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Student perspectives on co-creating timescapes in interdisciplinary projects

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ABSTRACT

Neoliberal ideology has transformed higher education timescapes in profound ways. However, research has given limited consideration to how pedagogical practices can create a space for students to reshape these timescapes. By drawing upon empirical material, I will first explore how students reflect upon timescapes in an interdisciplinary course. From the student accounts, it appears that it is possible to create spaces that enable students and teachers to express, explore, and negotiate their perspectives and co-create the timescape of courses. In addition, I will explore how an emphasis on dialog, relations, and reflections is perceived by the students and discuss how these pedagogical approaches provide opportunities for the co-creation of timescapes. Finally, I will highlight emerging possibilities to frame a counter narrative to neoliberalism in higher education that accentuates principles and values of authenticity, reciprocity, being more, hope, and collective responsibility.

Introduction

Neoliberal ideology and practices have transformed the higher education landscape in many ways during the last few decades (Connell 2013) and led to profound changes in higher education discourses with an increased emphasis on efficiency, individualism, competition, and consumption (Giroux 2002; Harvey 2005). This marketization of higher education, which increasingly positions students as consumers and follows the imperatives of market logic, efficiency, and value for money, also leads to a commodification of time (Ylijoki 2014). As Guzmán-Valenzuela and Barnett (2013, 1131) argue, 'what we are witnessing here is the emergence of multiple time-markets', where students and teachers are trading periods of time according to their personal investments and potential future returns in relation to how time consuming the activities are. These time-markets have strong effects on how students and educators experience learning situations, what roles they assign to each other and higher education, and what goals they have.

At the same time, group work has been identified as an important element to promote student engagement and a way to help students form diverse backgrounds to develop a

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sense of belonging at the university (Masika and Jones 2016). Furthermore, there is an increasing emphasis on providing students with opportunities to develop teamwork skills through interdisciplinary and intercultural group work in higher education (Fink 2003). It is at the intersection between neoliberal discourses and the desire for more group work that time emerges as a central theme. Time plays a pivotal role in many challenges commonly associated with group work like social loafing and egoism (Davies 2009), as students will judge and compare their own time investments in relation to their group.

To explore the connection between time and learning experiences in higher education in more detail, Adam's (1998) concept of 'timescapes' offers an interesting conceptual approach that acknowledges the spatial and temporal features of experiences and social interactions by seeing time as multidimensional and taking time frame, temporality, timing, tempo, duration, sequence, and temporal modalities into consideration. These structural elements of timescapes do not operate in isolation, but are deeply interconnected (Adam 2008). Furthermore, Compton-Lilly (2016, 576) points out that 'time acts as a constitutive dimension of people's experiences that significantly affects how people make sense of their worlds'. In other words, timescapes are shaped by people and activities and are shaping their experiences. Even though timescapes play such a pivotal role in students' learning experiences, they have received little attention in higher education research (Stevenson and Clegg 2013). In particular, there is a need to consider timescapes in relation to pedagogical practices (Burke et al. 2017).

In the present study I will first explore how students experience and reflect on timescapes in an interdisciplinary group project course by drawing on empirical material from individual reflective diaries, group reflections, and perspective dialogs. Using the qualitative analysis of the empirical material as my point of departure, I will then discuss pedagogical approaches that provide opportunities for co-creating a course's timescape amongst students and between students and teachers. Finally, I will discuss the ways in which this co-creation can help to develop a counter narrative within the current neoliberal education landscape and overcome some of the common problems with group work.

Research context

The context for this study is the interdisciplinary course 'Environments for learning in higher education', a 7.5 ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) course at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) in Norway that has been designed under the Experts in Teamwork (EiT) framework. Nearly all students at NTNU are required to take one course from the EiT framework during their fourth year at the university, meaning that students from all professions and disciplines are taking these courses. In total, around 80–90 courses under the EiT framework are fully integrated into the curriculum and held each year with over 2500 students (see Veine et al. 2019 and Wallin et al. 2017 for more details on EiT).

