

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340152998>

Synchronous Online-Teaching on EU Foreign Affairs: A Blended-Learning Project of Seven Universities between E-Learning and Live Interaction

Article in *Journal of Contemporary European Research* · March 2020

DOI: 10.30950/jcer.v16i1.1154

CITATIONS

8

READS

72

2 authors:



Friedrich Plank

Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz

36 PUBLICATIONS 132 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)



Arne Niemann

Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz

141 PUBLICATIONS 2,139 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Cross-site teaching between multiple universities [View project](#)



The identity effect of Europeanised lifeworlds: Becoming European through football? [View project](#)

Plank, F. and Niemann, A. (2020)
„Synchronous Online-Teaching on EU Foreign Affairs: A Blended-Learning
Project of Seven Universities between E-Learning and Live Interaction”

In: *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, Vol. 16, No. 1, pp. 52 – 64.
This is a preliminary version of an article whose final and definitive form was
published in *Journal of Contemporary European Research* © Copyright remains
with the authors. *JCER* is available online at
<https://www.jcer.net/index.php/jcer>.

Journal of Contemporary European Research

Volume 16, Issue 1 (2020)

Research Article

Synchronous Online-Teaching on EU Foreign Affairs: A Blended-Learning Project of Seven Universities between E-Learning and Live Interaction

Friedrich Plank and Arne Niemann

Citation

Plank, F. and Niemann, A. (2020). 'Synchronous Online-Teaching on EU Foreign Affairs: A Blended-Learning Project of Seven Universities between E-Learning and Live Interaction', *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 16 (1): 51-64. <https://doi.org/10.30950/jcer.v16i1.1154>

First published at: www.jcer.net

Abstract

Together with 6 universities in Germany, we organised a seminar on the inter-relations between crises in Europe and their effects on European foreign affairs. The seminar was conceptualised with regard to two dimensions: (1) weekly live-interaction between more than 150 students with a clear schedule for discussions and presentations, and (2) an e-learning portal that constituted the main reference for various elements of learning and information exchange. Within this framework, students in working groups across different universities critically developed problem-based assumptions and arguments on EU foreign affairs both live and through the e-learning portal. The projects thus included both synchronous teaching and blended-learning elements. Our aim was to particularly link students from different disciplinary and knowledge backgrounds who discussed current issues of EU studies/ EU foreign affairs. In this paper, we interrogate and reflect on this teaching experience by elaborating on its technical and didactical aspects, presenting its innovative character, outlining its strengths and weaknesses, and providing recommendations for colleagues.

Keywords

Teaching; EU foreign affairs; Blended-learning; E-learning

INTRODUCTION

Academics teaching European Union (EU) foreign affairs are confronted with increased complexity of current developments in the international arena. Moreover, multiple technological developments such as digitalisation and new learning spaces generate novel opportunities and challenges for teaching programmes. Hence, university teachers increasingly seek to apply innovative methods (Lambeir and Ramaekers 2006, p. 546). Many students wish to discuss the fast-changing developments in EU foreign affairs. Focusing on recent developments and explicit links to current debates such as Brexit, the financial crisis of the EU, the so-called European refugee crisis, or Europe's relations to the world in times of eroding alliances tend to be very popular among students. However, diverse backgrounds and previous learning experiences of the students require flexible approaches to teaching. Thus, the questions arise how to engage students effectively in learning about EU foreign affairs and its complexity, and how to make broader theoretical approaches interesting and worth studying for students.

Following increased demand for services of digital teaching (Garrison and Vaughan 2007, p. ix), a debate has evolved on so-called innovative teaching in Political Science (Goldsmith and Berndtson 2002, Gormley-Heenan and Lightfoot 2012, Ishiyama et al. 2016), and European Studies (Baroncelli and Farneti 2014, Lightfoot and Maurer 2014, Maurer and Mawdsley 2014, Maurer et al. 2020). However, most of the proposed innovations such as simulations (Usherwood 2014, Guasti et al. 2015, Muno et al. 2017, Plank et al. 2017), student engagement (Lightfoot and Maurer 2014), flipped classroom (Bergmann and Sams 2012, Boevé et al. 2017), new media (Quaintance 2014), web seminars

(Lieberman 2014, Mihai 2014), field trips (Roder 2014), and distance learning (Brühl and Henneberg 2016, Bell et al. 2017, Plank et al. 2019) can only to some extent respond to the demands made by students in digital teaching environments and with regard to the complexity of policy issues. On the one hand, students question the learning efficiency of traditional teaching methods (Garrison and Vaughan 2007). On the other, within digital learning courses, students have asked for more opportunities to interact with each other in synchronistic ways (McBrien et al. 2009).

