RESEARCH
INNOVATION
VALUE

Roland Schuster, Hubert Lobnig

Bridging Experience and Theory: Extending the Traditional Classroom for Tangible Leadership Learning

115 – Social Competence in Action: Research – Innovation – Values in Theorie und Praxis des Lehrens, Lernens und Forschens an Fachhochschulen / Inter- und transdisziplinäre Erkundungen im Dreieck Praxis-Lehre-Forschung

Abstract

This paper presents the concept of an innovative team teaching on the topic leadership and motivation. At first it describes the context of the teaching design, its historical and structural development. The second part depicts the basis of didactics and details of the teaching/learning setting. The basic idea for the concept is to maximise student's possibility to learn about complex coherences by providing a complex as well as coherent teaching respectively learning situation.

Keywords:

Didactics, intervention science, reflection in action and on action, leadership, experience centred teaching approach

The Teaching Design (History, Context and Structure)

The teaching design we present in this paper is embedded organisationally in a study program of a University of Applied Sciences (UAS). The course is part of the Master program *Strategic HR Management in Europe.* The students are part time students, working during the day. The university courses are held in the evening at weekdays and on Saturdays[1]. It is a so called *practical course with no considerable student work load*[2]. Those are non-negotiable organisational restrictions regarding the teaching therefore even an innovative design had to fit in. The initial set up (Figure 1) within the study

---

[1] At weekdays the time range is from 18:00-22:00, on Saturdays from 08:00-16:15.
[2] The expression *practical course with no considerable student workload* (abbr. PC*) indicates that the main workload for the students is the participation during the lectures.

program according to the syllabus was that the students - 40 in total[3] - would be divided in two subgroups. Then either

– two lecturers would hold the course separately after aligning the content by mutually preparing the ECTS[4] description (initial set up 1) or

– one lecturer would hold the courses for both subgroups time-displaced (initial set up 2).
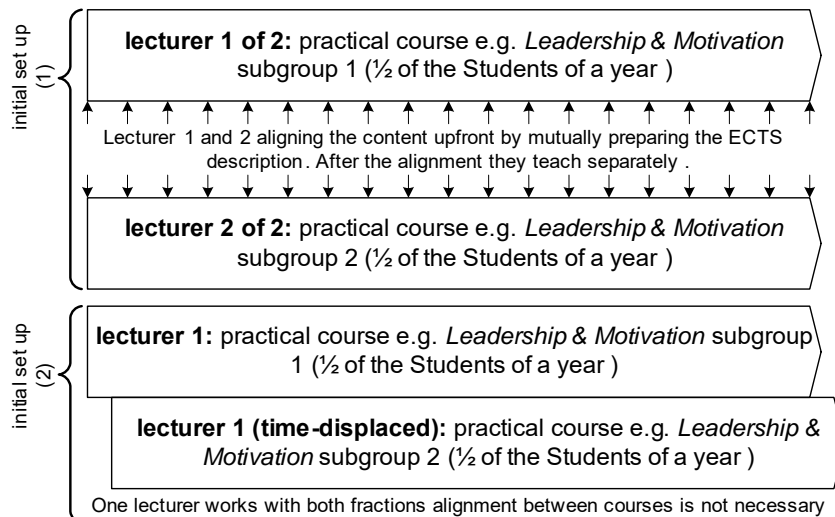

Figure 1 Initial set up of courses like *Leadership & Motivation* within the study program

The first step to change the initial set up was that the designated internal lecturer, namely Roland Schuster talked to the study program director and negotiated the leeway according to the course alongside the conditions mentioned above. The conclusion was that within the frame of 38 hours per subgroups and a maximum of two subgroups, the lecturers may decide the teaching design themselves. The challenge we encountered was to set up a teaching concept that maximises the student's possibility to learn about complex contingencies of leadership not only in theory but also in real life experiences. Thus we needed to create:

– a complex as well as coherent teaching situation,

– the opportunity for students to reflect on it in social and individual settings and

– the opportunity to experience that observing and acting is closely interrelated, e. g. the thinker (observer etc.) – the one who reflects about something – is inevitably a part of a social reality. (Loosely based on Foerster[5] (1981: 258): Teaching *in vitro* has to be combined with teaching *in vivo.)*

Based on previous experiments we already could build on the know-how of using the psychodrama-method to help student's to understand the external and internal respectively socio- and psychological

---

[3] The number of students varies approximately within a range of 38 – 48. To make it easier for this paper we chose 40 as guide number.