From a pedagogical standpoint, the EiT framework builds upon ideas from experiential learning (Kolb 1984) and aims at providing students with an arena for training and acquiring interdisciplinary teamwork skills. The general intended learning outcomes for EiT courses are that students should develop abilities to reflect on, evaluate, understand, and alter their own approaches in relation to the group. It is through their experiences that students should learn about group dynamics and the importance of seeing, using,

and integrating different perspectives in interdisciplinary groups. In addition to these general intended learning outcomes, each course under the EiT framework has its own more specific intended learning outcomes.

The course '*Environments for learning in higher education*' (ELHE) has 20–30 Master's degree students from various study programs working in groups of four to six over a period of 15 weeks on a self-defined research project coupled to the overall theme of the course. Building on ideas of dialog and liberation in higher education (Shor 1996; Shor and Freire 1987), contemplative education (Roeser and Peck 2009), as well as student partnership (Cook-Sather et al. 2018) and the concept of 'Student as Producer' (Neary and Winn 2009), the aim is that by defining, planning, and running their own research projects, students will be able to raise questions about university learning environments that they deem important and have control over how to conduct and frame their research. Examples of research projects that students have develop include: How to create an inclusive university environment; Identity places: Balancing disciplinary belonging and interdisciplinary collaborations; and Interactions, motivations, freedom of choice and learning outcomes – a qualitative study of students' learning experiences.

During the project period, the students and the teacher meet once a week from 8:00 to 16:00, where they work on their group projects in a self-defined manner. The teacher acts as a dialog partner and critical friend (Costa and Kallick 1993) to provide additional perspectives to the students' ideas and approaches and to give reoccurring formative feedback. For the teacher, it is important to balance the necessary scaffolding that helps student groups to progress and allowing groups to work independently and self-organized. At the end of the course, each group writes a process and project report, both of which count 50% towards their final group grade.

Research approach

Research concerned with timescapes requires that particular attention is paid to research approaches and how they might influence the different structural elements of timescapes. As Adam (2008, 4) points out: ' … a timescapes perspective involves a quest to understand the dynamics of relationships, interdependencies, and embeddedness', and '[e]mbracing the complexity of time, therefore, demands that we adapt and change established theories and methods' (5). To capture nuances in students' reflections on the process of co-creating the timescape in the ELHE course, I focus on one particular project group in this study, with six students from different disciplines: engineering, natural science, psychology, and social science. My aim is to approach and capture the complexity that emerges from a timescapes perspective through the use of different empirical entry points: reflective diaries, the perspective dialog, and the process report.

Reflective diaries play an important role in the course and all students are recommended to write down their reflections regularly throughout the day. In these diaries, students write down their own thoughts and reflections in relation to their experiences in the course. At the end of each day, they are given open prompts by the teacher to support them further in their reflective process. These prompts alternate between focusing on more general learning experiences and different phases of the project. Using the personal reflections as a starting point, the students share, explore, and discuss their different perspectives during the last hour of each day. While the diaries are primarily a

tool for promoting reflection, they can also be used to probe how students experience the course and how they reflect on underlying group processes (Wallin and Adawi 2018). From the group that I focus on here, two students agreed to submit their personal reflective diaries to be used for research at the end of the course.

Furthermore, everyone in the group gave their informed consent to audio record the perspective dialog on the last day of the course. The perspective dialog is an integral part of the ELHE course that aims to help students gain new perspectives on their individual and group development. The dialog focuses on four themes: group dynamics, doing research, interdisciplinary teamwork and report writing. Similar to focus-group interviews, the aim is to build on the communication between students to stimulate memories and reflections on experiences (Bhattacherjee 2012). At the same time, the teacher offer their thoughts after listening to the students in a more dialogic format to encourage further discussions and reflections. Through this dialogic approach, the students may be able to see their own development from new perspectives and gain deeper insights. The perspective dialog lasted 95 min and was transcribed soon after the event.

