

Title of example of practice: Quality Enhancement in Literature and Culture Courses

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Institution and initiating department/faculty

(i.e. where example of practice takes/took place):

Uppsala University, Sweden; Umeå University, The Faculty of Arts, Language Studies, Sweden

Departments/faculties in which initiative is/was implemented/to be implemented:

Department of English

Abstract

(QA question: What are/were you trying to do?)

This case study deals with successful attempts to move the focus (at least partly) from the teacher to the student as the provider of knowledge in the classroom in conjunction with integrating the use of the Internet in literature and culture courses in English at two Swedish universities. The study includes examples of tasks and their implementation as well as examples of forms of assessment, all of which can enhance the quality of courses in literature and culture. It also provides illustrations of the different stages in the quality model as presented in the LanQua Toolkit: context, purpose, organization of teaching and learning, review, evaluation of outcomes, and revision.

Background – contextual issues giving rise to the initiative

(QA questions: Why are/were you trying to do it? / What are/were the aims and objectives?)

As both Elisabeth Herion Sarafidis and Erik Löfroth at Uppsala University emphasized, fairly detailed and course-unit specific student evaluations are important in the work to maintain and enhance quality. According to student evaluations three-four years ago, “there should be more happening” in the American Studies courses. One reason for these comments was that there are students from other fields (for example, Political Science and History) taking this type of literature course. The aim of the measures taken to remedy this complaint was to make students more active and committed to what was going on in the classroom and, thus, more satisfied with the course as a whole.

At Umeå University, Karyn Sandström’s partly had similar aims in her attempts to enhance the quality of a culture course that she took over. It is a unit (7.5 ECTS) in the first semester of English both for students who take English as a single-subject course and students within the teaching program. It is called “Samhälls- and Kulturorientering” (Social and Cultural Orientation), and it is divided into two parts: Social Orientation/”Realia” (4.5 ECTS) with half of it dealing with American society and half British society; and Cultural Orientation (3 ECTS), which deals with a number of English-speaking

cultures. When Sandström took over the course unit, she discovered that it was very much centered on printed textbooks and lectures. Her aims were to adapt the course to the needs of the students in the teaching program, to make sure that the course would still work as a complement to the literature course, to move the focus from the teacher as expert to more student-based activities, and to make use of web-based tools and the course web site.

The current economic situation of the English department means that the students taking the course unit come from both the teaching program and English as a single-subject course. This is the background to Sandström's aim to adapt the course to the needs of the students in the teaching program. What we see here is what Ole Helmersen would call an attempt to achieve "fitness for purpose."

The first semester literature course (7.5 ECTS) teaches modern English-language literature from all over the world and its cultural history, so it makes sense that Sandström thought that the Social and Cultural Orientation should have some relevance or relation to that. This awareness meant that she did not want to change the themes of the course unit.

Moving the focus from the teacher as expert to more student-based activities is obviously in line with much of current teaching philosophy: Sandström wanted the students to analyze and draw conclusions on what they saw and read. Another reason for the shift was the anti-American attitude she, as an American, encountered. This meant that she wanted some distance from the persona of the teacher as expert on different societies and cultures. Moreover, in the Culture section of the course one of the aims is to give the students opportunity to practice speaking in English.

Using the Internet and the course web means that it is possible to use original (authentic and current) sources as the basis of the students' analyses, instead or as a complement to a textbook. The web-based tools also mean that students are able to search for information on their own.

Description of activity or initiative

(QA question: How is/was the activity/initiative implemented?)

In order to make the students in the American Studies courses in Uppsala more active in the classroom, and thus enhance the quality of the course, Herion Sarafidis and Löfroth designed report tasks that had to do with history and society in relation to the fiction the students were assigned. This report task quickly "spilled over" to other literature courses, such as the second-semester Twentieth-Century American Literature and Culture course (7 ECTS). In pairs, the students are to present a ten-minute report orally in class. The teachers post suggestions of reliable Internet sources for the report on the course homepage together with the topic. An example from the above mentioned American Literature and Culture course is these two tasks in conjunction with Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*: Report 1 – Give a brief report on the naming of slaves; Report 2 – Give a brief report on the murder of Emmett Till, referred to in ch 3 of Morrison's novel, and of the 16th Street Baptist Church Bombing, referred to in ch 8. In the course description for the American Literature and Culture course it says, under the heading "Assessment," that "Your final grade will be based on an **open book exam** ..., an **oral report**, a brief **written report** ... and a **home essay** on one of two topics."

