Online collaboration in teacher education

Some insights from an ongoing trial
The presentation at a glance

Overview

• Where are we from?
• Who are we?
• How did our collaboration start?
• What did we expect?
• What did we actually do?

Dialogue:

• What did we experience?
• What can we conclude so far?
• What are the prospects?

Discussion

• What do you think?
Where are we from?

Germany

→ about 4% of the US area
→ about 25% of the US population
→ highest population and biggest economy in Europe
Where are we from?

Brandenburg

→ one of the sixteen German federal states

→ surrounds (but does not include) the German national capital and city-state Berlin (population of 3.4 million people)
Where are we from?

Potsdam

→ capital city of Brandenburg
→ directly borders the German capital Berlin
→ about 159,000 inhabitants
Where are we from?

University of Potsdam

→ Brandenburg's largest university
→ about 20,000 students overall
→ situated across four campuses
→ about 4,000 students in teacher education programs (2,800 undergraduate, 1,200 graduate)
Who are we?

Dr. Frederik Ahlgrimm

Lecturer in Teacher Education programs at Potsdam University

Scholarly interests:
- Teacher education
- School development and management
- Heterogeneity and Inclusion in education

Prof. Dr. Miriam Vock

Professor

Research Interests:
- Teaching methods and interventions for gifted students
- Heterogeneity and Inclusion in education
- Research on and assessment of Intelligence and competences
### Who are we?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dr. Frederik Ahlgrimm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lecturer in Teacher Education programs at Potsdam University</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scholarly interests:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teacher education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• School development and management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Heterogeneity and Inclusion in education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prof. Dr. Miriam Vock</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Professor</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Research Interests:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teaching methods and interventions for gifted students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Heterogeneity and Inclusion in education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Research on and assessment of Intelligence and competences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Who are we?

SUNY Potsdam

Bill Herman
How did the collaboration start?

- Existing partnership and prior exchanges between the two Potsdams
- Visit of a SUNY delegation in summer 2013
- Individual meeting after the official part
- Regular, weekly Skype meetings (between 60 and 90 minutes)
- Heavy email traffic, including syllabuses, publications, CVs, descriptions of professional obligations and a typical week
The COIL idea

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)

• Model developed at the SUNY Global Center
• Links real classes at different places around the world
• Enhances virtual mobility
• bi-directional interaction at eye-level
• Combines face-to-face sessions with virtual collaboration
• For more information visit coil.suny.edu
### Teacher education at Potsdam University

#### Distribution of Credit Points* in the Teacher Education Programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>courses of study</th>
<th>Bachelors (180 ECTS in 3 years)</th>
<th>Masters (120 ECTS in 2 years)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>main subjects</td>
<td>thesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>elementary</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>elementary (focused on inclusion)</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lower secondary</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>upper secondary</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Credit points are indicative and may vary.**
Observation and student teaching

- **BA (3 years)**
  - Observation in school (2 weeks)
  - non-school internship, working with students (30 hours)
  - student teaching in 1st subject (10 hours)
  - student teaching in 2nd subject (10 hours)

- **MA (2 years)**
  - student teaching and observation (16 weeks)

- **practical teacher training (1.5 years)**
## Classes in teacher education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>“Educational Psychology”</th>
<th>“Introduction to School Pedagogics”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Terms</strong></td>
<td>spring semester (January-May) &amp; fall semester (August-December)</td>
<td>summer semester (April-July) &amp; winter semester (October-February)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Instructional Period</strong></td>
<td>15 weeks</td>
<td>14 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sessions</strong></td>
<td>2 sessions of 75 minutes per week</td>
<td>1 session of 90 minutes per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Class sizes</strong></td>
<td>15-35 students</td>
<td>15-25 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student load</strong></td>
<td>5-6 classes per week, 28-100 pages to be read per week</td>
<td>10-12 (up to 15) classes per week, 15-20 pages to be read per week, followed by a mandatory 2-week observation internship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
<td>organized around a textbook: A. Woolfolk’s “Educational psychology” (1-2 chapters per week)</td>
<td>organized around topics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Examination and assignments** | • four regular m/c examinations  
  • computer assignment  
  • final m/c examination  
  • essay (professional analysis of a classroom scene)  
  • bonus task (brief essay format) | 15 page report after the classroom observation internship |
| **Relation of students and professors** | majority of contacts between students and professors in classes (only occasionally in office hours, etc.) |
Why did we want to give it a try?