Finally, the group also agreed to submit an anonymized version of their process report to be used for research purposes. In the process report, the students reflect on different situations that have shaped their collaboration, describe how group dynamics have developed, and discuss different perspectives on the overall process of working together. By providing a framework for students to reflect on their experiences in a holistic way at the end of the course, the process report stimulates meta reflections and gives the students the opportunity to approach their development over time (Veine et al. 2019). The process report from the group I am focusing on here is 24 pages long and structured around a short introduction and a description of the group members, including their disciplinary background, previous experiences of group work, and their expectations for the course. This is followed by a main section with three different situations that the students found the most important for their development, and then holistic final individual and group-level reflections on the course.

These three empirical entry points allow for the triangulation of different perspectives by providing accounts from several individuals over time, as well as building upon a reflective group conversation and a narrated group report. While the focus remains on students' perspectives in all three, the different entry points complement each other as to how, by whom, for what purpose, and when they have been created. The triangulation thus helps to take a more holistic approach to timescapes as an analytical lens for exploring the dynamics of relationships, interdependencies, and embeddedness of time and experience in empirical materials (Felt 2016).

In this exploratory study, I am using a qualitative inductive research approach, where the material[1] was read and re-read several times to discover themes across the empirical entry points. In addition to the accounts from the students, my own role as both a teacher in the course and a researcher provided important contextual knowledge in this stage. On the one hand, the entanglement of my own experiences from the course with the students allows me to better understand the different pedagogical approaches that aimed to co-create the course's timescape in relation to the students' reflections. On the other hand, my double role can potentially influence what reflections the students want to share and how I approached the data. To ensure that the excerpts represent the students' viewpoints (Krefting 1991), three students from the group agreed to read through, comment

on, and contribute to this study by providing their perspectives on an earlier version of the manuscript after the course was finished.

From the analysis, two themes emerged that will be addressed below: *Creating opportunities for reconsidering time* and *emerging tensions in co-creating a timescape*. Each theme will be illustrated with excerpts from the reflective diaries, perspective dialog, and the process report.

Creating opportunities for reconsidering time

The students come to the course with a wide variety of group-work experiences from their study programs, high school, and other settings. Some students have worked extensively in groups during previous courses, whereas other students explain at the beginning of the process report that 'common to all the courses I have taken is an almost exclusive focus on individual work followed by an individual exam'. What is shared amongst the students is a certain degree of skepticism towards group work based on their previous experiences, described in the process report as 'varying in their social and professional value', 'demanding', and 'exhausting'. They point out that previously 'the workload within the group has been skewed, which in turn may have contributed to a lot of frustration and irritation' and 'group work has not been utilized to its full potential', with one of the main reasons being 'different expectations when it comes to effort and commitment'. On the other hand, however, one student pointed out that while group work 'can be demanding, as discussions and conflicts may arise within the group', she was looking forward to it, as she felt that 'group work is essential for learning and good collaboration often leads to a better product than working alone'.

With these experiences, reflections, and expectations as the backdrop, it is interesting to see that the students highlight how the group work in this course is different and that in the end, they are left with a very positive experience, even though they might have been very skeptical at the beginning. In the perspective dialog, the students describe that framing relations and reflections as key elements of the collaboration helps them to become more aware of underlying processes:

Julia: I had a great experience, maybe a little bit too much emotional chatter, which is really new to me. But I learned a lot from it. I was anxious about the group work. Collaboration can be so cumbersome, but it worked out really well.

Peter: I think it's been very exciting here with that reflection part, where in a way you stop for a moment and think about what is happening in the group. Because it's kind of unthinkable to do this in other types of group work that I have been part of … You become really aware of all the decisions that we make, all the group dynamics, and all the underlying processes.

Mike: I was very skeptical at first. Mostly because I have heard very much about EiT. I was prepared for the worst … you sit there for a long time, and it's tiring to spend all Wednesday, and so it takes a lot of the energy from the rest of what you are actually doing. But I feel that I've been very lucky with my group. I think it was a very good experience, because it went well. (Perspective dialog)

The students clearly position this course as different from their other courses, both by highlighting approaches that they are unfamiliar with in a higher education setting, 'emotional chatter, which is really new to me', and also by pointing out that the work in the course takes away from what they 'are actually doing'. Carl's reflections on day

four add to this positioning when he describes how the learning environment is distinctively different from learning environments in his other courses:

