguishes between collaborative and cooperative learning. Unlike the latter, the former implies a deeper interrelated and coordinated learning, where communication and discursive reasoning is a core measure for reaching the end of group work. (Carell/Herrmann, 2005: 75)

² See for different styles of learning: Kolb, David, 1985: Learning Style Inventory, Boston: McBer and Company.

PARAMETERS OF ACADEMIC CULTURE

The self-understanding of a university teacher is shaped first of all by his/her individual personality and interests, but also by the academic environment - what we call “academic culture”. As mentioned above, various approaches to learning imply different models of teaching. Despite inter alia the Bologna process, distinct academic cultures resulting from pedagogical traditions but also experiences with political changes at European universities persist and create different environments for teaching. While ignoring structural and financial conditions, we would like to highlight two parameters which we regard as helpful for defining academic cultures and thus for demarcating the space available for the implementation of group work:

Scheme 1: Parameters of academic culture



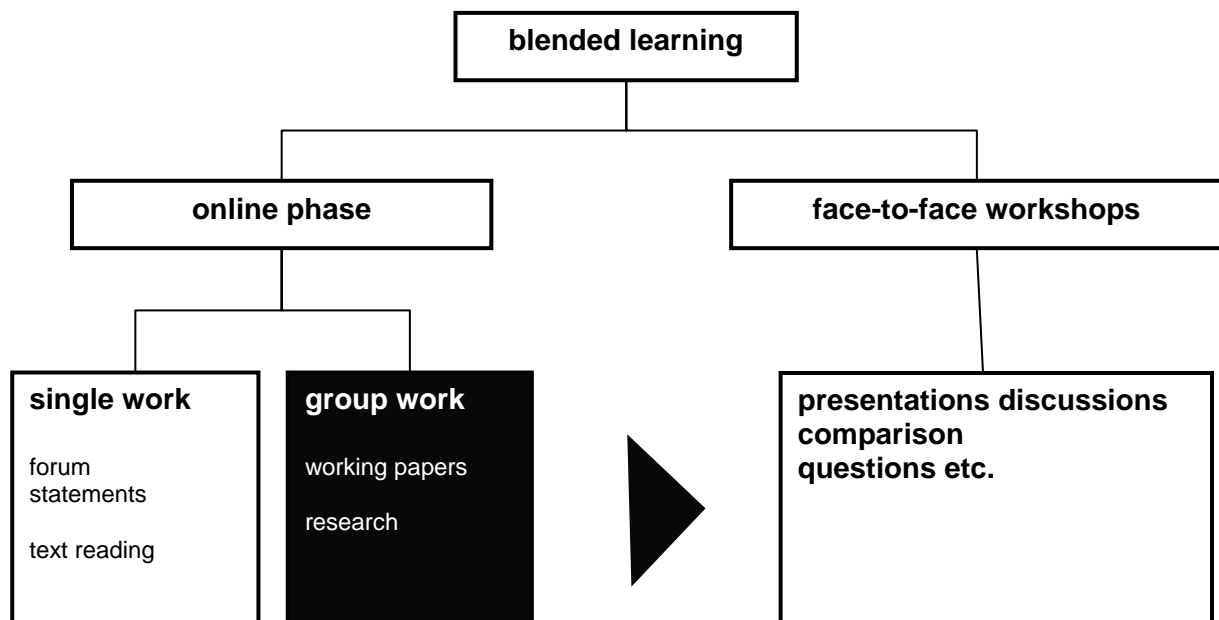
Obviously, the chances for a teacher representing an academic culture with a high degree of frontal teaching and hierarchy to successfully implement collaborative learning are limited. But compromises are possible, as our project illustrates.

