

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE FRYSLÂN

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STUDENT-LED SESSIONS



EXPERIENCES, BENEFITS & CHALLENGES

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PROJECT DESCRIPTION

As a programme in the newest faculty at the University of Groningen, University College Fryslân (UCF) strives to provide eager and diverse students with inspiring teachers that make use of creative and small-scale teaching methods. One such emerging method is the 'student-led session' model, where students lead classes and are responsible for preparation and discussion. Like any method, it has its advantages and drawbacks.

With this report, we sought to document experiences, with strengths and weaknesses of this unique teaching format, by consulting those who are already developing and exploring it. The aim is to introduce the approach and provide a fuller picture to our community and beyond. We aim to spark discussion and to encourage further developments. Ultimately, we hope to inspire others to be creative and curious and to experiment with student leadership.

OUR GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

- Collect and consolidate insights from teachers
- Collect and consolidate students' perception and experiences
- Communicate and reflect findings to CF staff members
- Encourage more teachers to experiment with student-led sessions



MEMBERS OF STAFF INVOLVED

THREE MEMBERS OF STAFF WERE INTERVIEWED



**DR. SEPIDEH
YOUSEFZADEH**

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR
OF GLOBAL HEALTH

Sepideh employs student-led session formats across her classes. Global Responsibility & Leadership (GRL) students' first encounter with her problem-based learning format in "Introduction to Global Health".



DR. ELENA CAVAGNARO

PROFESSOR OF SUSTAINABILITY
IN HOSPITALITY AND TOURISM
AT NHL STENDEN UAS

Elena primarily employs her student-led sessions in the "Leadership Lab" a Foundations course in the GRL programme that helps students in their personal leadership development .



DR. ANNE BEAULIEU

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF
SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
STUDIES

Anne currently employs student-led sessions in the energy track of the GRL programme at UCF. Students taking growing responsibility to lead sessions in her 200 and 300 level courses.

INTERVIEW

WHAT ARE STUDENT-LED SESSIONS?

Sepideh

In her classes, a problem-based learning approach is applied. This student-centered form of pedagogy requires much involvement by students, both in preparation as well as in the discussion. Prior to a session, students brainstorm, come up with a research question as well as sub-questions that they then take home to work on individually. Once back in the classroom, they discuss the concepts according to these questions, essentially having a structured conversation with each other. She describes this as a collective approach, where students help each other define concepts to create a shared understanding through a wide array of perspectives. Ideally, classes should not comprise more than 15 students.

Elena

Elena applies these sessions at UCF in her leadership lab courses followed in year 2 of Global Responsibility and Leadership. She describes it as a session where students take the chairperson role. As such, the student has an added responsibility to understand assigned literature in more depth, in order to lead and stimulate the discussion to their peers. They also have to be able to conduct and stimulate discussion, and be able to apply time management skills. She emphasises that each session looks different, so having a blueprint beyond this general guidance is not actually required and maintains a creative space.

Anne

Anne applies her student-led session format in her energy courses. It makes up 20-35% of a students' grade. Students work in pairs/small groups (200-level) and individually (300-level). They lead a complete session that encapsulates the theme of that specific week, by using assigned readings and bringing in additional material (a case to analyse, an illustration to explain a concept). Creativity is encouraged and students are given much freedom to take the session into their preferred direction. In the 200-level, every unit of this course starts with a teacher-led, more traditional lecture-style to introduce the basics of the theme, followed by a student-led session.

KEY ELEMENTS

- Student agency
- Class size
- Diversity of thought
- Structured conversation vs. creative freedom

WHAT IS THE MOTIVATION FOR USING THIS TEACHING FORMAT?

Sepideh

She sees the impact: how students are motivated to learn, how they take charge, how they want to build on their knowledge, and how they participate. She expresses the stark difference in engagement between 'just' holding a lecture, and thus gravitates to the student-led session format.

Elena

It is a very appropriate model in the leadership lab, as the core objective is to challenge students to develop their personal leadership. Essentially, taking responsibility for a class also means showing leadership. It gives students an opportunity to be proactive, and display their time-management skills. She described that being a chairperson is the synthesis of the challenges needed to develop one's own leadership qualities.

Anne

One motivation for this model is to encourage students to become responsible for their own learning. Another is to provide an opportunity for students to connect their learning to their own interests and the 'real-world', by being able to choose their own examples and apply the basic concepts to examples of their own choosing.

KEY ELEMENTS

- Leadership qualities
- Engagement

WHAT SKILLS DO STUDENTS NEED TO DO THIS?

Sepideh

Critical thinking and reading skills, communication skills as well as the ability to reflect on each other's contributions in a constructive way. They also need to have the confidence to do the preparation on their own, and to participate in the class discussion.