> This [learning environment] differs from other learning environments in that it's very group-based and that each group gets plenty of time to explore, research, and develop different things through collaboration. It's also very interesting that you do not only have the project, but that the process part is also given time. *(Carl – RD day 4)*

While different, Carl also explains how this group-based approach, together with the explicit focus on underlying processes, helps the group to work together. One crucial element he highlights is 'that each group gets plenty of time to explore, research, and develop'. The importance of the learning environment and having time, as well as how both influence their work, is something that the students are aware of from the start. Already on the first day, Carl writes in his reflection that he is excited about working with his group and points out that this day is important because it sets the tone for the group work. If the group is able to get to know each other and build trust, they will be able to create an environment with positive attitudes that facilitate discussions:

> I experienced the first day as positive and exciting. I'm always a little excited to meet new people, and especially when you're going to work in a group for a long time and towards a common goal. I see it as a very important part of the course, as I believe that it is easier for a group that trusts each other early on to create good discussions and a positive flow. (Carl – RD day 1)

Ella expands a little bit more on the importance of the first day in her reflections by highlighting how important it was to her to have a focus on getting to know the other students and educators in the course. For her, the emphasis on group work, dialog and relations rather than the final reports was a relief and something that she feels motivated her to work on the project.

> The first meeting in the course was good. It has assured me that the project will be rewarding work … It was nice to have a focus on getting to know each other, where we were allowed to laugh and talk, rather than a focus on the end result. I think such a focus [on the end result] would have made me somewhat concerned about all the work that needs to be put into this course. Instead, I'm left with a greater desire to work on the project than I initially had. I think this first day has a lot to say for the time ahead because we have now set the focus for the work: It's not the final report that is the most important thing, it's the experience of collaborating, group dynamics, and possible conflicts. (Ella – RD day 1)

From Ella's diary it is clear that she experienced the first day as liberating in some way, as she points out that 'we were allowed to laugh and talk', which appears from her reflection to be something that she does not associate with courses in higher education.

These accounts describe the learning environment in the course as something where the students feel they have time and space to discuss, explore, and work in truly collaborative ways. The ability for students to co-create the learning environment is a key element in the course and it appears that the students value this opportunity highly. It allows them to focus on elements that they consider important and meaningful, and redefines the timescape of their group work.

It is within this learning environment that dialog in the groups can emerge as an important work mode for the students. Ella underlines in her reflections on day four that the group conversations are one of the most important parts of the course. Even though

she does not think that these discussions necessarily change her disciplinary knowledge, she experiences them as exciting and helpful to understand the different positions and knowledge foundations within the group:

> The most important elements of the learning environment at the moment, I feel, are the discussions we have in the group. Not because I get so much disciplinary knowledge out of it (since we are still at the idea stage), but because I find it exciting and see how we communicate as a group. For each day, I also get a better understanding that we have an incredible amount of different types of knowledge and I wonder how we should use everyone's knowledge. (Ella – RD day 4)

Through regular and prolonged conversations within their group, the students explore what they want to focus on in their project, the ways in which they can interpret their findings, and how they want to structure their report, but the focus is not limited to the project itself.

In the group discussions, the students also talk about how they want to work together, what shapes their different approaches and understandings, and their own experiences from the process of working together. It is through these dialogs that the students feel they are able to build a shared understanding of concepts, theories, and terminology, which is particularly important for the type of interdisciplinary groups that they are working in. During the perspective dialog at the end of the course, the group reflects upon their discussions and the important role they have played for them:

> Mike: For example, we discussed what we put in a term like colloquium or lecture – I thought it was totally unnecessary to discuss such terms at first, but then it turned out that no, we really have quite a different view of what lies in different types of concepts.
>
> Clara: Yes, I see when it comes to the discussions – It's really interesting that it was really just different understandings of terms and concepts that led to long discussions.
>
> Ella: It was very interesting to experience that.
>
> Clara: So, when you suddenly start talking about greater things – maybe we just need to stop for a second and clarify what I mean by using that concept and what you mean by it, so that we can move on with a shared understanding. (Perspective dialog)

It is interesting to see that the students are aware of the discursive power of the terminology that they use and how much attention they spend on discussing details to ensure that they have a shared understanding. Nevertheless, over time different tensions in working together emerge in the group.

