



Surviving As Academic Teacher Without Irl-Students

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Abstract

During recent years, the students taking courses in history at Gotland University have been pretty constant in number. What we have seen is however that we now have almost no students present IRL on campus, but hundreds taking our courses as distance learning. This development is not unique for my discipline - Gotland University has about two thirds of its students taking distance education, never to be seen on campus. For lecturers who had their own basic training in the traditional form of academic teaching, this poses a new challenge and one that can be quite hard to handle. Your role as a teacher is not longer the same, you can't do things like they have always been done and many teachers misses the daily contact with "real students". Working hours have also changed, since students groups are now larger and teachers are expected to be present at their computers also during evenings. In this paper I address some of the challenges we have had to deal with, like how to ensure that we assess the right student, how we manage without traditional seminars, how we try to make our students interact with each other and how we try to preserve the joy of teaching in this new virtual environment.

1. Introduction

Gotland University is, unsurprisingly, located on Gotland, and island in the Baltic Sea. The geographical location, where one is dependent on ferries or planes to travel to and from the island is probably one reason why many of our academic disciplines find it difficult to attract students to campus. Another reason is probably that Gotland is a popular vacation resort where students (and others) find it difficult to find decent accommodation without economic ruin. Whatever the reasons, the fact is that most of our students nowadays are taking courses over the Internet. We never see most of our students in history, and this is also the case in many other disciplines at the university.

I am a firm adherent to Internet based studies. Still – the massive dominance of Internet-based students is also a problem for us. The government dislikes it, claiming that studies over Internet are inefficient (a low rate of students finish their courses) and that they might be insecure in so far that we cannot be sure that we assess and grade the right individual. Teachers have sometimes found it difficult to adapt to the new challenges brought by new forms of teaching, something that is not to be wondered of since the tasks really have changed in many ways.

2. Increasing efficiency

We have a system where the government pays the university a sum for each student that registers on a course. We get another, larger, sum when the students have finished the course. That means that if students register on a course and then never actually attends it; this still cost money for the taxpayers. Efficiency – measured as the put-trough of students – is counted from the number of students registered compared to the number of students who finish the course. Thus having plenty of students that never fulfil the course is something that generally gives us very low grades in national ranking systems. In history the number of registered students actually finishing the courses is as an average at slightly more than 50%. When we had campus students, this number was a lot higher, around 80%.

The problem has to do with student behaviour – since many presumptive students are not quite sure weather they will study or work, they apply for a number of courses just in case. There are also students who cannot decide what course suits them best, and thus apply for several courses, planning to decide when the term starts.

What we need to do then is mainly two things. The first is more of a technical nature – finding ways to “get rid of” the students who do not really want to take the course before they are formally registered. We have tried different methods here. Our mail system generates reminders for students to de-register within two weeks if they have decided to do something else. We have even made an experiment that demanded students to answer a question within two weeks or they would be de-registered. That measure might not be legal, but we decided to try anyway. Efficiency has risen somewhat, but not sufficiently. For the autumn term, we will try to get the process of registering over the Internet to be more difficult than just clicking “Yes”, in order to only get the truly interested. Hopefully that will give a better effect, but we are not sure of that.

The other thing we can do is to increase efficiency among the students who actually attend the courses, making them hang on and not drop out after a couple of weeks. We are aware that Internet-based studies puts a higher responsibility on the students, they have to be really disciplined to keep on studying in their own. Then we have to make sure that the Internet-based classroom is really used; that things happen there. Preferably not only texts, video clips or discussions led by the teacher, but also interaction among students. We also try to mix the forms of interaction, using chat-functions, discussions on forums as well as seminars in Skype or Adobe Connect. As for the workload, we consider it better to give many smaller assessments than one big at the end of a five-week period. The student who has already done three out of five assignments, gets more ready to do the last two as well. We do however have a problem in that our IRL-students have access to services that do not exist for student taking Internet-based courses, such as help in our “Language-workshop”.

3. How do we ensure that we assess and grade the right individual?

The short, and slightly depressing answer is that we don't. At least we can never be 100% sure. If a student chooses to use another identity right through the course, we would probably not discover that. We can however do a lot to make sure that the right student actually writes the assignment or participate in discussions. Most universities use programmes for detecting plagiarism. Unfortunately so do most Swedish high schools. The student determined to take a text from the Internet will probably know how to fool such a system. In my opinion, there are better ways of preventing different kinds of cheating – though I also use the plagiarism controls available.

