Memory Work as a methodology for evaluating learning in online environments

Line Palle Andersen

Abstract— **At a Danish University College we arranged one week of online teaching during each of three consecutive semesters where students in groups had to design their own learning programme based on online educational resources. Frigga Haug's methodology Memory Work was adjusted to classroom teaching and used to obtain an understanding of students' online learning and to work out advice that was passed on to next semester's students, resulting in increased learning.**

Index Terms— **Memory Work, Online learning, Online educational resources**

I. INTRODUCTION

AT Copenhagen University College in Denmark we have experimented with a week of teaching online only. Students work in groups and are only allowed to meet using online tools such as Skype, Google Hangout, Facetime or the like. Their task is to compose and follow their own 15 to 20 hour learning plan about economy and budgeting, only using online educational resources, e.g. MOOCs (Mass Open Online Courses) and OERs (Open Educational Resources). The teacher is available daily for online feedback, but otherwise students are left on their own to select the relevant courses, videos and supplementary learning material. By the end of the week, students present their learning plan in class and explain what these particular resources have taught them and why they selected them.

The main aim of the week of online learning is that students, as an essential part of their lifelong learning, begin to learn how to navigate in an environment of infinite educational resources on the web.

We can determine that students learn less online in comparison with classroom teaching. However, there is surprisingly little research about learning in online environments. I understood from the beginning that it would be impossible to formulate interview questions or a questionnaire that would encompass the problem satisfactorily. In addition, I wanted students to benefit from the experiences of the previous groups, so the obstacles that one class had been facing and how they had dealt with them would be passed on to the students the following semester. My solution was Frigga Haug's methodology Memory Work (MW), which I adjusted to the context of classroom teaching.

In MW students are asked to select a memory/story and

write it down in the third person as this creates a distance to their experience and results in a more emancipated writing style. They are requested to describe a scene or experience – not write an autobiography. I added an element to Haug's method, namely that the students hav to write about a memory from the online class and they are encouraged to write in detail (places, feelings, sensations, etc.), but not to analyse or explain. Based on their stories, I obtain inside knowledge of their challenges and obstacles.

When I read the MW, I select the issues that are frequently recurring as well as ambiguities that need clarification and these are discussed in class. Their (anonymous) experiences and advice are passed on to the students the following semester. Their presentations and learning plans reveal a considerable increase in their learning.

II. INTRODUCTION TO FRIGGA HAUG'S MEMORY WORK

A. Adapting Haug's Memory Work

MW is a social constructivist and feminist research method developed by Frigga Haug, who wanted to explore *the process whereby individuals construct themselves into existing social relations* [1]. The usual approach is to make participants write 1½-2 pages of diary notes based on an introductory presentation that sets the framework for the MW. Participants are then given access to the MW of the rest of the class and selected texts are discussed and interpreted together using e.g. the actant model as a starting point.

Haug's intention was to create a methodology that involved and gave women's everyday experience a status in research (Haug et al,. 1987, pp 43-44). When everybody participates in the interpretation of the research data, participants become both researchers and informants. Consequently, the traditional distinction in research work between subject and object is eliminated [1].

I adapted Haug's methodology in the following ways:

1. Students must choose a memory from their online week where Haug works with more distant memories [2]. However, they have to submit their MW two days after finishing, so memories of the week are still present and what they consider important from that week will have had an influence upon what they have learned and why.

2. Haug is interpreting data together with the participants whereas I pinpoint elements from the MW in advance. I do so, because I get the general picture when reading all the MW, but I interfere as little as possible in the discussion – only asking questions to clarify the issues – not interpreting on behalf of the students.

3. Haug based her groups upon voluntary participants who in collaboration decided what to write about [2]. As a teacher, I confine the subject to relate to the virtual week and writing a MW is a precondition for sitting the concluding exam. Both underline a power relation between the students and myself, which it was one of Haug's intentions to eliminate. The power relation is further underlined because I add my pedagogical knowledge to supplement the advice passed on to the students the following semester.

III. THE CHALLENGES OF ONLINE LEARNING

A. Zero Hour – Technical difficulties are a permanent – not a temporary – challenge

Based on my own experience I asked students to consider technical obstacles a permanent not a temporary condition of online working. When they had an online meeting they had to be available 5-10 minutes before. All groups took this advice to heart and some expressed in the MW discussion that it was also a condition of meetings in real life- You had to be present 10 min ahead if you wanted to start on time.

B. First semester – The challenge of procrastination and lack of professional foundation

Procrastination was the dominating MW issue the first semester. Though they began the day by appreciating the freedom of waking up late and meet online while they ate their breakfast, it very quickly became a challenge to concentrate and they kept doing extracurricular activities.

The warning about procrastination was passed on to the students of the second semester and they responded by having shorter and more frequent meetings. Usually they would select a moderator and a note-keeper and make clear agreements about the tasks that each group member had to complete before the next meeting.

A second issue was the missing basic knowledge about economy, which made it more difficult to navigate in the endless educational resources related to the topic. Students suggested an introduction to basic economy in class to familiarise them with standard terms and the most widely used economic theories relevant to them. Next semester we did so.

C. Second semester – The challenge of insecurity

The second semester's presentations and learning programmes revealed a more thorough understanding of the subjects, the programmes were more varied and the choice of educational resources more well founded.

Whereas the MW of the first semester revealed a diffuse frustration about online learning, the MW of the second semester defined it more clearly. Aspects of "Insecurity" were a recurring issue. Were they capable of selecting the right MOOCs? Did they learn what was necessary? At class they talked about missing the teacher telling them what to study. The following semester, I meta-communicated about differences between classroom teaching and lifelong learning where you are left to set up your own learning objectives and select the relevant educational resources, but also being the only one to validate them. The classroom teaching that initiated the online learning week included a hidden agenda about creating a comfort zone around the students and making them feel confident about their ability to define and meet their own learning objectives.

Procrastination was still a problem, but much less so than in the first semester. Groups would have shorter, but more frequent meetings. Others arranged something social in the afternoon, making it less challenging working on your own during the day.

Third semester's students made another learning leap – especially because of their definition, discussion and evaluation of their learning objectives that also made the learning programmes of each group vary considerably.

IV. EVALUATION OF HAUG'S METHODOLOGY

I have adapted Haug's MW to classroom teaching with the power relations that it implies. I minimised my influence upon student discussion and interpretation of their experiences of learning online, but have supplemented with my pedagogical knowledge when transferring experience and advice to the following semester's students.

Over three semesters student learning has improved considerably based on the same task, but with increasingly more specific advice about how to deal with the particular challenges of online learning.

MW has given me valuable insights into students' experience of online learning, which has made is possible for me to improve both the teaching and learning in collaboration with the students in a way that would never have been possible using more traditional evaluation methods.

REFERENCES

[1] F. Haug, B. Nemitz, R. Prinz, N. Räthzel, M. Scheu and C. Thomas, "Female Sexualization: A Collective Work of Memory" (E. Carter, Trans.). London: Verso, 1987, pp. 33-72.

[2] F. Haug, "Memory-work as a Method of Social Science Research: A Detailed Rendering of Memory-Work Method". Available: http://www.friggahaug.inkrit.de/documents/memorywork-researchguidei7.pdf, pp. 1-29.