Emerging tensions in co-creating a timescape

One important element in creating opportunities for reconsidering time is to place emphasis on dialog and allow different perspectives to be made explicit. From the different empirical entry points, it is apparent that this leads to tensions over time that the students need to handle. While the students highlight dialog as an important working mode in the course and see their discussions as a main element of the project work, they still have ambivalent relations to this type of group work. It is clear that they feel torn between the importance of their group discussions and how much time they should spend on the dialog, which suggests some underlying assumptions about what is valued in project

work. In the final reflections section of the process report, the students point out how difficult it has been at times to hide one's impatience during the discussion session, but at the same time how important it has been to learn that these discussions are the main strength of working together in a group:

> I think it has been challenging at times not to take over and end group discussions that have taken a lot of time. I have been impatient on several occasions and it has not always been so easy to hide this. However, I have learned that it is often useful to have a discussion even though it may be considered unnecessary there and then. One of the strengths of group work is precisely the opportunity to reveal different perspectives. (Process report)

The impatience during group discussions is also something that Ella touches upon as early as day two when she points out that it takes the group a long time to make decisions, and that this might be problematic in the future:

> … it can become a challenge eventually if we have to discuss everything for a very long time before making decisions. Today, I did nothing to meet this challenge … If, however, it turns out that we continue to spend a lot of time to make decisions, we must try to meet that challenge. Maybe we need to be a little bit more efficient to get everything done in the limited time we have. (Ella – RD day 2)

On day four, Carl writes in his diary that the group talked about the amount of time that they spend on discussion. Again, he points out the importance of the discussions and how they make the work truly collaborative, but they might also limit their efficiency.

> We often spend a lot of time discussing things and involve everyone in the process. This can be important for everyone to feel ownership, but less efficient for our progress. (Carl – RD day 4)

In addition to discussing the efficiency of their dialogic group work, the students also express that this type of extended group work is challenging and that they feel a strong need to shift between different working modes. On day three, Ella points out in her reflective diary that she feels it is difficult to stay concentrated for a full day when working together as a group and that it is important for the group to take more breaks in the future:

> Perhaps the most important thing I realized was how difficult it is to be focused as a group all day. I notice that my concentration is not always 100% there and that it is similar for the other group members … I also think I notice it within the group as we start to have multiple conversations going on at once and pay less attention at letting others talk … It is quite intense to sit like that and discuss a whole day, but if we manage and notice that we are no longer concentrating we can try to do something about it. Maybe by taking breaks to clear our heads, or setting aside some time to talk about something completely different. (Ella – RD day 3)

In addition to taking more breaks, another approach that the students experiment with during the project is to divide tasks and shift between working together through dialog and breaking up and working more individually. In other words, students actively shape the timing, tempo, scope, and rhythm of how they want to work together. As the students explain, working individually on smaller tasks is something they are very used to and feel comfortable doing without getting tired in the same way as when discussing with the group the whole day. In his diary, Carl explains how working individually on a smaller task feels good and more efficient. He sees this type of working mode as a

great way to get things done, but at the same time feels that there is a risk of losing the overview of the project:

> It was decided early on within the group that today we should work individually, since we had several smaller tasks to do. This was a nice way to work, as it more resembles what I usually do at the university. Oftentimes, I have been quite tired after long days with a lot of discussions, and sometimes it has not felt very efficient. The advantage today was that we were able to finish many tasks, and completed some smaller sub-projects. The downside, though, is that I feel I lost some overview of what has been done by the rest of the group during the day. (Carl – RD day 7)

This reflection is echoed by Ella, who in addition to a potential lack of overview problematizes the risk of not feeling full ownership over the project when working on smaller tasks. She feels uneasy about losing control of the project and thinks that it is very important to not divide the work too much, even though it is less stressful to work alone:

> Working independently and individually was good for me. That's almost exclusively what I do in my everyday student life and I have good enough discipline and technique to get things done when I need to. It felt nice in a way to let go of working as a group all day. During previous course days, I have felt very exhausted from the group work, and I find myself a little less tired now than I usually am at the end of a course day … Still, I am skeptical about whether we should do very much individually. I think it's important that everyone feels ownership of everything that is done, and even though we can't sit and hold each other's hands all the time, it's important that everyone feels that they have the opportunity to contribute in all areas. (Ella – RD day 7)

Ella's diary entry shows the complex tensions that emerge from working in unfamiliar ways, the reestablishment of a collective rather than a purely individual focus, and the contrast from the co-created timescape in the course to her other experiences in higher education.