[4] ECTS stands for European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System. For details see: http://ec.europa.eu/education/ects/users-guide/index_en.htm (accessed 21st Dec. 2016).

[5] Foerster (1981: 258) discussed epistemology and put it: „Life cannot be studied *in vitro,* one has to explore it *in vivo.“*

aspects and tensions generated by intense experience based teaching and learning. An internal teaching colleague, Martin Buxbaum[6] agreed to facilitate this part.

The next step for Roland Schuster was to contact a fellow researcher and lecturer out of the group dynamic community, namely Hubert Lobnig and to ask whether he was interested in mutually developing an innovative design to teach *Leadership & Motivation.* Schuster and Lobnig had already worked together successfully in other contexts and recently published their experiences (2016: 1-9). Regarding the subject of teaching leadership Lobnig experimented with action based learning processes and open formats like the Organisation Laboratory (Lesjak and Lobnig 2014: 55-69). Schuster's field of work is primarily defined by his inside – hence long time involved – position as an internal lecturer and researcher, whilst Lobnig as an external lecturer, researcher and consultant can step in a relatively distant position and thereby challenge locked in routines regarding organisational culture of the University of Applied Sciences (UAS) BFI Vienna. The common ground of Lobnig and Schuster, namely group dynamics and process facilitation is the foundation of the teaching cooperation, allowing them a shared situational awareness of social processes and intervention tactics Figure 2 shows a sketch of the design developed regarding time, segmentation and lecturers of the innovative version.
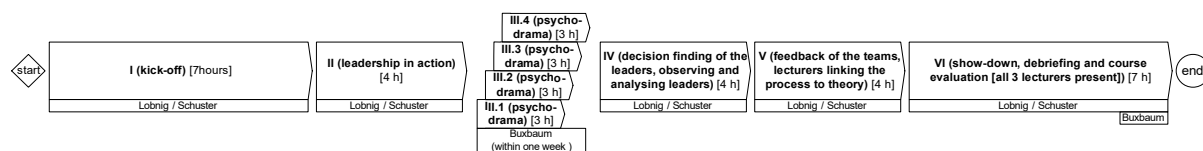

Figure 2 Teaching design regarding time, segmentation and lecturers

Martin Buxbaum's role as the third lecturer on board (III.1-III.4) is to supervise a phase of self-experience by using the method of psychodrama and to give the students a possibility to look at the process of the lecture facilitated by Lobnig and Schuster from a certain distance. The common roles of Lobnig and Schuster (I, II, IV, V and VI) contain the facilitation of the process of the lecture and to provide content on the topics of leadership and motivation. While Lobnig and Schuster appear as a team from the beginning, Buxbaum acts alone and joins the team in the last part of the lecture i. e. the feedback round and final debriefing within the plenum.

In addition to that the role of Schuster is to coordinate the team of lecturers (Buxbaum, Lobnig and Schuster) as primus inter pares, to organise the formal structure of the lecture including administrative tasks and the communication with the director of the study program and its coordinator. Being educated within an intervention science respectively research[7, 8] tradition Lobnig and Schuster decided to connect the teaching of the lecture with an intervention research endeavour.