Confronted with the challenges described above, lecturers of European Studies as well as International Relations from 13 universities and academic bodies decided to establish a course on the inter-relations between crises in Europe and their effects on European foreign affairs during the summer term 2017 (Plank et al. 2019). It sought to bring together the expertise of different universities and research facilities for the students.¹ The seminar was conceptualised with regard to two dimensions: (1) weekly live-interaction between more than 150 students with a clear schedule for discussions and presentations, and (2) an e-learning portal that constituted the main reference for various elements of learning and information exchange. The latter included aspects from both an academic perspective – e.g. by making use of weekly short video lectures by internationally renowned scholars on specific topics as well as academic literature – and integrated aspects from a more practice-oriented perspective, such as online tests, or student works like videos, briefing papers, wikis, or podcasts. Within this framework, students critically developed problem-based assumptions and arguments on EU foreign affairs in mixed working groups across different universities, both live and through the e-learning portal (see below).

Our aims were to particularly link students from different disciplinary and knowledge backgrounds who sought to discuss current issues of EU foreign affairs. Moreover, we had the goal to specifically enable students to critically reflect on current challenges of EU foreign affairs. Another specific objective of the courses was to provide universities with limited expertise on EU foreign affairs with knowledge provided by experts and to make use of synergies from cooperation in this regard. The project drew on inverted/ flipped classroom elements – i.e. the shift of knowledge transfer to the self-study phase and of the in-depth reflection to the actual session (Lage et al. 2000, Strayer 2012, Talbert 2012, Goerres et al. 2015, Lambach and Kärger 2016) – which were replenished by far-reaching e-learning platforms and an interactive, cross-site element during each session. The focus on students and their learning paths was complemented by a didactic-theoretical teaching concept which centred on the specific requirements of e-learning and synchronous online-teaching. The creation of a cross-site working atmosphere within student groups by using digital elements was an essential part and objective of the course. In the summer term 2018, the consortium reviewed the project and started a cross-site seminar involving 200 students which focused on the security-development-nexus of EU-policies towards Africa.

In this paper, we seek to particularly focus on the answers to the quests for innovative teaching in European Studies the projects provided, and the lessons learned for future teaching projects as outlined in the introduction to this special section (Maurer et al. 2020). We thus aim at presenting the concept of synchronous teaching in the field of European Studies and EU foreign affairs and point to its strengths and weaknesses. Specifically, we focus on the didactic and technical implementation of the projects, their context, adaptations we made, a comparison to more conventional teaching approaches, and recommendations and lessons learned. Moreover, this study seeks to critically engage in a discussion concerning the degree to which we achieved the aims of the projects. We argue that the projects had specific advantages such as the inclusion of a heterogeneous student group, and specific weaknesses such as considerable expenditure.

We proceed as follows: First, we elaborate briefly on blended-learning and synchronous teaching before we outline the conception of our cross-site courses. Afterwards we point out in how far the projects could respond to an increased quest for innovative teaching before we point to lessons

learned from the experiences. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the findings and consider potential improvements for prospective teaching projects.

SYNCHRONOUS TEACHING AND BLENDED LEARNING AS INNOVATIVE TEACHING METHODS

Before this contribution presents the projects undertaken, it seeks to briefly elaborate on synchronous teaching and blended learning as specific teaching methods. The term blended learning has been defined as combination of “face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction” (Graham 2006, p. 5). Scholars have to a great extent elaborated on teaching experiences, and the efficiency and effectiveness for student learning processes of blended learning (Bonk and Graham 2006, Garrison and Kanuka 2004, Garrison and Vaughan 2007). As effort to increase a perceived lack of social interaction in (traditional) forms of distance learning, synchronous teaching allows “students and instructors to communicate orally, exchange messages through typing, upload PowerPoint presentations, transmit video, [or] surf websites together” (Mc Brien et al. 2009, p. 2). Synchronous teaching elements have particularly been used in the context of international cooperation or language courses (Hastie et al. 2010, Wang and Chen 2009), but have only been marginally applied to political science and European studies so far. One aim of the seminars presented below has been to provide for blended learning by including synchronous elements, in particular live interaction between the students and lecturers of the different universities. This effort moves beyond traditional forms of synchronous teaching that specifically target online-communication but do not necessarily include live-social-interaction (Martin and Parker 2014).