Elena

Students need several qualities, but most important is to have the perspective that this session is not something that one has to do, but rather something they wish to do for their own leadership development. She stresses the ability to manage time (in preparation for, and during the session) but also listening skills. However, she describes a paradox, whereby the skills a student needs to host a successful session are also the skills that are strengthened throughout the course. This is why these sessions start week 3 of the term,

Anne

One major skill students often carry into the session is the sense of their shared 'level'. With this she means that they are able to fill a gap that exists in more traditional lectures, where it can sometimes be hard for teachers to know at which level of difficulty or complexity to pitch the material. Students know much better what is complex, what needs to be clarified, and what does not, in a way teachers normally do not.

KEY ELEMENTS

- Critical thinking
- Communication
- Listening
- Confidence/Courage
- Respect
- Time management

WHAT DO STUDENTS LEARN?

Sepideh

The skill of reflection is a big part of it. Sepideh has experienced how students come back to her to talk about how a topic appeared in the news or in a book etc. that reminded them of class discussion. In this way, students carry their knowledge and class conversations with them: learning doesn't end when the course does.

Elena

Students may also learn things Elena has not sought out to teach. In their role as chairpersons they can design the class as they wish. Their design can be effective or ineffective in reaching the class goals, but can also lead to unexpected outcomes. During the first cohort of students, ice breakers was a new concept that was not considered before but that is now a core part of the course, after she noticed its impact on group cohesion. Students learn a lot from each other, which is something a teacher cannot always pinpoint or even plan for.

Anne

Students develop presentation, engagement, moderation, and time-management skills. There is also a leadership element, where students get insights into what it's like to manage a group.

KEY ELEMENTS

- Strengthening of skills
- Reflection
- Unplanned, creative outcomes: good and bad

WHAT DO YOU, AS A TEACHER, LEARN?

Sepideh

Patience. She has observed students' Initial frustration. They are used to the banking system of education, where they want to hear everything from the lecturer: the topic, solution, instructions, in a structured and clear manner. She has received criticism for her teaching format because the expectations of students are very different to the reality of her classroom environment.

Elena

Elena expressed that "she has to sit on her hands". She has learnt that she is not a teacher in this format anymore, but a coach. She describes it as an everlasting challenge that requires more than the usual teaching skills, but hopes to continue to improve.

Anne

Humility. Similar to both Sepideh and Elena, Anne emphasizes that it has been important to 'bite her tongue' and learn when to hold back and let students lead independently. She has also learnt new perspectives on topics she teaches, and that students can be better at communicating them - which she can then bring with her in the future.

KEY ELEMENTS

- Patience
- Enrichment from student input

WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE WEAKNESSES, AND HOW CAN THEY BE ADDRESSED?

Sepideh

The biggest weakness is that the limit in class size. The number of students in a class in order to have a successful PBL session should be maximum 15 people. Despite UCF promising students small-scale education, she is finding it challenging to keep this format going. The solution she puts forth is that every 2 weeks a big lecture is held that brings in all students, who are then in the time in between in a smaller PBL session. Student assistants can be employed to help run the PBL sessions. By using this teaching format, you go against the flow (banking system of education) which is a hard fight. Not many other teachers use this approach, which can be both viewed as positive as it increases diversity of teaching to our campus, but it could also be perceived as an inconsistency. A solution would be to expand this form of teaching across areas, and improve the total net benefits.

Elena

Firstly, the quality of the input from the students is not always as high as hoped, due to poor preparation. Grading the preparation may be a natural response, though this would defeat the purpose of taking responsibility for the sake of their own development.

Secondly, one might end up in a situation where the teacher does not stay in the role of the coach, and takes over, which also defeats the objective; students may feel as they don't have to prepare as they can expect the teacher to fill in the gaps. This is why balance in intervention is important.

Thirdly, for a student led session to work well there needs to be bonding among the students and with the lecturer. A weak bond can make it more difficult for the chairperson to keep up intrinsic motivation but also harder for people to discuss and open up, as they may be more scared to make 'mistakes'. The challenge becomes how to enhance this bond, and the size of the group can hinder this process. She describes how as UCF grew, the fragmentation of the class did too.

Anne

Student-led sessions seem more appropriate for smaller groups. She also emphasizes an inherent risk of quality: if one group of students does poorly, the class as a whole may risk missing essential knowledge in part of the course. But so far, the level has been very high and this has not happened. Another point is that not everyone likes it - there is no format that works for everybody.

KEY ELEMENTS

- Balance of intervention
- Class size
- Group bonding
- Going against the norm
- Quality
- Preparation

WHAT TIPS DO YOU HAVE FOR LECTURERS WHO MAY WISH TO USE THIS FORMAT IN THEIR TEACHING?