- Interested in promoting international education
- Overseas collaboration results in learning about other citizens/cultures of the world and oneself/one’s own culture
- The potential rewards are great based upon personal/professional enrichment, teacher education students becoming more globally oriented, and the ability to sustain and enhance existing partnerships

- Curious of experimenting with this new format
- Always seeking new and exciting ways in teaching
- Personal interest in scholarly work in North American
- International experience for students
- Overlap in scholarly interests of Bill and Frederik
What did we expect from that experiment?

Expectations were low by design during this exploration phase. Learning from educational collaboration is at times frustrating, but always an adventure. The German/English language barrier and alignment of semesters would present hurdles.

Uncertain whether students would sign in for the class. Participants open-minded, with previous international experiences, well acquainted with the English language. After an initiation phase students would exchange online. Questions and discussions would arise from the different local and educational backgrounds.
What did we actually do?

**SUNY Potsdam: Educational Psychology**

**Bill**
- Enrolled all our students on Bill’s Moodle site
- Picture and video of the German class posted on Moodle
- Started online discussions
- Invited colleagues to participate
- Shared learning and evaluation tools
- Had all our students watch and critique the same Hong Kong math lesson

**Uni Potsdam: Einführung Schulpädagogik**

**Frederik**
- Changed syllabus and synchronized topics with Bill’s syllabus in the first half of the semester
- Produced video to introduce the class
- Used Bill’s textbook (English and German) and had students read one chapter (40-50 pages) per week
- Introduced weekly multiple choice tests
- Actively participated in online discussions
The introduction video
What have we experienced?

Some observations

• German students rather easily adapted to the atypical course conditions:
  – reading (and partly speaking) in English language,
  – using a textbook instead of single articles or book chapters,
  – heavier workloads (preparing about 50 pages per week instead of 15-20 which are usually required),
  – weekly tests

• Only very few and only American students actively took part in the online exchange.

• E-mail conversations and weekly video meetings led to an exchange of scholarly interests, discussions about educational issues, and a better understanding of each other’s academic environment.
What did the German students say?

Some quotes from the evaluation

„I thought it was good to read English literature once more as I do not often have the opportunity to do otherwise“

„I liked the textbook very much!“

„A common task [of both classes] would be helpful!“

[...]

What could be reasons for not participating in the online exchange?

„Could not see the necessity and added value for students“

„Not relevant for the grade“

„No feedback /introduction of the American course“

„I cannot tell... but I have read the American students‘ contributions“

“Workload too high, too few time”

“Anxiety of writing in English”

[...]
What have we experienced?

Some preliminary conclusions

• The technical possibility of working together is not sufficient to create collaboration. To foster the students’ online conversation, more precise stimuli are necessary. Expectations must be made more clear, and some reward should be given for online contributions.

• The close collaboration and the need to explain seemingly natural matters to each other helped to understand the other’s reality, and to scrutinize one’s own.

• Without personal contact an online collaboration will hardly evolve and endure.
Conclusions

Students...

... indicate that they are generally interested in the international collaboration,
... did not make much use of the online exchange,
... wish to be introduced to the others,
... need clear expectations and incentives to engage in the online exchange,
... may become more aware of their professional roles as “citizens of the world”

Bill and Frederik...

... put a lot of effort into the project,
... benefited very much from the exchange,
... exchanged ideas and experiences about teaching in teacher education,
... discovered many (surprising) differences and similarities in their professional work,
... discussed scientific topics,
... got to know each other fairly well and became friends
Was that worth it?

**Frederik:**

“I think that students, scholars, and their institutions can learn very much from exchanging, comparing, adapting, experimenting, and reflecting with one another – not in spite of, but because of the differences between them!”

**Bill:**

“Personal and professional growth can lead to later collaboration on scholarly research projects, teaching abroad opportunities, and professional knowledge. This could be called the “internationalizing of the professor.”

**Thus, the resulting answer is: Yes!**
What are the prospects?

It goes on!

- Meeting with Bill Herman in Albany, NY

- 2nd stage of the experiment:
  - two new classes in both Potsdams
  - focus on one topic (student assessment) in one particular week
  - mandatory participation in the online discussion
Thank you for your attention!

In case you wish to learn more about our experiences, please feel free to contact us:

Miriam Vock  
miriam.vock@uni-potsdam.de

Frederik Ahlgrimm  
frederik.ahlgrimm@uni-potsdam.de

William E. Herman  
hermanwe@potsdam.edu