Connected to this is the notion of efficiency that is a reoccurring theme through all the reflections, the perspective dialog and the process report. It appears to be a key goal in itself for the students to be efficient and use the time that they have for the project in the best possible way, even though they do recognize that they 'may have slightly different opinions about the notion of being efficient in the group' (Carl – RD day 4). In the process report the students write the following about efficiency:

> An overarching theme that has formed the basis for much of the group's discussions is linked to efficiency. Already from the starting phase this concept has influenced us as a group, where much of the focus was on finding solutions within a limited timeframe. Several of the group members initially described themselves as efficient and structured persons both in schoolwork and otherwise, and the word efficient was treated as purely positive from the beginning. (Process report)

However, the purely positive connotation of efficiency at the beginning of the project is subsequently questioned by the group. Ella reflects on it in her diary on day fourteen. While she clearly positions herself as being an efficient person who is used to working in a structured way, and alone, she questions if efficiency should be the overriding standard, or 'gold standard', as she puts it. She also reflects on how her own and others' assumptions and understandings might have influenced the group and led to a strong focus on efficiency and rushed decisions within the group:

> I'm committed to being efficient. Accustomed to working alone, at my pace. I'm an efficient
> person in general – structured. I have probably brought this attitude with me into the group
> work, as if efficiency is the gold standard. Is this what has made the group focus on efficiency?
> I think it may have something to do with it, but it's not just me who has been the impulse
> behind efficiency … A focus on efficiency can lead to less efficient, rushed decisions. (Ella
> – RD day 14)

The process report makes it clear that the group has discussed efficiency and related con-
cepts explicitly during the course. Here again through the dialog the students are able to
start to unpack what efficiency means to them, and how it influences their approaches and
attitudes. Through these conversations the students construct a more nuanced under-
standing of efficiency and start to question it as the 'gold standard' of their work. In the
process report, they point out how a focus on efficiency has led to quick rather than
well-reflected decisions in the beginning, and how the discussions have helped them to
reflect on and change their attitude:

> Based on the experiences from the course, the concept of efficiency was discussed more expli-
> citly within the group, and we realized that as a group we could tend to make quick decisions
> instead of well-reflected choices … The very discussion of how we as a group now felt what
> 'being efficient' meant, led to a change of attitude and a clear change in how we wanted to
> continue working. (Process report)

By creating a dialogic space for sharing different perspectives, the students appear to be
able to develop more nuanced and complex understandings of different concepts and
use these in their creation of the course's timescape.

Discussion and concluding remarks

In general terms, the student groups work with a variety of different topics under the
umbrella theme of '*Environments for learning in higher education*'. They use both quan-
titative and qualitative research approaches to explore their research questions, and
draw on a variety of theories and research literature. While this means that students
learn about and explore different topics and methods, they all develop a better understand-
ing about higher education research in general and make important contributions to the
field. By being in control of all stages of the *inquiry cycle* (Pedaste et al. 2015), from for-
mulating research questions, to develop research designs, evaluating information, framing
discussions and reporting the work, students experience and learn about the messiness and
complexity of research.

With a focus on the analysis of the empirical material, as presented in the two pre-
vious sections, it becomes also apparent that the students describe the ELHE course as
different from their other courses. The course offers them opportunities for reconsider-
ing time and it creates a space where students can experience emerging tensions in co-
creating timescapes. These opportunities and tensions are initially experienced by some
as challenging and stealing time from working on ordinary courses. Over time, however,
the students begin to see the benefits of the pedagogical approaches and in the end are
left with a positive experience. It is through their discussions that students learn to
appreciate different perspectives, understand the discursive power of the terminology
that they use, and how perspectives and discourses shape group dynamics and team-
work strategies.