In Umeå, Sandström looked up the criteria of the Swedish National Agency for Education ("Skolverket"), i.e. she checked what the pupils of the teachers-to-be were supposed to learn in order to make sure that the students in the teaching program would get the background they needed. She also talked to the teachers teaching the literature course.

For the Social Orientation, she realized that it was necessary to keep a textbook – a "goofy" history book on the US and the UK - that give the basic facts about the society in question. The one that is used for the American part is Bryn O'Callaghan's *An Illustrated History of the USA*. She also kept the lecture format, which means that the American part consists of seven lectures: 1) Attitudes; 2) Government part 1; 3) Government part 2; 4) Immigrants and Minorities; 5) African Americans; 6) American Values and Social Class; 7) Regions, Landmarks, Geography. The reasons for keeping the history book and the lecture format are grounded in what the students in the teaching program need

to know in their profession. However, on the course web, she has posted links to articles and other web sites. The students are to read one article posted on this site before each lecture and there are two additional articles per section/lecture that they should read before the test. There are also additional sites on the topic of the lecture. (See also attachment “Society_Realia_Swedencase1”)

Regarding the Cultural Orientation, the purpose is “to learn some new things about some English-speaking cultures and to practice speaking in English.” Here the students are the providers of knowledge through different forms of presentations in groups, and they prepare the assignments by using sites posted on the course homepage and by searching the Internet. These are the assignments: Pop Culture Quiz Assignment; Investigating Trends by Using Statistics; Tourism’s Use of Cultural Stereotypes; Investigating Culture through Laws and Attitudes; Assignment for Books and Cultural Reference; Subcultures through Lyrics; Your Own Topic. (See also attachment “Culture_Sweden_case1”)

Assessment: The students take one test on American society and one on British society (the two parts of the Social Orientation). Here the students can choose between traditional written tests or oral tests in groups of five students. If they choose the oral test, they draw a topic each on which they have to lead the group discussion. All students have to be able to speak competently on all topics to get a pass grade. The only pass grade awarded if they take the oral test is Pass, while it is possible to achieve Pass with Distinction as well as Pass when taking the written test. On the written test, the students write on seven out of ten essay questions. In the Cultural Orientation the final grade is based on continuous assessment of the students’ performance in class and the quality of their assignments.

Evaluative comments

(QA questions: What are/were the outcomes? What is/was the impact? Is/was the activity/initiative successful? How do you know whether or not it works/worked?)

The report tasks used at Uppsala University were and are successful, as evidenced by the spill-over to other courses. There have been no student complaints about them, and the teachers have seen no negative effects. However, they point out that the quality of the reports differs a great deal, which is to be expected: while some of them really add to the classroom dynamic, some reports are less memorable.

The report tasks have enhanced the quality of the course in more than one way. Herion Sarafidis and Löfroth presented the following benefits or outcomes of using it: a) there is an increased student participation in the classroom, moving the focus from the teacher to the students as providers of information; b) the students use modern technology in the sense that they are directed to Internet sources by the teachers (they are also allowed to use other sources than those suggested if they wish); c) the students are “forced” to use the language; d) there is room for student creativity within a given topic.

There is also much to recommend what Sandström has done at Umeå University in developing this course unit on culture and society in English-speaking countries. The current articles and other web sites with authentic material (for example, the Smithsonian Institute on African-American history) are important as they bring life and relevance to the course. That the students can choose between a written and an oral test is also commendable. The discussion format of the oral test appears to be a good idea that could be used in other courses and contexts, too.

