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## DEALING WITH HETEROGENEOUS GROUPS

**Abstract:** All the individual differences between the students are not a hindrance to the learning process. Different personalities, preferences and characters also contribute to the fact that group learning becomes a mutually fruitful experience and a satisfactory interaction with other people. The teacher, however, is expected to pay special attention to learning difficulties, mistakes and performance anxiety, as students with these symptoms need individual support from the teacher.

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Some people are faster, others are slower. This is true for eating, walking, deciding, thinking and for almost everything in life. This fact has a positive effect in two directions: it stimulates competition and it enables mutual support. Different tempos are not a problem for individual work. Here, everyone can work as fast as he/she can.

### Competition

The impulse to be better or faster than the others is a big motivator while learning. Wherever the conditions for competition are fair, everyone has fun and is curious to see what the others have done. Hence, you can use competition when everyone can contribute something. It is even less of a problem when you allow groups to compete against each other.[5]

Organise competition either when the students can prepare for it, in terms of an assessment, or when experience or creativity are needed rather than knowledge. Typical competitive situations in the class are: brainstorming, a quiz, looking for solutions in groups with a subsequent presentation, and creativity exercises. Using the methods in Chapter 7, you can find other ways to use competition in a playful manner under “sandwiched exercise”, “small text exercises” and the “cards method”[1].

### Mutual support

According to learning theory, a subject matter can be mastered only when it can be imparted to others. This fact corresponds with the experience of most students. With appropriate instructions, they will be willing to mutually support each other.

Mutual coaching and explaining works best when working in pairs or in small groups. Case studies can be resolved well in heterogeneous groups. The project teaching approach is especially suitable for mutual support. In this case, the students are given a complex problem. To solve this problem they must first collect information, discuss solutions and decide on an approach before they can come up with the product. Thus, the different skills of the entire group will be used. In order to work on a project, one needs four teaching sessions if possible. Shorter teaching sequences are often unproductive.[3]

Complicated theoretical aspects can sometimes be explained by two to three students in an abstract form, which gives the ones who are slower the opportunity to understand one of the several explanations.

### Individual work / exercises

If you have subject matter that needs to be tackled practically, it is relatively easy for you to work at different tempos. This is especially true while acquiring software know-how on the PC. There are hardly any good reasons in this case to work in a classroom setting. It is better to provide the students with as

many exercises as possible. Ensure that the students get the opportunity to try out new things and to come to a conclusion by themselves. Ensure that adequate aids like documents and exercises which are meaningfully, clearly structured are made available. The exercises should be practically relevant and their difficulty level should be appropriate.[2]

But even in the case of theoretical topics, the different working tempo can be used for individual work or for work in groups.

Prepare the exercises in such a manner that even the weakest can complete them. This is the obligatory part for everybody and should be enough for meeting the learning objectives. There are additional exercises for those who are faster, which consolidate or differentiate what they have learned. The exercise may also be of different levels of perfection: whereas the ones who are slower work on a minimum solution, the ones who are faster can comment on the same exercise, enhance it or develop the solution. This gives those who are faster an opportunity to go beyond what is required by the subject matter.

With these different learning tempos, always ensure that even the slowest ones meet the learning objectives. To do this, you will really have to slow down to the absolute minimum and distinguish between the mandatory and optional contents. Make your time schedule clear. Otherwise, the ones who are slow will be under time pressure and the ones who are faster will start worrying about whether there is enough time for the remaining topics.[4]

#### Tips for preparing the exercises

The workshop teaching approach is especially well suited to heterogeneous groups. Here, the students go to the task; the task is not brought to their seats in the classroom. It is like in a carpenter's workshop: you go to the mill for sawing, to the grinding machine for grinding and to the spraying booth for spraying. In workshop-teaching, different tasks are prepared at different stations. This enables the tasks, the sequence of the tasks and self-assessment to be chosen freely. Workshops can also be organised for small groups. There is a lot of preparatory work even here (e.g. preparing the series of exercises), but the learning effect is correspondingly higher than in conventional teaching. For the workshop itself, two sessions should be available excluding the introduction to the workshop and a subsequent assessment or consolidation.

#### Different levels of prior knowledge

The fact that the students have different levels of knowledge about the topic is quite a normal situation in the classroom. Although attempts have been made to form groups with homogeneous knowledge levels with the help of grading tests and preparatory courses, heterogeneity cannot be avoided. Instead of starting a lecture from first principles, it is better for the teacher to compile existing knowledge. In doing so, it is important to record whatever is compiled, perhaps using mindmaps on large sheets of paper, cards on a pinboard or OHP transparencies. The teacher can then make specific adjustments or additions and go into depth without boring anyone. This approach is shown for every new topic, and it is described in detail in Chapter 9 under the heading "moderation". The individual level of knowledge can be captured quickly using multiple-choice questions. Such a test can be carried out even before the course, which gives the teacher an insight into the level of knowledge of the target group, and he/she can specifically prepare the classroom sessions accordingly, right from the beginning.

#### Different experiences

Every student has had his/her own experiences and has developed a personal mindset and feelings about the topic. These different experiences can be exchanged in groups or can be systematically introduced in the course as different perspectives. A lack of experience or very different experiences among those in the professional field can make it difficult to open up the topic. If the teacher cannot build on practical experience in the professional field because the participants do not have any experience yet, he/she will resort to using analogies and generally understandable comparisons or

processes, because it is almost always possible to make links to existing common knowledge. In such cases, films, anecdotes or simple case studies offer good possibilities.

### Gender mainstreaming and diversity

Gender mainstreaming in education implies considering gender equality aspects from the beginning while planning and preparing the course and taking responsibility for its implementation. Gender mainstreaming is based on the fact that men and women come across different living conditions and opportunities due to their social and cultural gender roles in society. These gender roles as assigned by society can be shaped and changed. Teachers would do well here to reflect on their own presumptions time and again. One's own notion as to how men and women should behave has a direct impact on what happens in the classroom. Depending on how one confronts dominating behaviour, aggressive behaviour, self-confidence ortendencies towards withdrawal and thoughtfulness, the student will respond differently to these behaviours, depending on their gender.

It is advisable for teachers to choose interventions to reduce behaviour that tends towards dominance, hierarchy or aggression, while cultivating empathy at the same time. In the case of students with low levels of self-confidence and assertiveness, a competitive spirit, management skills and self-confidence as well as intuitive and holistic problem-solving behaviour should in fact be strengthened and made visible.

This is not about gender-specific choices, but about highlighting the aspects that connect the genders and providing cross-gender choices and tasks. The objective is for all participants to come across educational arrangements that allow them to learn in the best way.

“Diversity” refers to the variety or dissimilarities in a group of people with regard to differences that can be externally seen, like gender, ethnicity, age and disability, and other differences such as religion, philosophy, social origin, sexual orientation, lifestyle, migrational background, professional group or capability. Diversity management is a management concept which consciously uses the dissimilarity of group members for collaborating and promoting a group atmosphere. The objective is the equality of minorities with regard to recruitment, encouragement and reward.

The teacher can do a lot to ensure that the learning atmosphere is good and that all the participants are capable of learning and working and remain so. The first step is to recognise one's responsibility in this regard and not to think of teaching as just conveying knowledge, but also as coaching and supervising. Recognising the present phase in which a group finds itself, as well as having an idea of the abilities of the various group members, are essential to maintaining adaptability among a heterogeneous group from start to finish.

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