Creative university 101 - the Aalborg University integrated first year study programme

Palle Rasmussen, Department of Learning and Philosophy, Aalborg University

From its start in 1974 Aalborg University (at the time named ‘Aalborg University Centre’) had integrated first year study programmes in all its three faculties. In principle, each programme covered all study programmes in a given faculty. These programmes were an innovation introduced together with the educational principles of ‘problem oriented project work’ (which is now mainly referred to as PBL). Aalborg was not the only Danish university to introduce these innovations; they were also an integral feature of Roskilde University, which had started 2 years earlier. The idea of starting university study with such integrated programmes had been developed by government task forces as one way to cope with the massive rise (often called an ‘explosion’) in higher education enrolments. Two main arguments for the model was (1) that the traditional scientific disciplines with their increasingly narrow specialization had to be supplemented or even replaced by transversal, interdisciplinary types of knowledge and skills and (2) that a broad first year programme would allow students time and experience to choose the right study programme, and thus reduce the risk of dropping out.

At Aalborg University the integrated first year programmes were abolished relatively early in the humanities; but in the two other faculties, engineering/science and social science, they were continued for many years. After the turn of the century, however, they came under increasing pressure from different forces in the university and its national environment, and today they are more or less gone.

In this paper I will discuss the experience of the integrated first year programme in the social sciences. I see this as an innovative attempt to introduce creative and interdisciplinary study work as a foundation for university study. The idea that students themselves can, from the first day they start at the university, locate important issues in social life and investigate them, working together and drawing on methods and knowledge from different disciplines, reflects a high degree of trust in the creative abilities of students – and also high ambitions on their behalf. I will not dwell too much on the origins of the integrated first year model and ‘problem oriented project work’. Rather I will try to characterize teaching practiced and the creative learning processes that could take place in this framework, and their potentials as well as their limitations. Further I will try to trace the factors that gradually led to the erosion of the social science integrated first year programme and discuss whether the model is still relevant and could be practices today (which I think is the case).

I will draw on existing sources, including studies of the first year programme and its students carried out over the years by Aalborg University colleagues. The theoretical framework will draw on Habermas’s theory of communicative action but also include other elements.

References