THE SYNCHRONOUS AND BLENDED SEMINAR ON EUROPEAN CRISES: “THREATS TO INNER PEACE IN EUROPE?”

In response to student interest in current political issues related to EU foreign affairs and in continuation of a previous teaching project on the Islamic State, which had been conceptualised as a classical lecture series (Brühl and Henneberg 2016), lecturers from six German universities came together in order to organise a synchronous online-teaching experiment. The seminar focused on crises in Europe and their effects on European foreign affairs and asked whether the various crises in Europe and the European Union can be deemed threats to peace in the region. This broad and up-to-date set of topics could only be achieved through the joint expertise of the participating universities, which was a major incentive for cooperation.

The seminar involved 13 synchronous sessions (one per week) and was included in the curricula of various masters and bachelors programmes of the participating universities. These involved programmes in Conflict Studies, European Studies, and Political Science. It was conceptualised as cross-site course and involved the use of digital technology. The idea of synchronous online cooperation focusing on the specific topic of Europe in crisis emerged from the lecturers’ observation that the departments involved faced a similar student demand for teaching on the phenomenon of European crises. However, the expertise in European Studies and specific crises varied among the participating academics, who were not comfortable to teach on all the crises and issues involved. As a consequence, members of the consortium felt the need to include external expertise into their curricula. In this sense, experts from diverse academic institutions were invited to give a short lecture which was uploaded as a video to the e-learning system. However, instead of inviting experts to each of the universities, the consortium decided to pool resources and additionally develop a seminar with specific learning elements.

In general, the seminar involved two dimensions: (1) an e-learning portal that constituted the main reference for various elements of learning and information exchange, and (2) weekly live interactions

between more than 150 students with a clear schedule for presentations and discussions. The e-learning portal served as the main communication platform for interaction between the students and teachers. Each of the lectures lasted between 15 and 20 minutes and focused on a specific topic such as refugee relocation systems in the EU, the Front National as right-wing populist party, or the impacts of Brexit (see table 1). Moreover, the students could find additional information, for instance on previous elections in a country, academic literature on the specific crises, and many student-made elements such as quizzes or briefing papers in the portal. Within the platform, which was moderated by the lecturers, the students were also able to upload material. The student-made elements involved videos containing interviews with external experts conducted and organised by students, a briefing paper for each crisis which was uploaded prior to the respective session, radio podcasts, video polls, short wikis, short analyses of caricatures, etc.

Each student had to conduct at least one task which she or he had chosen within the online platform. A task could, however, also involve membership in a working group that had to fulfil one online task. As an innovative element and in order to generate synchronous online-learning and coordination competence among the students, most of the groups were composed of students from different universities. As a consequence, students worked together across large distances and in an online format. The e-learning platform provided for specific fora, ether pads, and communication channels for each group which made it possible to use the platform not only as an information hub, but also as a working space. We applied the ILIAS platform as the e-learning component, a system commonly used in many German universities.²

Table 1: Course outline “Threats to peace in Europe”