By acknowledging time as a 'constitutive dimension of people's experiences' (Compton-Lilly 2016, 576) and timescapes as the embodiment of time and space in the specific context of the course (Adam 1998), the ELHE course aims to create a space that allows the students and the teacher to express, explore, and negotiate their different perspectives on time and how they shape their learning experiences. It is through making these perspectives explicit and sharing them with each other that everyone in the course is able to create and form the timescape of the course. Based on how the students describe their previous group work experiences, it appears that this space often does not exist in other settings and the lack of opportunities to co-create timescapes results in problems for both group work and learning.

As Bennett and Burke (2018, 3) argue: 'Timescapes are discursively (re)constructed through tradition and habit'. It is the breaking with tradition and challenging some of the students' habits that create opportunities to collaboratively reconstruct the timescape that shapes the activities within the course. While the time frame, tempo, duration, and sequence are partially given by the structure of the course, the students have a high degree of freedom to co-create the course's timescape within these boundaries. The interdisciplinary nature of the course has an important double function here. On the one hand, it demands that the students are open to different perspectives. On the other hand, it provides a clear contrast to other courses, as described by the students, which helps to reposition the default from assuming similarity towards assuming differences, and to create a space for critical dialog and co-creation.

From the empirical material, it is clear that the students at the beginning have a strong focus on efficiency, which is seen as the 'gold standard' with a positive connotation. The emphasis on efficiency foregrounds students as consumers in a marketized higher education landscape (Brown 2010), with a focus on individual performance (Bennett and Burke 2018) in a competitive environment that presents serious equity concerns (Manathunga 2019). At universities where time has become a commodity and activities are often judged by how time consuming they are, efficiency is a key metric (Guzmán-Valenzuela and Barnett 2013).

Over time, however, the students reconsider their focus on efficiency and individualism and start to create a counter narrative. By providing opportunities to develop a counter narrative to dominant neoliberal discourses, building upon ideas from contemplative education (Roeser and Peck 2009), dialog (Shor and Freire 1987), and partnership (Cook-Sather et al. 2018), students are encouraged to reconsider assumptions, processes, and relations in working together. In this process, procedural awareness is an important element for promoting such values as humility, curiosity, open-mindedness, open-heartedness, and caring for others. The focus on procedural awareness leads students to share their different perspectives, explore where they are coming from, develop more nuanced understandings, and create a new timescape.

This shift is particularly visible in the different work modes that students use within their groups. One of the main work modes in the course, as the students describe it, is based on dialog. It is through the conversations that they have with each other in the groups that they progress with their project. The extent, scope and rhythm of these conversations are described by the students as something unusual and at times exhausting. One interesting tension that the students highlight across the empirical entry points are their ambivalent relationships to the dialogs they have had. On the one hand, they

believe the discussions are very important for the group and their collaboration, but on the other hand, the discussions are experienced as very time consuming, sometimes untargeted, and to some extend inefficient.

In connection with the notion of efficiency, timing, and in particular synchronization, is an important factor that the students consider with respect to dialog. Working together through dialog requires continuous synchronization between students, in contrast to the block-wise synchronization that is dominant when dividing tasks and working more individually. The students experience the need to concentrate on the moment and to be constantly aware of social interaction cues as challenging. This leads them to subsequently adjust their work modes to balance the desire to engage in dialog and to avoid the need for constant synchronization. The ability to discuss and adjust their activities is a key element in how students dynamically shape the timescape of the course.

While the students have a strong focus on dialog within the groups, as discussed above, they talk much less about the student-teacher dialog. This is in contrast to much of the student partnership literature, where the focus is on the reciprocal relationship between students and teachers, where students become knowledgeable partners who contribute to and shape their learning experiences (Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2014; Jensen and Bennett 2016). Even though student-teacher relations play an important role in the ELHE course, it appears from the empirical material that the opportunity for students to create a strong partnership between each other and to establish their group as the primary social unit facilitates the creation of an environment that affects and potentially dissolves the teacher's position. In contrast to the dominant neoliberal discourse that emphasizes individualism (Giroux 2002), the ELHE course provides students with opportunities to re-establish the collective. From the students' perspective, it appears that the role of the teacher in this type of partnership is focused on creating opportunities and supporting students to re-consider their expectations and understandings of higher education (Neary and Winn 2009), and on co-creating a learning environment that facilitates dialog (Dolan and Johnson 2009; Palmer et al. 2015).