The spatial setting of the course includes the following four formats, namely:

    (1) Format Plenum; all students (S) and the lecturers (Le) are sitting in a large circle (Figure 3)**.**

---

[6] Martin Buxbaum received his training in psychodrama techniques from Maria Stockinger & Susanne Hackl (directing role playing), Susanne Schulze & Helmut Haselbacher (directing psychodrama) and Roswitha Riepl (psychodramatic constellation work) – all Österreichischer Arbeitskreis für Gruppentherapie und Gruppendynamik (ÖAGG) [Austrian Workgroup for Group Therapy and Group Dynamics, translated by R. J. S.].

[7] Intervention research is comparable to action research and has its roots in the Klagenfurter school of group dynamics (Krainz 2006: 7-28).

[8] Lobnig (2009) habilitated in the field of group dynamics, Schuster's (2010) dissertation based on group dynamics and intervention research.
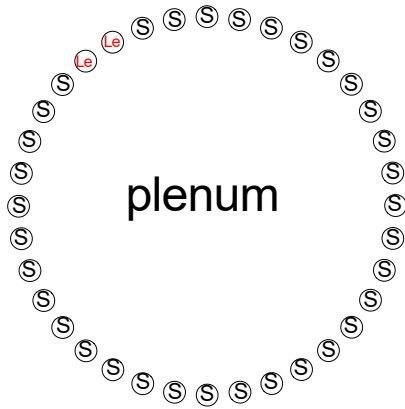
Figure 3 Format Plenum

(1) Format Plenum, observing; the lecturers (Le) and all students (S) except the leaders of the teams are sitting in a large circle. The team of leaders (L_{1-6}) is sitting in a concentric circle surrounded by the large circle. Students and lecturers in the large circle observe the negotiation of the Leaders (Figure 4).
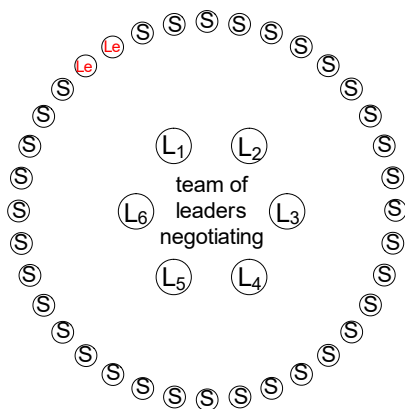

Figure 4 Format Plenum, observing

(2) Format ¼ Plenum; this is the psychodrama setting where the lecturer, namely Buxbaum is working on an intense level of facilitating students self-experience. It is the aim to increase student's attention according to the continuously process and his or her personal participation in it (Figure 5).
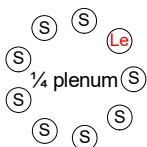

Figure 5 Format ¼ Plenum

(3) Format Team; students of a team (S), namely team members and their leader (L), there are 5-6 teams depending on the actual amount of students of a year.

Figure 6 Format Team

The teams are working on their own within as well as outside the lectures. Within the lectures lecturers do only visit shortly before the given working time is over to ask whether a prolongation is wanted.

To meet the quality management standards of the study program the lecturers are obliged to assess the course. This assessment is an important part of the teaching design as well as a necessary organisational aspect.

assessment	assessment criteria	context of the criteria
continuous assessment	Collaboration; to pass a student needs to attend at least 70% of the course.	The 70% are a non-negotiable condition of the UAS to enable students to compensate e. g. illness and/or occupational obligations.
Grading	Successfully completed; if at least 70% of the course are attended.	To prevent *as if* performance and to increase uncertainty regarding behaviour the least restrictive condition, namely *attending the course* was chosen as sufficient to complete successfully.
voluntary individual reflection	It is possible for every student to write a voluntary individual reflection on (subjectively) relevant perceptions within the process of the course. For the reflection, no citation rules have to be applied.	This option provides students a possibility to get rid of various (intense) emotions related to the process (mental hygiene).
If a student fails the course for whatever reason (due to less than 70% attendance), a written exam is mandatory. This is done by submitting a scientific paper of a certain scope.	Written exam; only relevant if the course is failed. Scientific paper on the content of the course. The paper has to discuss leadership based on the student's own experience and literature provided or literature related to the topics of leadership and motivation known by the student. The scope is 3000-3500 words. For this paper, the citation rules of the *Master Thesis Seminar* are binding and have to be applied.	Though the priority is to have all the students participating there has to be a *fail-safe* for those who have less than 70% of attendance. This is strongly related to organisational aspects of the study program. To force students to repeat the course in the following year is not an option because of economic reasons.