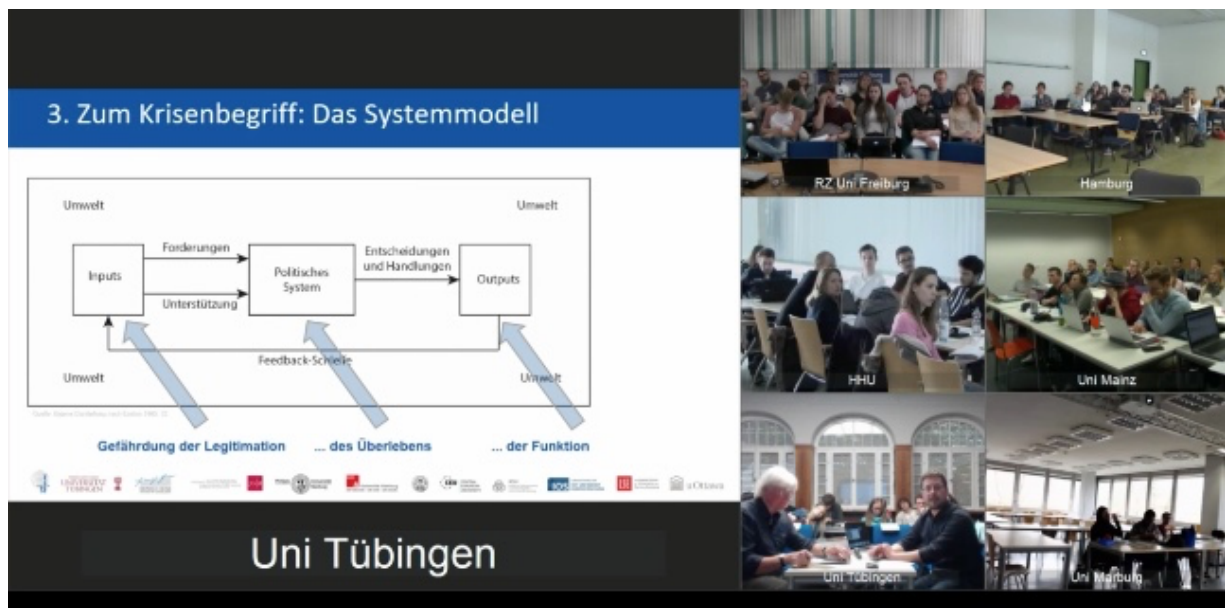
No.	Topic (original titles in German)	Input	Lead site
1	Introduction 1 - Welcome, presentation of analytical concept		Freiburg
2	Introduction 2 - Theoretical and conceptual session		Tübingen
3	Rule of law contestation?	András Bozoki (Central European University)	Hamburg
4	Inequality in Europe	Leo Bieling (Eberhard Karls University Tübingen)	Tübingen
5	Brexit	Karen Smith (London School of Economics and Political Science)	Freiburg
6	The Eurozone crisis	Joscha Abels (Eberhard Karls University Tübingen, and George Andreou (University of Thessaloniki)	Tübingen
7	Right-Wing populism in Europe	Daniel Stockemer (University of Ottawa)	Mainz
8	The Asylum crisis	Natascha Zaun (University of Oxford)	Düsseldorf
9	Geopolitics and Ukraine	Konstanze Jüngling (Institute for East and Southeast European Studies)	Marburg
10	EU-Russia and EU-US relations	Hans-Georg Ehrhardt (Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy)	Hamburg
11	Conclusion		Düsseldorf

Weekly live interaction among all participating universities constituted the second main component of the seminar which was conceptualised as a live-learning space in order to enable students to interact with each other. In addition to a preparatory and a revision phase, the seminar consisted of a 90-minute weekly session reflecting an inverted classroom concept. All participating universities exchanged live with changing lead-sites that conceptualised the session and provided instruction for local-phases in which the students were able to conduct group exercises on specific topics related to the overall theme. For instance, in the session on right-wing populism, the students in at the University of Mainz discussed the conditions under which right-wing parties might evolve as a threat to peace in Europe. Other universities discussed the conditions under which these parties might be stronger or weaker to do so. As such, every participating university had the lead for (at least) one session (see table 1). A typical session consisted of a (1) welcoming stage, (2) a live interaction involving input on the specific topic of the session, (3) and the possibility to ask questions to the expert who had provided a lecture uploaded to the e-learning portal. Most of the time, the expert attended the session physically or through online contact and the students were able to engage directly with him or her. In this context, cross-site student groups collected questions and comments beforehand. After this first online stage, in stage (4) a local component of the weekly sessions enabled the lecturers to individually develop group exercises, discussions, or text analyses with the local group. For instance, during the session led by the Mainz group which focused on right-wing populism and included an expert lecture on the Front National, the students studied additional video inputs by other experts elaborating on additional populist parties such as the AFD in Germany. The local sites could individually choose from a set of material provided for by the students with specific tasks related to the session. This included literature, quizzes, or short videos. Afterwards the local academics used the discussed potential threats to peace in Europe in the local group with regard to the particular session theme. As a standard procedure, the lead-site provided materials, an outline of the session, and guiding questions for the local discussion phase.