FORPOL ONLINE: GROUP WORK WITHIN AN ONLINE INTERNATIONAL SETTING

Resulting from an initiative of young researchers from the IR department of the Dresden University, the seminar *ForPol Online - Foreign Policies in Changing Europe: Poland, Czech Republic and Germany Compared* connected Political Science institutes in Dresden, Prague and Wrocław (with 5 tutors participating in the project). Based on the blended-learning method and using a freeware Learning Management System (LMS), we created tri-national groups out of 30 students. Their task was to analyse different cases of the three states' foreign policies during 1990s: the debate over the EU Constitutional Treaty, relations towards Russia and the Iraq conflict. Online work during four-week modules was supplemented with four face-to-face weekend workshops. English was the working language of the project.

Students worked within the groups in two 'environments', online and face-to-face. Besides the initial steps (reading a text and giving a statement on it in an online forum), students were expected to work as a team (scheme 2).

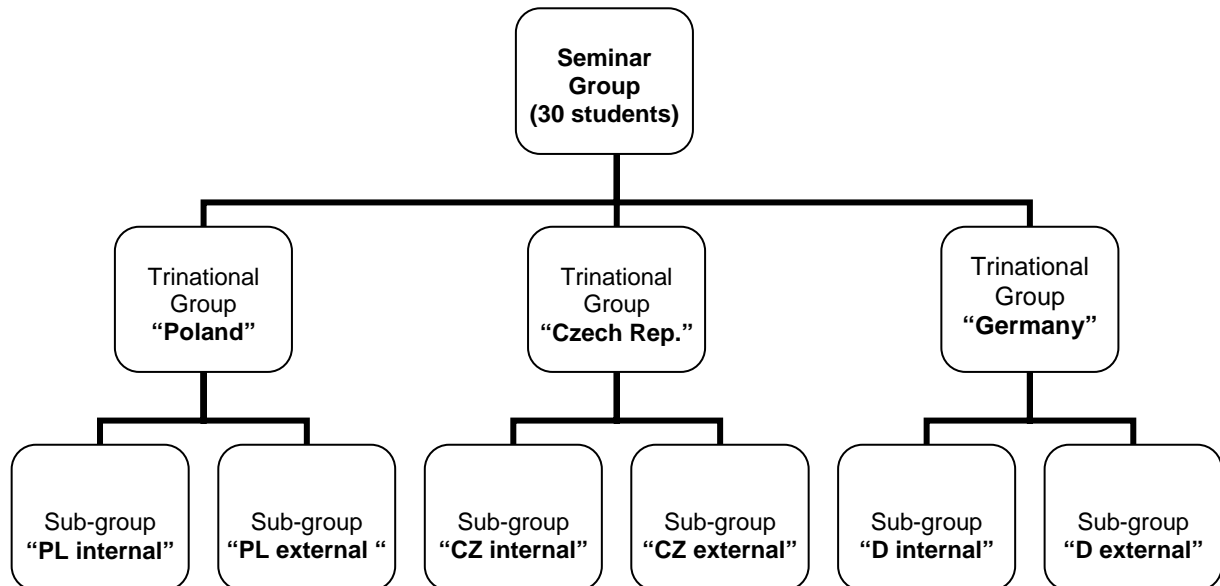
Scheme 2: Group work as a central component of ForPol Online blended-learning concept



The working groups were divided according to the country they focused on, and the factors influencing the foreign policy – either internal or external (scheme 3). There were 5

students in each working group and two tutors (one in the case of Czech Republic) responsible for the two groups analyzing one of the countries.

Scheme 3: Division of working groups in ForPol Online



Students had to organize their work using the communication tools of the LMS. How they would divide the roles within the group (searching for additional literature, looking up and summarizing sources in the national language, actual writing of the final paper etc.) was left up to them. As tutors we could oversee the work of the students by reading their intermediate results as well as by following the debates in the online forums. The final group papers were subsequently presented and debated at the face-to-face workshops, first within the country groups between the external- and internal-factors working groups, subsequently within two formations of the three internal and external working groups.