Table 1 shows a summary of the assessment criteria and the related context.

Didactical Concept

The didactical concept of our approach is based on the learning levels of the Organisational Laboratory (OLab) as described by Lesjak and Lobnig (2014: 63-67), namely group, role and organisational learning. The OLab, set up for 6 sequential days, 40-100 participants facilitated by 3-8 staff members, located within a remote facility as a retreat, is built on a minimal set of structure and instruction. Within this „[…] leadership vacuum […] the participants [of the OLab, R. J. S./H. L.] start the process of organizing primarily based on their own assumptions and >ways of doing things< rather than on tasks or working structures defined by the [teaching] staff" (ibid. 2014: 59). The duration, the continuity of the process, experienced facilitation and the environment of the retreat[9] enable this kind of approach.

In contrast, the above described University of Applied Sciences (UAS) system is rigidly structured and this has to be taken into account regarding the choice of didactic methods. The teaching approach introduced in this paper can be compared to flights on an aircraft carrier where starting and landing have to be done very carefully yet vigorous because of the limited take-off respectively landing site. The lecturers have to apply authority as well as facilitation to provide students the possibility of learning by experience within the general context learning in the program. Figure 7 sketches the core elements of the learning/teaching levels.
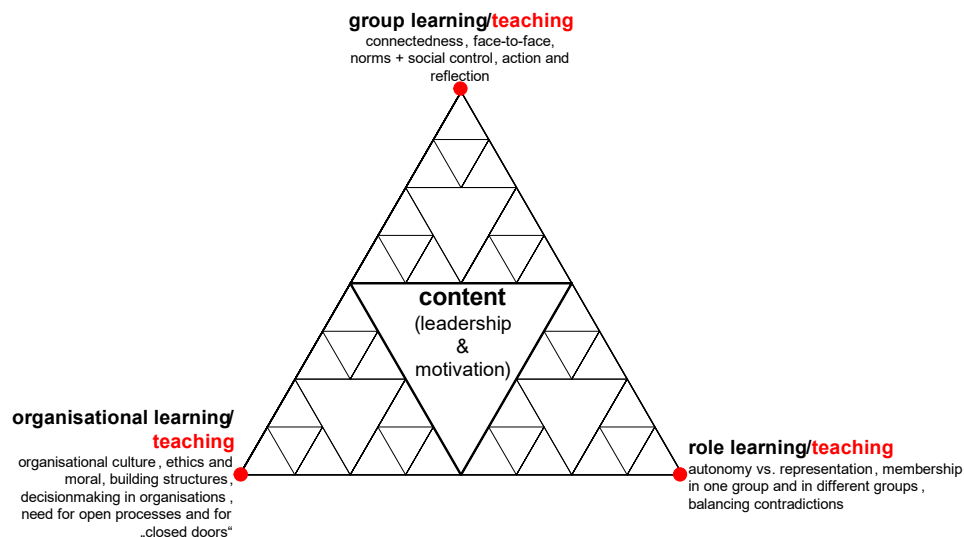

Figure 7 Learning/teaching levels (based on Lesjak / Lobnig 2014: 65)

However the need to provide guiding authority and to facilitate an open reflection process as well seems as a contradiction for the students, creating confusions and insecurity in interpreting the teaching situation. The following close look to the didactics of the segments (I-VI) shows how this contradiction is processed and thus the three different levels of learning, namely organisational learning, group learning and role learning are accompanied by organisational teaching, group teaching and role teaching.