Lastly, in stage (5) findings of the local discussions and elaborations were brought together online before the lead-site closed the session. In the example described above, the expert had the opportunity to respond and comment on the points raised by the local groups. Although not every session stuck with this outline – single universities sometimes skipped the last online stage in order to intensify discussion or due to technical problems – most of the sessions proceeded in this way. Technically, the consortium used the software vidyo³ for the live interaction and some sites used H.323 standard as video-conference equipment (see figure 1).⁴

Since sessions in which students had to be present were taking place at every site which was connected via video conference, our conception of a synchronous online teaching set a different focus that distinguishes it from other sorts of online or blended-learning seminars and virtual lectures. Lecturers were present at all sites. In general, synchronous online-teaching is only scarcely covered by the existent literature (Plank et al. 2019). In contrast, the seminar provided an extension and modification of the inverted classroom and flipped classroom format in the sense that the possibility to discuss and work in small groups of up to 30 students was able and explicitly part of the concept. Accordingly, the teacher-team developed an analytical framework which was constantly discussed and modified by the students throughout the seminar.

The analytical framework included a discussion of central terms such as ‘crisis’ and ‘Europe’ and provided a basis for discussions and student working orientated to the framework. Moreover, many students used parts of the framework for theses and student papers.

Figure 1: Example for weekly live interaction including a presentation

THE SYNCHRONOUS AND BLENDED SEMINAR ON THE SECURITY-DEVELOPMENT-MIGRATION NEXUS WITH LOCAL PHASES: “THE SECURITY-DEVELOPMENT-MIGRATION NEXUS IN AFRICA”

After the first round of a cross-site seminar the consortium decided to repeat the teaching experiment and conceptualise another course in the summer term 2018. This seminar built largely on the didactical approach of the previous experience, but the consortium modified the concept to quite some extent (see below). In sum, eight universities and seven academic organisations were involved in the teaching experiment and more than 200 students from different backgrounds including masters and bachelor programs participated and received credit points.⁵ The seminar included 12 sessions. Whereas we also relied on weekly live interaction and an e-learning platform as major components of the seminar, the course also applied structured local phases into the conceptualisation and provided for a more flexible analytical framework based on securitisation-theory of the Copenhagen School. These local phases served as platforms for intensification and discussion within a smaller local group. They refer to working sessions within the synchronous session in which the local seminar (e.g. the seminar at the University of Mainz which involved 25 students), elaborated on specific aspects such as a specific proposal by the EU Commission, surveys in EU member states on the link between security and development, or the text analysis of one speech. The local lecturer (e.g. the authors at the University of Mainz), conceptualised these local phases (30 minutes) previously. After the local part, the findings of the local groups were brought together, contextualised and discussed.

The teachers put more effort into the composition of the group formats elaborating on specific tasks and tried to leave more space and flexibility to the local aspects of the seminar. For instance, in the session introducing the security-development nexus, it was possible to do a text-work on critical approaches to the nexus, discuss videos with statements from citizens in Mainz that tried to define the nexus, or search for narratives in Commission proposals. A particular emphasis was placed on securing the findings across the universities engaged in the local phases.

As one central element of both projects, the project team and the students created specific e-learning portals for both projects. These portals make the videos, students' outputs, literature, and all other documents, elaborations, or briefings publicly available.⁶

Table 2: Course outline “Security-Development-Migration Nexus in Africa”

No.	Topic	Input	Lead site
1	Opening		Freiburg
2	Introduction to theoretical and conceptual framework		Hamburg
3	Policy field 1 - Security and development	Alexander De Juan (University of Konstanz)	Marburg
4	Policy field 2 - Migration		Marburg
5	The Security-Development-Migration nexus	Julian Bergmann (German Development Institute)	Mainz
6	Germany as actor in the nexus	Cord Jakobeit (University of Hamburg)	Frankfurt
7	Italy as actor in the nexus	Bernardo Venturi (Istituto Affari Internazionali)	Magdeburg
8	The EU as actor in the nexus	Toni Haastrup (University of Kent)	Tübingen
9	The African Union as Actor in the Nexus	Christoph Hartmann (Heinrich-Heine-University Düsseldorf)	Hamburg
10	Consequences for the EU	Martina Fischer (Brot für die Welt) and Christine Hackenesch (German Development Institute)	Tübingen
11	Consequences for Africa	Chris Changwe Nshimbi (University of Pretoria)	Düsseldorf
12	Conclusion		Frankfurt

IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION OF THE INNOVATIVE TEACHING EXPERIMENTS

Both projects had their strengths and weaknesses. A particular reason for conceptualising the courses as seminars has been to address weaknesses of the preliminary lecture series on the Islamic State, which was partly criticised for including too few participating elements for students (Brühl and Henneberg 2016).