One such thing is to make sure that students know the difference between proper and not proper ways of writing and referring to other texts. A surprisingly lot of them do not. I have actually had a student who instead of doing the assignment in a proper way copied two pages from my dissertation and posted as her answer. Of course she knew that I would recognise the text, she just thought that I had already answered the question so why should she do it again? Obviously we had not been clear enough on what rules apply in the academic world.

Another solution is to keep the students writing a lot – something that also has the abovementioned positive effect on efficiency. If you get to know how each student expresses him- or her self in writing, you will notice if language change. When strange things are found, a language deviating from the normal, you obviously check for the source – and sometimes find it. If you don't, and still fell uncertain, you can always ask the student to clarify the text in an eye-to-eye meeting in for example Skype. This takes time. If you have 40 students and want them to write a five-page essay every week, you as a teacher end up with reading 450 pages every week, and you are expected to write personalised comments to all of the students. Just grading is generally not enough, since you of course also want them to improve by giving critique.

Of course, the nature of the assignments is also a key. It is definitely no point in asking questions that the students simply can Google the right answer to, or easily look it up in a book. Instead you will have to create assignments that requires the students to have read the literature, but that also forces them to use the knowledge they have gained thereby. My opinion is that you must make them apply knowledge, not repeat it. That is I believe a good thing in any kind of education, but for us this really became an issue when we was forced to think differently. Finding that kind of assignments is not easy. For myself, I have tried a number of variations during the years I have taught the Middle Ages to students. Some of my assignments, those that demand students to read and analyse medieval source material or ask them to compare one authors view with an others.

For longer essays, like exam works, the problem is a smaller one. There the key obviously is to be an active supervisor, demanding to participate in how the product develops. Here I think that the difference between in- and out of campus-students is small. The problem facing the supervisor and



examination are really the same, whether the student is taking the course on campus or as an Internet-based course.

4. The changing role of the teacher in Internet-based studies

Internet-based studies have changed the role of the teachers. Some appreciate it, but most in my corridor miss having IRL-students. Working hours and workload is different. Teachers feel that they have to be accessible by their computer most of the time. They give fewer lectures, but generally get more to read and comment on. While we at campus had something like 15-20 students, we can easily have 40-50 active students on an Internet-based course. And since we have the ambition to keep them writing, to keep them active in discussions in real time as well as in forums, you have to put in a big effort. Most activities that take place in real time have to be on evening times, since students generally find it easiest to attend then. On daytime they might attend a part-time job, care for children or something else. Of course one could say that this is easily solved by giving us more hours to care for a course, or by providing extra pay for evening work. That we cannot afford. What we can do is only to change our way of working, finding for example other ways of assessment – but that also requires new thinking.

Another explanation for teachers looking back to the golden days where we had campus students is that we have exhibitionistic traits. There is an element of show in lecturing, and it is not easy to find the same gratifying feeling in an Internet-based course. Talking to a camera is not the same thing; neither is leading a seminar over Skype. Teachers also miss the contact with students face to face, students dropping by office to ask something, seeing them on open lectures at university and such.

Not having IRL-students has also had the unfortunate effect of staff thinking that they don't have to be present either. Some of our disciplines have colleagues that are rarely seen on campus. Partly this is because we are an island university, with some employed teachers actually based on the mainland. For them, it simply seems more efficient and convenient to work from home, where their families are. For us who live on Gotland and spend most of our time at work it is far from convenient. Apart from the fact that it deflates the academic environment, it also gives us extra work. Students as well as administrators at the university soon learn who it is most efficient to ask questions, and thus we get more than our share of administrative work.

5. Conclusion

I would like to have more students also as IRL-students, without losing the ones we have on Internet-based courses. It will probably be politically necessary for us not to lean too heavily on Internet-based courses – a Swedish university as a whole will not be allowed to survive solely on Internet-based courses, even if single disciplines may. I do think however that we are now in many ways better teachers than we were when we last had campus courses. Internet-based learning has forced us to think about how we teach, how we activate students and how we assess and grade them. We have also become more innovative in how we teach, testing more varied forms. When we in recent times have had (small) student groups on campus, we have obviously brought with us the experiences from Internet-based teaching, combining it with our traditional forms of lectures and seminars. Thus I would say that we have become more skilled in our tasks. I believe that some of this change for the better is because Internet teaching is not the obvious thing for an academic teacher and therefore it is OK to be a rookie, OK to try, retry and discuss failures as well as successes with your colleagues. We have survived so far, and actually also developed from the effort.