

Interculturally competent PBL –
global educational cultures and the
Aalborg model.

- The encounter between the PBL-organized teaching and learning AND students representing different educational cultures and traditions constitutes a complex set of challenges
- "interculturally competent PBL" is an approach to problem-based learning and project-work based on an awareness of these challenges.

- Presentation of reflections on PBL challenges based on research on Chinese Master's degree students at AAU and Danish/international students studying at Chinese universities
- The study takes a specific interest in students' experience of the culturally different environments and the assessment of academic quality. PBL turned out to be a dominant issue. (Researchers involved: Malene Gram & Kirsten Jæger).
- The presentation will also draw on: "Kinesersagen" RUC 2005.

Educational culture

- Tension between national orientation and transnational policy trends and processes: Higher education cultures develop at the intersection of 'nation-building' projects and globalization processes.
- Often defined as broad, overarching regional (rather than national) cultures (e.g. the Anglo-Saxon, the Anglo-American university culture, the Humboldtian tradition, the Confucian tradition...)

'Kinesersagen'

- In 2005, 8 Chinese students filed a complaint to the Danish Ministry of Research and Education, (Minister Helge Sander), allegedly on behalf of hundreds of students
- Their complaint concerned their experience of the teaching quality at RUC.
- "low academic standards"; "multiple cancellations of classes"; "not enough qualified teachers"; "too little teaching" "change of the title of the study program" "no integration/ Chinese ghetto"
- The Chinese students feared that they might return to China with useless exam certificates
- Chinese students at RUC had paid between 83.000 and 103.000 DKK in order to study in a Master's degree program at RUC

Consequences...

- RUC was forced to return 18 million DKR to the Chinese students
- The RUC management never admitted any problems with the academic level of the program
- RUC instead focused on strengthening English language requirements for students applying for the program (and communicated frequently to the media on this issue)

Financing

- 'We speak on behalf of hundreds of students, and we feel let down. We haven't received what we were promised. We have paid a lot of money for an education that may turn out to be useless. It's completely disrespectful,' said Jiamin Shi, one of the letter's authors.
- She had hoped for opportunities to exchange ideas and experiences with her international classmates, but said she found herself 'trapped in an academic ghetto of Chinese'.
- 'This looks like a filthy money machine,' said Hui Xu, who is one of 20 out of 22 Chinese students in his class.
- <http://jyllands-posten.dk/uknews/ECE3817032/chinese-students-complain-over-ruc/>

- “My mother has worked at the market every Saturday in addition to her regular job in order to save money for my education. I cannot bring it over me to tell her how bad the teaching is that I get here”. She is a student at the Department of Social Science and Business Economics. Her parents have paid 102.415 DKR for her seat in the program.” (Politiken November 2005)

Important fault lines in international education

- The exam-giving university vs. The instruction-giving university
- The lecture/seminar-organized university vs. The problem-based, project organized university
- The university culture rooted in Western intellectual traditions vs. universities maintaining links to Confucian teaching principles [or any fault line between intellectual traditions reflected in the conduct of university education]
- University education primarily funded by governmental sources vs. University education primarily funded by private sources.



	Lecture/seminar organized teaching	PBL organized teaching
Exam-giving university	Scandinavian non-PBL universities German universities	RUC, AAU
Instruction-giving university	Most (all?) Chinese universities Most American universities	PBL organized curricula at for example American universities

The exam-giving vs. the instruction-giving university

- “The Norwegian university model has been called ‘the exam giving university’ in contrast to the Anglo-American ‘instruction giving university’ (Øverland 1989, 1994). Somewhat exaggerated it can be said that while American university students ‘take courses’, students at Norwegian universities ‘take exams’. For Norwegian students the ‘contract’ with the university is the curriculum list of texts in which exam questions are based. What students do in the meantime in order to acquire the required knowledge, is in principle their own responsibility. It follows from such a system firstly that students’ grades only depend on the final exam, and secondly a very strong emphasis on external assessors in order to secure a fair evaluation. “ (Dysthe 2003)

Chinese student on intercultural differences and their role in project work

“The biggest challenge in my project writing was cooperating with the foreign group members who have totally different academic and cultural backgrounds, opinions and working styles. When we thought about our topic for the project, we couldn’t agree with each other at all. One member criticized everything. His ideas were so extreme and against Chinese culture that the other group member [Name of another Chinese student] and I were even shocked by those ideas that we had never imag[in]ed. As our project was about the relationship between Africa and China, the Chinese members wanted to talk about how China gives aid to African countries and whether the relationship is of mutual benefit. But for that member China was like a rude colonialist who colonized and exploited those poor countries.”

“Other than this choosing topic problem, we also had work dividing problems. Because of our different majors in our bachelor studies, everyone wanted the project’s approach close to his major. [...] Especially one member who used to learn economy wanted very much to write the whole paper in economy direction, so he tried to convince us to only write about the economic relations between China and African countries. But as everyone knows that of course when we talk about the relationship between countries, we cannot only touch the economic field.”

- I need to say, it's quite different. Because when I was in other countries supervisors really give you a lot of comments and tell you which way you need to go or which method you need to choose. But in Aalborg the supervisor just tells us some comments. It's not which method you need to choose or which way you need to go, so they just tell you like: "This choice is okay. You can go on." Or "This choice is not okay. You should choose another." And then they will not tell you which other you can choose. It's totally just the comment or suggestion. Sometimes it's not ...
- : And what do you think about it?
- *WM*: We feel really lost. We really needed the supervisors to tell us something but they didn't.

What is interculturally competent PBL – some suggestions:

- The issue of the amount of teaching should be explicitly addressed
- Integration in an international PBL environment (tendency to Danish and foreign national enclaves and ghettoization should be avoided) – how can multicultural group work be encouraged?
- Supervisors must be prepared for more complex supervision work, where students may expect them to take different roles (for example an ‘instructor’ or ‘mentor’ role).
- Interdisciplinarity may be as serious a challenge as interculturality.
- Especially on Master’s degree level: broad understanding of employability and careers; knowledge about job markets outside Denmark should be included (awareness of the difficult financial situation of some students).