The Cultural Orientation is indeed student-based and consists of a number of different assignments, methods, and forms of presentation that give ample room for students’ curiosity and creativity. They are also required to make good use of web-based tools. Sandström mentioned that at the beginning of the course students often do not like to be the providers of information. (On the other hand, they became very argumentative when she gave them answers.) What she has done then is to try to design assignments that step-by-step will help the students to get used to the role of being the provider of information.

Sandström maintained that both of the formats outlined above have worked well.

Advice to others

For the report tasks, Herion Sarafidis and Löfroth pointed out that it is important that the teacher makes sure that the suggested Internet sources are reliable. The teacher also has to check that the sources are still available if s/he assigns the same tasks more than one semester. Moreover, the teacher should give clear instructions on focus, time-limit for presentation, and what the point of the presentation is.

Sandström mentioned two general problems with the student-based approach. One is lazy students who do not do their assignments, which means that they have nothing to contribute to the interaction in the classroom. The solution to this problem is to have the students show their assignments at the door when the class starts, and turn away those who have not brought theirs. (There are make-up assignments for students who miss classes.) Another problem that she has encountered, and which appears to be harder to solve, is that there may be social hierarchies within the group that skew the dynamics when students interact. This problem requires teacher intervention.

It is important that the groups in the Cultural Orientation format are not too large, since the teacher needs to know the names and faces of the students in order for it to work well. Moreover, the noise level needs to be acceptable and the teacher needs to have room to move around. So, there should not be too many students in the room at the same time. About 25 students are the maximum.

The students are dependent on having access to a computer that works with broadband.

The teacher needs to update some of the assignments depending on available technology. (Sandström gives an example when the assignment was to create a radio program, and she discovered that the students did not have to use the language lab but could do as well or better by using their mobile phones.)

Reflection/any other comments

QA question: Is/was that the best way to do it? Why/why not? What improvements or adjustments are needed?

Although the course unit that Sandström developed at Umeå University has worked well, there have been recent discussions about how to combine and develop the elements of it. The core information of the lectures is to be put on line, especially since there are students who cannot follow what is said in the lectures, and the course is to be spread out over the whole semester. There are plans to create small seminar groups in which the students taking English as a single-subject course are supposed to apply what they have learned from the lectures and the students in the teaching programs will discuss how they can use the information to plan their own classes.

Further details

e.g. web links; relevant references/publications; alternative contact names [OPTIONAL]

The two universities, Uppsala and Umeå University, were singled out (together with Göteborg University) as particularly good in the field of English by "Högskoleverket" (The National Agency of HE) based on the evaluation of the subject in 2004. These evaluations are the motivation behind the interviews conducted by me during the spring term of 2009 with questions focused on issues of quality enhancement in literature and culture courses and programs.

The case study is based on interviews with one teacher at Umeå University and two teachers (both with a Ph.D. in English, with a specialization in American Literature) at Uppsala University. In addition to the interviews, the case study includes references to student evaluation forms that Elisabeth Herion Sarafidis kindly sent to me by e-mail and material obtained from Uppsala University's English department's web site. I have also used Umeå University's course web to access material about the courses, and Karyn Sandström kindly sent me instructions, hand-outs, and examples of assignments by mail.

Uppsala University:

The English department's web site is a rich source of information (in English):

<http://www.engelska.uu.se/undergrad.page.html>

Second-term (B-level) Twentieth-Century American Literature and Culture:

General Information: <http://www.engelska.uu.se/b.amlit.20th.general.html>

Report Topics: <http://www.engelska.uu.se/b.amlit.20th.reports.html>

Exam Information: <http://www.engelska.uu.se/b.amlit.examinfo.html>

There are also two attachments that may be of interest, since they are examples of student evaluation forms for specific courses:

- 1) Student evaluation form for the second-semester American Literature and Culture course: attachment “_BALK_h07_eval_eng”
- 2) Student evaluation of a literary Master's course: attachment “_evaluation_MA_h08”

Umeå University:

There are two Pdf attachments submitted with this case study: Culture_Sweden_case1 and Society_Realia_Swedencase1. The first one (“Culture”) contains the hand-out with descriptions of assignments and a print-out from the course web. The second one (“Society”) is a print-out from the course web on the American section of the Social Orientation, which gives an overview of the kind of material posted on this page.