Sepideh

To risk it, to try it and to just go for it. Do not be afraid to experiment with it, and make it your own: customise to fit your own teaching skills and habits.

Elena

To ask yourself why you wish to do so, and what is the added value for the course you're teaching. Also the challenge of finding a balance between when you should, and should not intervene, all of which is dependent on the 'why'. When the goal of the session is to make sure the students understand a concept, it may be appropriate to step in and correct at certain points. However, in Elena's case, student development is the central component of the session, so then it is not always so appropriate. Her biggest tip is that teachers should follow a coaching course.

Anne

She emphasizes the importance of contracting, similar to Elena's notes on strengthening bonds. For Anne, this means taking the time at the beginning of the courses to discuss what student-led sessions are, and why they are used. Notably, she made it clear that students should be given space to share what they expect and want it to be, that the lecturer should not tell students, but rather ask. This creates shared goals and evaluation criteria. She also asks students to give feedback at the end of each session, which helps improve them as the course goes on.

KEY ELEMENTS

- Risk-taking
- Experimentation
- Creativity
- Balance of intervention
- Coaching
- Contracting
- Feedback

AND... WHAT DO STUDENTS THINK?

8 STUDENTS RESPONDED TO A SHORT SURVEY ON THEIR EXPERIENCE

The response among students is very mixed. All students who responded were either in year 2 or 3 of Global Responsibility and Leadership, and they had all encountered student-led sessions in one form or another before. The courses mentioned were: Behavioural Economics, Qualitative Methods, Leadership Lab, Global Health and Homes and Cars: citizens, technology and the energy transition.

Students have had varied 'types' of student-led sessions. They primarily mention presentations, leading the whole session with a small or the whole class, some more focused on discussion of assigned articles or readings and others on providing and presenting additional literature, but there is also emphasis on varied levels of interactive lectures, where some entailed coming up with exercises.

The highlighted strengths include an active participation and learning process, learning how to work in groups, being able to delve deeper into subjects, as well as the creative aspect where they are independently able to 'invent' new ways to learn and interact with their peers.



"I LIKE THE ACTIVE PARTICIPATION AND THE DEEPER RESEARCH YOU (HAVE TO) DO INTO THE SUBJECT YOU ARE PRESENTING ABOUT"

AND... WHAT DO STUDENTS THINK?



"I DON'T LIKE PRESENTING SO I THOUGHT IT WAS VERY UNCOMFORTABLE"

"STUDENTS ARE NOT LECTURERS"

Students were also asked what they learned. Answers ranged from learning how to set up an engaging lecture, strengthening their independence and responsibility but the most common answer was that “teaching is hard”, communicating an increased respect for their teachers who do this as a job.

There are of course also weaknesses, though they were notably very different. Some students mention that leading an entire class can be too challenging, so they prefer doing it in smaller groups. One mentioned that they felt the quality of the course decreased, as doing 9 assignments with the same group was exhausting. Students who do not enjoy presenting feel uncomfortable learning this way, and several mentioned that it can at times, be boring to be in the audience.

The students were also asked in what ways they believe this form can be improved. These include not using it so often and even getting rid of it. The most common response was giving students more freedom in tailoring the topics and form, but also for the teachers to ensure everyone reads the articles and participates.

CONCLUSION

HOW DO WE MOVE FORWARD?

In conclusion, this overview shows that a more open dialogue between students and lecturers seems as the most adequate next action step. Students either really enjoy or really dislike leading or participating in these kinds of lessons, and it seems to boil down to individual preference. Nonetheless, some students raised important points in how sessions can be improved, especially in providing more creative freedom.

Teachers identified balance as a central element of struggle: knowing when you intervene vs. holding one's tongue becomes both a weakness of the format as much as it can be a useful learning opportunity to develop as a teacher.

Another important element is the class size. As the GRL programme expands, so has the issue of keeping these sessions as beneficial to as many students as possible. Employing student assistants and carrying out student-led sessions in smaller groups acts as one way of mitigating the size issue.

Despite its challenges, student-led sessions seems to be benefitting both students and teachers as long as the fine balance between quality, intervention, preparation, and class-size, can be met. Moreover, although there are similarities across subject areas, we could also identify variation in the creative ways in which teachers centre their students in their lessons. Important to emphasize is that interactive education is not something that is simply an alternative method to the mainstream lecturing. Engaged pedagogy is about assuming that your targets (students) are smart, can think for themselves, are empowered and can (and do) learn a lot of things independently.

Keeping this in mind, lecturers who use or wish to use this format could share their experiences with each other in order to build a strong, shared, resource-base. Colleagues who are curious about this approach can contact any of the teachers interviewed, who would be happy to share experiences and materials.