---

[9] Most of the participants and staff stay in the remote facility during the OLab.

Segment I Kick-off
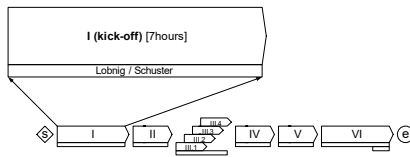
The lecturers start by explaining how the lecture is organised and by briefly presenting the didactical background. To signal the importance of student´s input, the lecturers continue with a session facilitating an inquiry of their thoughts related to the content of the course, the remarks are noted on flip-chart and lead to further explanations and discussions. Having achieved a *good enough* level of common understanding (at least as assessed by the lecturers) the content *Leadership & Motivation* is introduced by presenting a movie scene (Schuster 2015) followed by theoretical inputs and by connecting the movie scene to students remarks and to practice by the lecturers

The further didactic concept proceeds as follows: As a task (task 1 of 5) Students have to remember a situation (an experience) individually where they were confronted with leadership or where they themselves lead a team. They have to write down bullet points to be able to tell the story to the others within 15 minutes. Immediately after that (task 2 of 5) students build teams and organise their team leadership[10]. Directly related to that is task 3 of 5 where teams have to observe their own process and to evaluate their leader selection process (formation, communication, decision making) and to summarize this on a flip-chart page ([+/-]-aspects and key learnings).

After the tasks are explained *action* starts. Student's *action* is important to balance the phases of lecturers input. It helps to *digest* the presented material and to connect the whole body to the abstract and rather rational input.

Within this phase – 70 minutes including a 15 minutes brake – each team works on its own and lecturers act as time keepers only. Content based assignments for the teams are to exchange and reflect the individual stories in the context of leadership and motivation. (What is interesting? What is special?) Each team has to prepare a flip-chart with names (team members, leader) and a name and motto (slogan) for the team. Another flip-chart has to show the title of each story and one sentence capturing the essence of it. Lecturers protocol the process by taking pictures of the teams, its stories and their mottos. The challenge for the teams is to mutually collect data, select and decide on what of the collected to in- respectively exclude.

At the end of segment I lecturers facilitate a first view at the process. Team members are asked why they chose the leader, leaders are asked why they chose to be one. Feedback to the leaders is given by the team members and vice versa. After that lecturers transfer the actual events to practical examples deriving from their practical experience as well as from theory.

---

[10] Leader's responsibilities, according to the lecturers are to help the teams to perform its tasks, to negotiate and exchange data with other leaders. The selected leader is selected for the duration of the course.

Segment II Leadership in Action
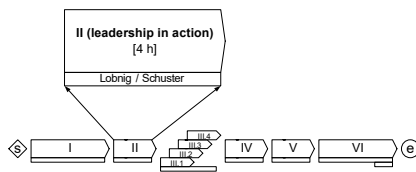
Segment II of the seminar starts with lecturers and leaders having a meeting, excluding the team members. In telling the leaders exclusively about tasks 4[11] and 5[12] they are put into a specific responsibility, namely the responsibility to represent the team while listening to lecturers instructions.

After that meeting lecturers provide in a plenary session theoretical input on leader's membership within two teams and their exclusive access to the next level of hierarchy, which is a dilemma inherent to leadership roles. Both matters of fact are challenging confidence and trust in the leader-team member relation. The leaders themselves are in the situation to be part of their team and part of the team of leaders thereby confronted with loyalty issues (Pesendorfer 1983: 12-13). It is the aim to show that a possession of data restricted to leaders and an access to certain meetings as well as relations to other leaders can be an instrument of power even if the leaders are without any given formal power[13] which is the case in the setting discussed here.

This phase of theory based inputs is followed by 90 minutes – including a 15 minutes brake – of action of the teams regarding tasks 4 and 5 as communicated to the leaders at the beginning of the segment.