Synchronous online-teaching as innovative method in teaching EU foreign affairs

As specific innovative elements, the synchronous character of both projects constitutes a challenging as well as new format of teaching EU foreign affairs. Drawing on the concept of inverted or flipped classroom, we additionally included an interaction mode in each of the sessions and through cross-site student working groups. The inverted classroom stands out in terms of encouraging a more intense interaction between lecturers and students and by overcoming individual learning challenges such as the need for clarification felt by single students during the presence phase in common seminars (Bergmann and Sams 2012, pp. 20–32, Strayer 2012, Brame 2013). It is explicitly not intended for knowledge transfer but for generating understanding, insight, and critical reflection, and scholars have argued that it leads to more effective learning (Talbert 2012, Brame 2013, Goerres et al. 2015). The extended concept of the inverted classroom has been used as an additional element of the seminars, but the consortium intended to move beyond the concept to additionally create a blended learning environment facilitating student interaction both in the presence phases and online.

We argue that three factors in particular make the projects innovative teaching formats, which seek to address challenges identified by previous teaching methods: (1) First, students had to conduct specific tasks that move beyond traditional learning exercises. In the European crisis seminar, one cross-site working group developed a dossier regarding the respective crisis and conducted a conflict analysis. This closely mentored dossier ensured a common level of knowledge among the heterogeneous group. During the sessions, the invited experts were connected to the cross-site video conference, while the mixed student groups were in charge of the discussion between the experts and

the student community. By assigning students to two different working group formats and mixing students of different stages of study, tasks could be adjusted to students' previous knowledge, thus focusing on students and their capabilities. Students appreciated the challenge inherent in these tasks compared to more commonly used presentations and confirmed that they allowed for a facilitated access and helpful overview over recent topics (evaluation poll).⁷ Within the nexus seminar, groups preparing the discussion were replaced by 'summary groups' which encompassed students from all participating universities and sought to provide syntheses of the findings and reflections on the working processes. In addition, the nexus seminar put more emphasis on text work, for instance by analysing speech acts in the policy fields. Other students were asked to develop additional e-learning elements such as audio and video contributions as well as quizzes for feedback, which supported them in preparing and revising content. The development of these contributions fostered individual foci of interest and the skills of all participants in terms of their prospective 'employability'. Students also valued the possibility of becoming creative while extending their knowledge and the broad range of materials they could choose from: in the course evaluation that was undertaken they highlighted their appreciation for "creative tasks", "interactive methods", or "super media" approaches.

(2) Second, the seminar sought to make it possible to reflect on learning processes, the topics themselves, as well as analytical assumptions. In every session, time was reserved for students to reflect and classify their insights with regard to their broader knowledge which was taking place both within their local group (offline) and in cross-site working groups (online). In particular, the local phases of the projects that were increased in the nexus seminar, made it possible to discuss and reflect on the online interactions. Moreover, a working group focusing on a cross-sectional analysis of the whole seminar made reference to the analytical framework and provided for a conclusion. In this working group, students were able to express specific demands and reflect upon the seminar and its theoretical, analytical, and didactical basis. Most importantly and due to the prior recording of the expert presentations, students were granted the time needed to reflect the contents in-depth and to formulate well-directed questions, but most importantly to better contribute to the discussion because they could ask their questions directly to the experts. In this way, discussions with the invited scholars became a precious element of the weekly sessions.

(3) Third, the interaction between students from various universities, diverging study programs and different (e.g. disciplinary) backgrounds, can be emphasised as a specific focus of the project. Whereas for instance European Studies are a permanent feature of the curriculum in Mainz, students in Tübingen and Marburg are enrolled in Peace and Conflict MA programs. The inclusion of interactive elements both in the general approach of the courses as well as within the student working groups increased social interaction which has been identified as missing in many distance learning endeavours (McBrien et al. 2009). In the latter, important skills and learning processes are suppressed, such as the need to think with each other, to share one's ideas, and to engage oneself critically into the process of search and research (see Smith 2003). Moreover, students can be prevented from talking to each other in virtual learning environments when others are less present (whether student or professor) (Lambeir and Ramaekers 2006, p. 550). Hence, the engagement with each other, the exchange of ideas, and the collaborative search for answers constitute important elements of effective learning. Acknowledging these challenges of virtual learning, the consortium established student working groups, live interaction during the online phases, as well as interaction and exchange among the lecturers, the latter being another important element of collaborative teaching.

