



Background

Higher education traditionally emphasizes teaching knowledge and methodical skills. In the last few years however a „shift from teaching to learning“ (Rohr, Ouden & Rottlaender, 2016, p. 140) is notable in higher education teaching as well as in the conception of study programs (e.g. competence-orientation). This also involves a new understanding of *what* we teach. Besides teaching a set of subject-specific matters there is a need to teach students competencies and provide assistance in discovering one’s very own skills, resources and competencies as well (Pfäffli, 2015). Those competencies can help achieve general learning outcomes such as self- and social competencies. In addition, these kinds of competencies (e.g. communication skills, perspective-taking, empathic understanding, self-regulation) can promote self-efficacy and enable students to achieve (also self set) goals on their own (Kanning, 2002), or as Maria Montessori put it: Help me to do it myself (Ludwig, 2017). Thus a course at the University of Cologne in cooperation with the “Centre of Advanced Teaching and Learning” (University of Cologne, Faculty of Human Sciences) with a small set of students was established to promote those competencies. The course focused mainly on the students’ already existing resources, skills and competencies (e.g. unrelated to the main subject) and (maybe) developing new ones in order to enable them to write their final thesis (resource oriented approach).

Course structure

The course included 6 sessions (3 hours each) over the course of one semester. It covered three main aspects:

- (1) working techniques (time-, project- and self-management)
- (2) relaxation-techniques (meditation, autogenous training, yoga)
- (3) peer-support (collegial counselling, peer-counselling)

Evaluation methods

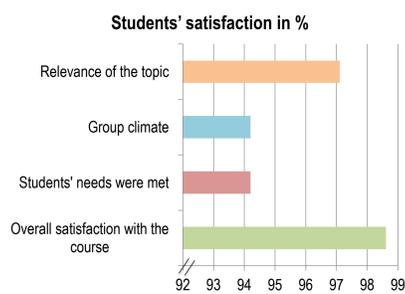
- 4 dimensions to be rated between 1 (very bad) to 10 (excellent).
- open questions: “Which of your expectations were met?”, “Which aspects were helpful for you and why?” or “What did you learn about yourself?”
- “Reflecting Teams” (Andersen et al., 2018) by 3 students after each session
- open discussions within the group towards the end of the course

Findings, evaluation and the role of feedback

The students were asked to evaluate certain aspects of the course on a scale from 1 (very bad) to 10 (excellent) on 4 dimensions:

Final evaluation

All in all the students were quite satisfied with the course as the evaluations of each dimension vary between 7 and 10.



Which aspects of the course were found to be helpful? What did the students learn?

Self-statements

Experiencing connectedness with others

„I am not alone.“, „Others feel like I do.“, „Sharing my experience with others helps me.“, „It is okay to be worried about my thesis.“

Feeling enabled in various ways

„I feel organised.“, „I feel capable to do it on my own.“, „It is okay to stop working from time to time and just relax.“, „I learned how to organise myself more effectively.“, „I learned new techniques.“

Getting to know oneself better

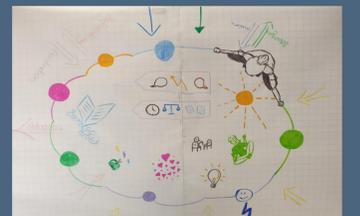
„Structure and continuity are important for me.“, „Relaxation helps me to stay focused.“, „I know my stress patterns and can act on them accordingly.“, „I know how to be organised and relaxed at the same time now.“, „I know when I need a break and it is important to take one.“, „I can feel good about myself even when I’m stressed.“

Is there a link between feedback and social competencies?

The course was designed to include many different forms and times of feedback in each session (e.g. communicating expectations, one-minute-papers, final evaluation). Especially the method ‘Reflecting Team’ (Andersen et al., 2018; Hargen & Schlippe, 2002) which originates from the “Systemic Family Therapy” was used (in an adaptation for a university setting): It describes a structured conversation among selected participants about previously made observations of the learning group. Focusing on feedback and reflection processes with and within the group could support and promote the development of social (and self) competencies such as communication skills, perspective-taking, empathic understanding throughout the course (Dainton, 2018). However, a successful group-reflection process requires successful group formation, trust and cohesion among the participants.

Has there been a successful group building process?

The exercise called “group paints group” in which the students drew their perception of themselves as a group, indicates a successful group building process. It clearly shows how the students understand themselves as one learning group with similar learning goals and providing each other mutual support.



Discussion

The findings indicate that students can profit from courses which target the development of social and self competencies. The students experienced self-efficacy and learned how to deal with study-related challenges as writing their final thesis and were able to successfully transfer their existing competencies to this new area. Students often experience isolation and competition among each other (Bauer, 2019). Promoting self- and social competencies may be one way to help deal with this phenomenon. Those kind of courses can provide a link between learning processes and self-help with regard to study-specific topics and challenges. If we focus on promoting various self- and social competencies, we must ensure that there are sufficient feedback instruments to accompany and monitor those specific learning processes (Dainton, 2018). The effect of promoting self- and social competencies in higher education teaching and learning can also have an impact on an overall societal level. It can encourage an appreciative and empathetic interaction with each other as a community. However there is a need for more similar projects with a higher number of students, which will have to be closely monitored scientifically so their findings can be incorporated into current university didactics and the conception of resource- and competence-oriented study programs.

References (in german)

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