At the end of segment II lecturers facilitate the presentation of the selected stories and the selection criteria in use in the plenum.

---

[11] Task 4 of 5 (explained to the team of leaders only): Amongst all individual stories within a team the team has to decide what story suits best for a learning on *leadership & motivation* in the context of human relations (HR). Teams have to prepare criteria for the decision, observe and note the decision process. Furthermore the teams have to prepare flip-charts including the outline of the chosen story and the criteria. The flip-charts have to be presented in the plenum. The time granted for the task is 90 minutes. When teams finish earlier they begin immediately to work on task 5 of 5. After 90 minutes the presentations of the selected stories and the selection criteria start.

[12] Task 5 of 5 (explained to the team of leaders only): Every team has to prepare an input of 15 minutes maximum (interesting, compelling, future-orientated; concept / theory / model) in the form of power point or prezi presentation, demonstration, theatre play, video, speech etc. The aim is to move a step forward in learning about *leadership & motivation* and what HR professionals should know respectively reflect on. These presentations will be held at the beginning of the last segment (VI) in the plenum.

[13] A special term for leaders without formal power is *first among equals* respectively *primus or prima inter pares.*

Segment III (III.1-III.4) Psychodrama
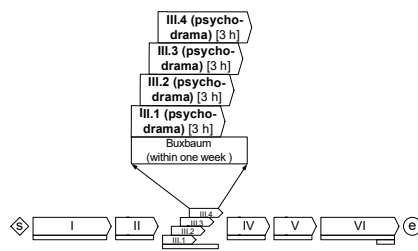
In four separate subgroups (¼ of the total students[14]), the students spend a three-hour session with psychodrama practitioner Martin Buxbaum to experience and explore the concept and techniques of psychodrama. After brief theoretical input and a warmup exercise, the students are invited to perform freely-chosen roles in a future workplace-related HR situation that only emerges through their actions and choices. This opens up space for each individual to enact expectations, stereotypes and prejudices, but also to expand their role repertoire and range. Role feedback, sharing and situational reflection round off the session.

The psychodrama segment is an intense self-experience intended to make students aware of their own impact on the organizational processes they are involved in. Sufficient experience from earlier segments enables students to transfer course processes and their individual roles to the psychodrama sequence. In realizing the impact of stereotypes and prejudices on one's voluntarily chosen role(s) in a given context students ideally become conscious of potential room for self-responsibility in social systems, respectively organizations.

Segment IV Negotiation, Observation and Analysis
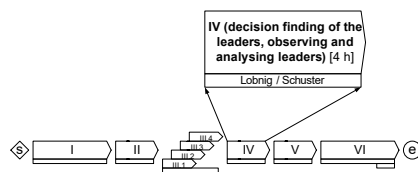
Starting with an advice of the lecturers regarding participating observation, the team of leaders gets the objective to negotiate and to rank the stories chosen in their teams according to the criteria developed within task 4 of 5. The team members are assigned to observe the leaders like sketched in Figure 8.

The guideline for the observation is to observe the negotiation with the following questions in mind:

– How do leaders identify with the task, his or her engagement?

– Which problem solving methods are put in place?

– Which decision modes are chosen?

– Whether the observed leader is a team player?

– Which differences can be observed looking on the group of leaders, i. e. individual team member / leader / representative of a team?

---

[14] This gives the other ¾ of students a time range of 9 hours to be spent on task 5 of 5. Within this time range the teams have to work on their own, whether and how this is done is not directly verified but after the presentations during segment VI (Figure 2) the lecturers ask the teams how much time they actually spent to prepare.