Evaluation: Weaknesses and strengths of the projects

As has been rightly noted, innovation does not necessarily involve effective learning and many enthusiasts of e-learning and new teaching focus primarily on evaluations that measure the popularity

of the methods among students (Middleton 2010, p. 7). As a consequence, we do not particularly analyse the popularity of the courses in terms of student demand but do include self-reflections of students' learning processes. From our point of view, students increasingly attach great importance to the effectiveness of their learning and how far their knowledge, skills, and reflection-ability increases. Both projects have shown that a synchronous online-teaching element involving blended learning formats has specific strengths: (1) First, different types of learners can be addressed individually. Since a diverse set of working materials – from academic literature to audio-visual e-learning elements – was offered and students were given the opportunity to conduct specific tasks, which varied in terms of requirements and with regard to the expected competence of students, flexible and individual approaches were possible. In this sense, the consortium tried to adjust specific tasks to the specific skills and competences of students by also enabling interaction in the working groups between students of different experience and background since students had to manage tasks within the group. As students increasingly express their wishes for decentralised and flexible learning outcomes (Bell et al. 2017), the projects largely enabled this flexibility.

(2) Second, the projects focused on the link between debates in EU foreign affairs such as nexus-thinking in the Africa-EU relations and current events. External experts and their exchange with our students by means of live transmissions are at the heart of including current research results. Given the shift of presentations to the preparatory phase, an intensive exchange is possible, and students can prepare their questions in advance rather than posing them in an ad hoc way. The applied tasks seem to strengthen students' motivation towards recent research. In the evaluation poll, 77 per cent of students praised the possibility to interact with these experts on current topics. For example, they had a chance to discuss the erosion of rule of law in Hungary and Poland with a colleague from the CEU in Budapest. The fact that experts were actually involved in the sessions and thus participated in the discussions was specifically appreciated by the students in the evaluation. They referred positively to the experts' approachability and the possibility to pose direct questions in the evaluation poll.

(3) Third, the learning outcomes are applicable for students. Based on the assumption that the application of knowledge and available skills improves learning processes, the latter become an integral part of teaching concepts, also regarding prospective 'employability' (Biggs and Tang 2011, p. 63, Maurer and Mawdsley 2014). This applies especially to interdisciplinary qualifications which do not only include classic competencies but also rely on teaching anchored in the digital age (Goldsmith and Berndtson 2002, p. 70, Carpenter and Drezner 2010). The practical applicability of learning outcomes is covered through the diverse range of tasks within the seminar. Students have to apply their skills in interviewing, producing digital content, and dealing with complex digital platforms. Due to the need for close coordination within working groups, the students have to work together under time pressure and over long distances.

(4) Fourth, the inverted classroom model allows for a stronger student-centeredness as well as a flexibilisation of learning methods as we could spend more time on intensifying learning objectives in the class. 63 per cent of all respondents confirmed that their overall learning progress was strengthened by the e-learning elements (evaluation poll). Self-produced videos like short expert interviews or representations of public opinion on specific political topics represent the most popular elements among students. In sum, the evaluation verifies that e-learning elements are accepted among students and deemed to contribute to the success of university teaching. The synchronous student cooperation was explicitly appreciated among the participants.

However, a number of weaknesses were also identified: (1) First, some challenges evolved concerning the student working groups. Students recognised that the time-consuming coordination and distribution of tasks was difficult in some groups. In addition, the communication for the lecturers with the working groups has at times been very time-consuming. Moreover, occasional free-riding was

raised in the evaluation as students reported of challenges from the unequal work distribution (evaluation poll). Partly, these issues emerged due to diverging examination requirements at the different universities, which can be standardised only to a limited degree.

(2) Second, the live interaction format is also characterised by some shortcomings. In contrast to traditional seminars, some students were less likely to raise questions or participate in discussions. This might be particularly related to the uncommon situation of speaking to a camera. Moreover, there were also challenges concerning the technical aspects. While the viewing and audio quality was rather good, many universities had to move the seminar to specific video-rooms which had number restrictions. Moreover, the format required lecturers to rather give up control in specific learning situations as they were embedded in a consortium of several lecturers. In this sense, cooperation, coordination, and substantial agreement between the participating lecturers constitute major prerequisites for the seminar (Plank et al. 2019). The latter also points to transaction costs involved. The more lecturers and universities become involved, the more likely the technical challenges. In addition, the group of lecturers should share specific teaching methods and be able to accept a loss of control.