The co-creation of the course's timescape does, however, create some confusion among the students. Engaging in this activity is challenging as they have to reject their old frames of reference (Mezirow 1997), without the new ones being fully in place. Therefore, it is important that the teacher can co-create and hold the space that allows students to be in this liminal state and develop procedural awareness of how their perspectives affect their experiences, approaches, and interactions. The teacher's role is focused on creating the necessary structures and boundary conditions for students to work on their projects. As the students point out, in order to design and work on their research projects, it is important for them to know that they can always turn to the teacher to discuss their project and get help when needed. Another important role that the teacher has is to provide different stimuli throughout the course to help students become aware of underlying group dynamics and team work processes. It is within this educational space that students can have experiences 'with unique potential to challenge deep-seated assumptions about how a community or society works' (Cook-Sather and Alter 2011, 37), and develop 'a more critical worldview as [they] seek ways to better understand [their] world' (Taylor 2008, 5). In connection with this, the students highlight the focus and framing of reflections and relations as key elements of the group work in the course and as two particularly important pedagogical practices.

In the ELHE course, reflections are framed as an important element of the learning process, both by allocating time for and by scaffolding reflective activities on individual and group levels. From the empirical material, it appears that reflective activities are new to many students and not something they associate with higher education. At the same time, reflections are described in the literature as playing an important role in integrating theoretical and practical competences (Schön 1983), helping to interpret and internalize academic activities (Karm 2010), and serving as a way to become aware of, share, and question implicit assumptions (Mezirow 1997). Through a reflective approach the students can become aware of their own assumptions and frames of reference, share them with their group members, and support each other in reconsidering their perspectives. The focus on reflection extends teaching beyond socializing and scaffolding and explicitly frames the cultivation of awareness as an important part of higher education through a focus on attending, thinking, feeling, perceiving, acting, and interacting (Roeser and Peck 2009).

In addition to reflective approaches that focus on the self and becoming aware of one's frames of reference, a relational approach emphasizes social interaction and the importance of the collective. By emphasizing the group processes and interrelational experiences as the basis for learning in the course, a relational space is created that allows students to establish social bonds and shared understandings (Mulcahy, Cleveland, and Aberton 2015). This approach acknowledges learning as embedded in the emotional life of learners, where relational experiences give rise to identification with peers, tutors, and the subject discipline (Hodkinson 2005). In this way, the relational approach contributes to creating spaces for non-binary positions and enables students to take liminal positions (Murphy and Brown 2012). As experienced by the students, the emphasis on relations and reflections provides a counter narrative to the neoliberal discourse that emphasizes preparation for employment (Giroux 2002).

In summary, the space created in the ELHE course enables the students and the teacher to express, explore, and negotiate their perspectives and co-create the timescape of the course. Explicit discussions of assumptions, concepts, and terms within the group are key elements that provide opportunities for students to experience how their frames of reference influence their approaches, to see other students' perspectives, and to question their own understanding of concepts and terminology. As Taylor (2017, 235) points out: 'What makes higher education spaces significant is that … they still perhaps offer greater openness for the emergence of new ethical subjectivities, and greater spontaneity for co-constructing teaching and learning relationally through joint action'. It is of utmost importance that educators together with students use the possibilities in higher education spaces to counteract neoliberal, domesticating, and technocratic threats to meaningful partnership (Peters and Mathias 2018). Students and educators need to co-create spaces that allow the development of alternative timescapes through dialog, challenge traditional roles and predictable paths of education (Bovill et al. 2016), and re-establish principles and values of authenticity, reciprocity, being more, hope and responsibility in higher education (Peters and Mathias 2018).

Note

1. All the material was in Norwegian, only the passages used in the present paper have been translated into English, where all the students have also been given pseudonyms.

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