

The Learners' Perspective: Key Factors in the Success of Higher-Level Active Learning

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Introduction

Active learning has recently attracted attention as a way to achieve better learning outcomes in universities (Nemoto & Suzuki, 2008). Active learning is a general term (Bonwell & Eison, 1991), and refers to various learning methods, such as discussion among students, fieldwork, and project-based learning (PBL).

As students, however, we are not adapted to this learning style to achieve optimal learning outcomes. The active learning style is markedly different from the typical class style we experience during high school. We therefore aim to examine aspects of student attitudes that combine beneficially with active learning. This study focuses on the authors' experience of PBL. PBL is considered a manifestation of higher-level active learning; it is also considered to effectively foster problem-solving skills, presentation skills, and cooperation skills. We discuss the effect of students' attitude on students' experience of PBL in light of our analysis of our activities during PBL.

Research Design and Methods

Target Projects

We collected data through interviews in this study. Considering PBL to be a higher-level form of active learning; we therefore interviewed four students (two Japanese and two Korean) who had experienced PBL in their universities. Students were aged 19–22 years.

Two Japanese students participated in the World Youth Meeting (WYM), which was held at Nihon Fukushi University (NFU). The WYM is an international collaborative event (Kageto, 2007); NFU students prepare for and administrate this event under their university's official curriculum. The WYM attracts around 700 participants from within and outside Japan. The WYM focuses on collaborative presentations conducted by combined foreign-Japanese student groups. First- and second-year students act as steering committee members; third-year students, who have experience from two previous years' participation, act as supporters. A preliminary event for Japanese participants is held on a weekend near the end of June; the actual event is held over two days at the beginning of August. Overseas participants stay in Japan for around 10 days.

Two Korean students who participated in the present study attended the International Summer School Buddy Program (ISSBP), which was held at Chonnam National University. ISSBP takes place over four weeks. And it is taught by professors associated with the authors' university and other institutions, who are experts and highly experienced in the most leading-edge areas of knowledge.

Students can take up to two classes worth three credits each, and travel across Korea in the company of international students from up to 20 countries. Participating students are involved in ISSBP for at least one year.

Interviews

We interviewed students regarding their motivation for taking part in ISSBP, and regarding their assessment of team and individual activities. The following is an example of interview questions.

- 1) Why did you participate in the program?
- 2) How did you collaborate with your group members?
- 3) Goals
 - 3-1) What was your goal in this program?
 - 3-2) Did you achieve your goal?
- 4) Experience
 - 4-1) What outcomes did you achieve through your group?
 - 4-2) What were the good points of your group?
 - 4-3) What did you find difficult in the program?
 - 4-4) What should be improved?
- 5) Basic information of program
 - 5-1) What was the program's goal?
 - 5-2) How were participants recruited?
 - 5-3) What were the roles of facilitators and students in the program?
 - 5-4) What was your role in the program?
 - 5-5) What were the program schedule and activities? (Please describe in detail.)

We examined key factors affecting achievement of fulfilling outcomes in active learning in light of the results of these interviews, following Parrish and Wilson (2008), who proposed four factors that improve learning experience.

Results

The following provides a sample of typical answers drawn from interview responses related to students' **motivation for participating in WYM and ISSBP**.

- 1) Why did you participate in the program?
*"I think it is a chance to become friends with overseas students."
"I can study English through speaking with people from other countries."*
- 2) How did you collaborate with your group members?
*"It is important to help each other, as all people have strong and weak points. I think we helped each other well enough."
"It is hard for first-year students to plan what to do by themselves. I therefore shared information as much as possible, to help them understand their tasks."*
- 3-1) What was your goal in this program?
"I was not satisfied with last year's outcome. By preparing more, I wanted to improve the quality of our hosting services for overseas participants. My goal was to exceed last year's outcome."
- 4-2) What were the good points of your group?
*"Even when we faced difficult circumstances, we communicated in a relaxed manner. We kept in touch with each other even after completing the project tasks."
"During preparation for WYM, we created an atmosphere that allowed frank exchange of opinions."*

4-3) What did you find difficult in the program?

"I was sometimes uncertain if I should insist on my opinion or compromise with other group members."

"It was quite difficult to make first-year students concentrate on their work."

5-1) What was the program's goal?

"The goal was to improve knowledge, develop new ways of thinking, and dismantle stereotypes, by talking and exchanging opinions with students from other countries."

Discussion

Parrish and Wilson (2008) proposed four factors that improve the learning experience: intent, presence, openness and trust. The following discussion considers each factor's meaning, and illuminates our analysis of interview results and students' experiences of WYM and ISSBP.

Intent

Active learning is sometimes influenced by teachers' intent; however, quality of learning improves when students bring their own intent to the learning that is undertaken. Intent is similar to the possession of a clear purpose in undertaking the learning activity. As a term, intent includes such concepts as attitude, belief, interest, and group position or role. Students need to understand this concept to actively engage in learning. Both Japanese and Korean students expressed that they decided to join the project and chose their working group of their own initiative; this suggests that these students possessed the intent to participate in the project.

Presence

Students who join programs such as WYM and ISSBP should consider the value of their personal presence in the situation, and maintain awareness of engaging and cooperating with others. Nonetheless, it is important to express one's own opinions in collaborative enterprise. These two modes of thinking produce opportunities for learning. In question 4-2 ("what were your group's good points?"), one student answered "we created an atmosphere that allowed frank exchange of opinions." These students naturally created an environment in which group members were able to talk freely. This suggests that these students were highly present in their group activity, through pursuing a common goal and maintaining awareness of cooperation with others.

Openness

It is important to hold one's own opinions; however, it is also important to attend to the opinions of others. There is no reason to resist changing one's opinion. In interviews, one Japanese student expressed that the WYM's purpose is to allow communication with overseas participants and to dismantle stereotypes. We suggest that this expression indicates this student's openness. This factor is important to fostering personal change. Another student responded: "It is important to help each other, because all people have strong and weak points." This suggests that this student was sufficiently open to allow her weaknesses to be visible to others. Additionally, this open mind may foster trust in others, and mutual understanding between cultures.

Trust

Students must continue to engage in their group and program in the belief that they will obtain good results. If students obtain poor results, students must be provided with encouraging feedback regarding their experience. Students who trust in learning outcomes do not doubt the learning process. Further, programs must foster trust between program participants. In interviews, most students expressed that they needed to be able to trust their fellow group members, and that better results came through greater trust. Developed trust is apparent in the interview response "even when we were facing difficult circumstances, we communicated in a relaxed manner."

In sum, we were able to observe the presence of Parrish and Wilson's four factors in the attitudes of students who participated in the WYM and ISSBP. We therefore consider that these programs constitute

good models of active learning; however, responses indicated that students who participated in these programs for the first time experienced difficulty in realizing intent. One student indicated some new participants did not engage in work voluntarily, due to difficulty conceptualizing their role within the event as a whole. This student indicated that students in this position seemed to regret having made a limited effort at the program's end, and did not obtain satisfaction through the project. This may inhibit the projects' learning outcomes. We consider it a central future challenge regarding these projects to motivate students by describing the overall project in ways that newcomers may understand.

Conclusion

In this paper, we looked at four key factors that promote learning outcomes in active learning through students' experiences of higher-level active learning and PBL: intent, presence, openness, and trust. We found that newcomers sometimes had difficulty apprehending the examined projects' intent. While experienced students were readily able to apprehend the projects' intent by virtue of their previous participation, our analysis suggests that these projects' intent is difficult to understand prior to participation. To promote better learning outcomes through PBL, we would like to pursue means of managing this challenge.

References

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