

Chapter 10

From Online Role–Play to Written Argumentation: Using Blended Learning in Lessons on Social Issues

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on a teaching experiment conducted during a blended learning course in social work in a Finnish university of applied sciences (polytechnic). The aim was to investigate how students' multidimensional understanding of social problems could be fostered. As argumentative methods, the study used writing tasks, online role-play, and drama work. The data consisted of essays written by 65 students (experimental group 29; controls 36) in each of three phases, plus online discussions. The essays were based on 1) the students' personal experiences, 2) general facts, and 3) a fictional case taken from the online role-play. Varying the focus of the writing task affected students' standpoints on the effects of adolescents' intoxicant use on their well-being. Moreover, the use of argumentative methods applied in the blended learning environment both broadened and deepened the students' argumentation, helping them to understand the diverse nature of an ill-structured problem.

INTRODUCTION

According to the Pisa study (OECD, 2006), Finnish schools have shown good learning results. Nevertheless, social problems such as bullying are

common in Finnish schools (National Institute for Health and Welfare, 2008). Thus, it is important to develop suitable methods for teaching problem-solving skills related to social issues.

As well as teachers, there are various professionals working on social issues in Finnish schools. Youth educators and social workers, for example,

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often co-operate with teachers on issues that are of social, educational and mental concern to adolescents. Social pedagogical work of this kind (see Hämäläinen, 2003; Blatchford, Kutnick, Baires, & Galton, 2003) has many similarities with the work of guidance counselors (see Peavy, 1997, pp. 19–25; Borgen & Hiebert, 2006). The aim in social pedagogies is like the aim of guidance counselors, namely to help students to manage in their lives, both at present and in the future.

Also school teachers encounter a variety of social problems in their work. The ability to understand social questions from different viewpoints (e.g. those of a client and relevant stakeholders) is thus essential. Moreover, working with adolescents often requires engagement in critical debate. In the present study, we developed methods that we considered suitable for the education of professionals in the youth education field. It should be noted that even if they were planned for future social workers and youth counselors, the methods presented here can be applied in teacher education, and at elementary and high school level. The methods were applied in a teaching experiment in which online and face-to-face learning environments were integrated.

BACKGROUND

Argumentation in the Study of Social Issues

Argumentation can be characterized as verbal, social, and rational interaction, aimed at justifying or disproving a given standpoint. When one is studying social issues, argumentation can be seen to have a two-fold character: it is learning *to* debate, i.e. learning argumentation skills in order to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and also learning *from* debate, i.e. learning content through an argumentative debate (see Andriessen, Baker, & Suthers, 2003; von Aufschnaiter, Erduran, Osborne, & Simon, 2008). Learning *to* debate

is valuable when, for example, teachers discuss intoxicant issues with young people. On the other hand, learning *from* debate may help students to achieve a deeper understanding of social problems (see Andriessen, Baker, & Suthers, 2003).

Logical structures are important, since they embody the characteristics of good argumentation, that is, argumentation that includes at least a claim and grounds (see Toulmin, 1958). In informal reasoning, evidence for a claim is generated and evaluated in cases where information is unclear or problems are ill-structured (Means & Voss, 1996). In everyday argumentation, in addition to knowledge, people also utilize values when making decisions (Kolstø, 2006). Professionals working with adolescents often have to deal with ill-structured problems. The solutions to these are frequently unpredictable, and contain many alternatives (Jonassen, 1997). This means that logical models of argumentation alone are not enough; indeed, they may be unsuitable in a good deal of informal everyday reasoning.

Supporting Multidimensional Thinking by Argumentation

Collaborative argumentation is a means to deepen independent critical thinking and multidimensional understanding. It requires elaboration, reasoning and reflection as well as social and collaborative skills (Andriessen, Baker, & Suthers, 2003). In collaborative learning through argumentation, participants try to solve a conflict by debate in order to construct knowledge and to understand different viewpoints (Andriessen, 2002, pp. 443–444). Laurinen and Marttunen (2007) define collaborative argumentation as a learning situation in which learners seek together to understand the core issues of a topic, by co-examining different standpoints, arguments, and counter-arguments. Developed argumentation requires counter-arguments (von Aufschnaiter, Erduran, Osborne, & Simon, 2008; Kuhn, 1991; Osborne, Erduran, & Simon, 2004). The critical evaluation of alternative standpoints is a step towards critical thinking and an understanding

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