After the introduction the negotiation of the team of leaders starts and so does the observation.
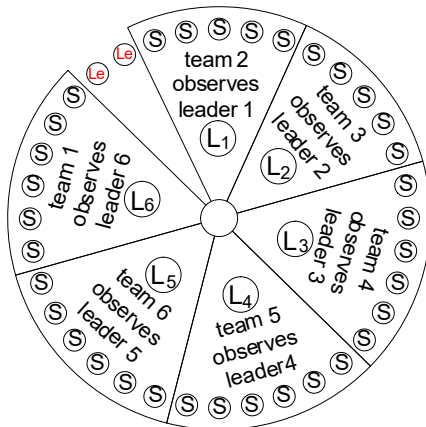

Figure 8 Observation of the Negotiation of the Leaders (L$_{1-6}$)

When the team of leaders decide on the ranking the lecturers facilitate an assessment process regarding team members, leaders and lecturers satisfaction with the final decision made (on a flip-chart page) Figure 9.

Figure 9 Assessment regarding the decision of the team of leaders

Within the next step lecturers assign two objectives (A and B) to the teams. Objective A is to analyse the observations within the teams. Every team has to produce a flip-chart addressed to the leader observed by that team (Figure 8). The flip-chart has to contain strengths, weaknesses and recommendations for improving his or her leadership behaviour / style / approach. Objective B is to analyse the team dynamics during the negotiation in the team of leaders. Every team has to come up with a flip-chart containing [+/-]-aspects related to certain criteria, namely

- structuring of the discussion process (documentation, method, ...)

- communication (listening, arguing, question techniques, ...)

- role differentiation (member of the team of leaders / representative of a team)

- group dynamics (who took the lead, who followed, who did neither?)

- task engagement

– etc.

After communicating the objectives, the lecturers send the teams to work until 15 minutes before this segment IV ends. Within the last 15 minutes lecturers collect the produced flip-charts and close down this part of the course.

Segment V Feedback and Transfer to Theory
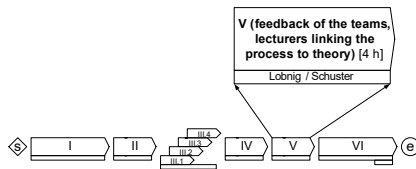
Segment V starts in the plenary with the feedback of the teams to the leaders they observed (Figure 8) by using the flip-charts produced during the antecedent segment (IV).

When the feedback is done the teams get the objective to give feedback to their own leaders (strength / weaknesses / recommendations; time frame 20 minutes; every team on its own).

After that the highest ranked story is analysed[15] by the lecturers in the plenary-setting.

When the analysis is done Lobnig and Schuster start to link the process to theory, according to their experiences and Argyris' (1995: 20-26) discovery of common inconsistency of individual's theories of action[16]. Students are invited to ask questions.

Segment VI Show down, Debriefing and Course Evaluation
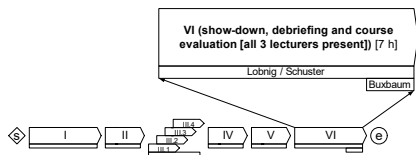
The show down starts with the presentations of the teams (task 5 of 5) including feedback on content and style of the presentations (Figure 10).
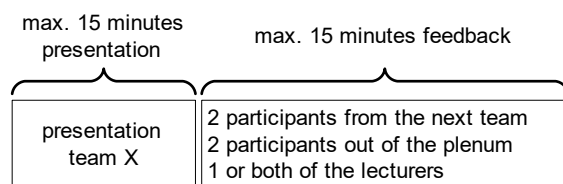

Figure 10 Feedback system

---

[15] A necessary condition for that is the presence of the story bringer because the lecturers need to ask questions. If the story bringer of the highest ranked story is absent the next lower one in the ranking will be chosen and so on.

[16] Argyris discovered significant differences when looking at the *theory individuals espoused* and their *theory-in-use* i. e. their actual behaviour. Another interesting fact of his finding was that *the individuals were unaware of this inconsistency.*

After that presentation/feedback part, a closing of the roles, the social dynamics experienced and the personal relations starts. To provide a good closing and farewell the lecturers advice for some *rituals.* Internally team members give feedback to each other and say things that have to be said. For the external farewell in the plenary setting the teams are told to produce a flip-chart containing one highlight and one lowlight of the process. The time given for this teamwork is 60 minutes including a break of 20 minutes.