CHALLENGES OF MANAGING WORKING GROUPS

a) Formulating tasks and guaranteeing knowledge exchange

Because of the online-dimension, we decided to provide the students with a *web-based storyboard*, where tasks, steps and deadlines were precisely formulated per week. This strict formal setting was combined with open research questions, such as which internal factors have influenced the analyzed foreign policy most, according to the group's point of view. As

a result, students were strongly motivated to do further research in order to come to a conclusion. It is obviously impossible to anticipate the results of such “collective reasoning” in detail. We rather expected the students to argue their findings in a scientifically convincing way. In this vein, our role as tutors during the online phases was to provide the students with motivational feedback (“pluses first, minuses second”), making them aware of analytical problems in their intermediate research results.

The final online papers remained uncommented and were supposed to be read by all participants before meeting face-to-face. Thus, at the workshops we had to moderate students’ discussion of their results, ideally in a knowledge-enhancing way. But we also had to point out problems and mistakes. Here the question of different “academic cultures” comes into play: When your role as a teacher does not rely on transferring factual knowledge, are you open to regard the students also as research partners? Will you maintain your unique position as a teacher while offering a fairly liberal approach to learning? And – provided the answer is ‘yes’ in both cases – how do you assess and mark the results of the group work?

b) Providing assessment through group discussion

Nothing releases the tutor from his/her responsibility to assess the students and mark their effort. We conclude, however, that the traditional focus on the results of students’ work is not sufficient for evaluating group work. Rather than inquiring primarily whether students “got the results right” a teacher should first of all assess students’ analytical ability, asking whether they “addressed the problem correctly”.

Moreover, when managing working groups, what matters is not only *what* you assess but also *how* you do it. To use the full potential of the working-groups setting we suggest that instead of “lecturing” the students on their final papers it makes more sense to use a form of guided discussion in which students comment on the results of their colleagues. This provides an opportunity for all students to engage in the process of identifying and correcting mistakes, but also to raise arguments to their defence. The challenge for the tutor is on the one hand to structure and moderate the discussion in such a way that it results in concrete conclusions. Otherwise it might lead to confusion rather than the desired clarification. On the other hand, he or she must still be in a position to assess. That, however, could be challenged by a striking feature that we discovered: the formation and manifestation of a strong group identity.

c) Dealing with “group identity”

Despite meeting their colleagues exclusively online for most of the time, the students in tri-national working groups managed to develop a tangible team spirit. This, indeed, can be regarded as one of the primary motivational advantages of group work in general: At the emotional level of the learning process, it helps to transgress the purely academic world and to create a situation close to what the students will most likely experience in their professional career.

While very helpful in motivating the students, the group identity also caused some problems during the assessment process. Proving correct a well-known Foreign Policy Analysis finding that the more time and effort one spends on a problem, the more he/she is convinced of the clarity and correctness of the results, our students sometimes refused to accept and internalize the critical remarks to their work. The fact their findings had resulted from an intensive process of collective consultation and peer review raised their resistance to external criticism.

CONCLUSION: THE MOTIVATIONAL EFFECTS OF COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

As our experience with *ForPol Online* shows, the approach of collaborative learning motivates students by promoting individual initiative combined with openness to and respect for the work of the others. When supported with the use of IT, it seems to be an ideal tool for teaching in an international setting where it allows utilising the international element to the maximum. However, it is as helpful for supporting locally bound classroom group work (Bremer, 2000).

Whether the concept of collaborative learning succeeds in each particular case depends significantly on a set of parameters we describe as “academic culture”. A tutor interested in using the concept should ask the following questions: How are the tasks formulated? How do groups’ results get discussed and developed? How do I assess the students? But also: Am I prepared for possible resistance against criticism by the working groups? Tackling these challenges should be regarded as the first step which opens the way for a more efficient and fruitful teaching through the use of group work.

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Further information about *ForPol Online*:

http://tu-dresden.de/die_tu_dresden/fakultaeten/philosophische_fakultaet/ifpw/intpol/Projekte/

<http://instituty.fsv.cuni.cz/~karasek>