In this very last part of the course all three lecturers involved are present, namely Buxbaum, Lobnig and Schuster. It starts with the presentation of the high-/lowlight flip-charts by the teams. One or two other teams and the lecturers can be asked for feedback by the presenting team. When the presentations are completed lecturers give all participants the opportunity for open feedback regarding the whole process. This is the final act of the course.

Summary

The first part shows the interrelation of *teaching* and the *institution organising the course and the curriculum* and how this can be used to determine the complexity and coherence of the didactic approach. The leeway granted by the institution was utilized to set up a team of lecturers who mutually built a structure for the course *Leadership & Motivation.* The whole concept is based on organisational and group dynamics and uses groups of different sizes for teaching, learning and experiencing.

The second part focusses on didactics which is derived from a group dynamics and process intervention format called *Organisational Laboratory.* It depicts in detail how the innovative teaching concept processes lecturers contradiction of being a guiding authority and facilitators of an open reflection process.

Since the here introduced innovative teaching concept is accompanied by intervention research the authors are collecting experiences with the format presented in this paper to further elaborate the impact of the teaching.

References

Argyris, Ch. (1995): Action Science and Organisational Learning. In: Journal of Managerial Psychology Volume 10 Number 6, 20-25. (Possibility of download: http://www.saspa.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Argyrus-Action-science-and-organizational-learning.pdf, 13 Jan. 2017)

Foerster, von, Heinz (1981): Notes on an epistemology of living things. Republished in *Observing Systems.* Seaside, CA: Intersystems Publications. (Possibility of download: http://ada.evergreen.edu/~arunc/texts/cybernetics/heinz/epistemology/epistemology.pdf, 26 Dec. 2016)

Krainz, E. E. (2006): Gruppendynamik als Wissenschaft [Group-dynamics as Science, translated by the author] In: Heintel, P. (ed.) (2006): betrifft: TEAM, Dynamische Prozesse in Gruppen [regarding: TEAM, Dynamic Processes within Groups, translated by R. J. S.] Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Lesjak, B./Lobnig, H. (2014): The Organization Laboratory. An Experimental Training Setting for Learning the Process of Organizing. In: Scala, K./Grossmann,R./Lenglacher,M./Mayer, K. (Eds): Leadership Learning for the Future. North Carolina: Information Age Publishing, Inc.

Lobnig, H. (2009): Organisationsentwicklung und Kooperation zwischen Organisationen. [Organisational Development and Cooperation between Organisations. Translated by R. J. S.] Habilitation Klagenfurt.

Pesendorfer, B. (1983): The Dynamics of Organization; 1st Version[17]. Download: http://www.pesendorfer.de/downloads/BP1983_Dynamics_Organisations_.pdf (30th Dec. 2016).

Schuster, R. J. (2015). On teaching leadership intervention science in action theoretical background and design of a lecture on leadership. Gruppendynamik und Organisationsberatung, 46(2), 213-235. SharedIt: http://rdcu.be/mRlk. (26 Dec. 2016)

Schuster, R. J./Lobnig, H. (2016): Lehren und Lernen aus Erfahrung. Beitrag zum Forschungsforum der FHK 2016. [Teaching and Learning from Experience. Contribution to the Research-Conference of FHK 2016. Translated by R. J. S.] Download: http://ffhoarep.fh-ooe.at/handle/123456789/751. PREZI presentation: https://prezi.com/znygc7skagpx/lehren-und-lernen-aus-erfahrung/.

---

[17] A second, german version was published 1993: Pesendorfer, B. (1993): Organisationsdynamik; 2nd Version. In: Schwarz, G. (ed.): Gruppendynamik - Geschichte und Zukunft (Festschrift für Traugott Lindner). Vienna: WUV-Univ. Verlag, p.196-230.