(3) Third, many observers emphasising e-learning and blended learning as innovative teaching methods praise the cost-effective benefits of these approaches (Osguthorpe and Graham 2003, pp. 231–232). However, from the experience of the two projects, it seems that the considerable time invested in these teaching formats exceeds that required for regular seminars. Yet, when evaluating teaching from a cost-benefit calculus it is also important to specify the audience (Middleton 2010). In this sense, students tend to benefit from the projects, whereas the lecturers might have to invest more time than in a traditional seminar. Hence, third party funding constitutes an important aspect of synchronous teaching with blended learning elements, as this may, to some extent, help create the necessary foundation and infrastructure.

CONCLUSION

Starting from the observation that EU foreign affairs constitutes a teaching field which is characterised by the complexity and dynamic nature of the subject, and referring to the changing nature of teaching in higher/university education, we have presented two teaching projects based on synchronous teaching, blended-learning, and collaborative engagement from both students' and lecturers' perspective. The study reveals that inverted classroom-inspired synchronous online-cooperation using blended-learning elements can make a precious contribution to innovative teaching EU foreign affairs and related subjects. We have indicated that such a teaching method can address different types of learners, include the most recent international expert knowledge, create applicable learning outcomes, and generate flexible learning outcomes.

Apart from the benefits received by directly participating students and lecturers, the format also carries great potential within an internationalisation of the participating universities, notwithstanding any organisational and technical obstacles that might exist. From the analysis undertaken in this study, the establishment of this form of teaching seems suitable for two reasons: on the one hand, interaction among students, lecturers, and between students and renowned scholars in the field might provide excellent opportunities for integrating the field also from a teaching perspective. On the other, there is a possibility to make the collected material (like videos, presentations, recordings) available to a broader public. Then, colleagues, students, and other interested persons can make use of parts of the knowledge collected or intensify their learning through additional material.

However, there are also some major challenges emanating from the structure of the environment in which these projects take place. There might be challenges within the student working groups and students might raise fewer questions due to the live interaction. From a cost-benefit calculus, the projects are rather demanding. In addition, and as we have argued in this study, innovation is not a good thing per se. Rather, effective, flexible, and dynamic learning environments should be a major objective of teaching. With these projects, we sought to enable students to learn in flexible, interdisciplinary, dynamic but also demanding environments, and despite some weaknesses and challenges identified, the projects have also facilitated synchronous cooperation and acquaintance between students and teachers of different backgrounds and universities.

Important recommendations for colleagues thus include in particular three aspects: First, the consortium should be kept small. With reference to transactions costs and coordination between lecturers, a smaller group of up to five different programs seems optimal. Second, additional technical support for each institution is necessary to develop the time-consuming e-learning elements (see also Henneberg 2018). This might require the acquisition of third-party funding. Third, local parts of the sessions are recommended since they enable in-depth discussion and consolidation of specific topics. It might even be an option to hold whole sessions on a local basis in order to leave more space for debates among the students. Overall, this article should be taken as encouragement for colleagues to engage in synchronous teaching and foster (international) interaction between both students and lecturers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and editors for their helpful and constructive comments. Moreover, we would like to thank our colleagues Tanja Brühl, Ingo Henneberg, Alexander Kobusch, Patricia Konrad, Witold Mucha, Thomas Nielebock, Natalie Pawlowski, Tina Rosner, Kerstin Zimmer, Clara Föllner, Jacob Liebig, Christina Pesch, Carolin Reichert, the technical staff at the universities, the experts lecturing, and all students for the great co-operation, their motivation and passion.

AUTHOR DETAILS

Arne Niemann, University of Mainz
Friedrich Plank, University of Mainz

Corresponding author: Friedrich Plank, Department of Political Science, University of Mainz, Jakob-Welder-Weg 12, Mainz, Germany [friedrich.plank@politik.uni-mainz.de].

ENDNOTES

¹ The project succeeded a lecture series on the Islamic State which the consortium jointly organised in the summer term 2016 (Brühl and Henneberg 2016).

² Similar to moodle or blackboard, Ilias constitutes an online platform for the management of courses.

³ See <https://www.vidyo.com/>.

⁴ For an outline and best practice guide see (Henneberg 2018).

⁵ For more information see (Plank et al. 2019).

⁶ See <http://www.elearning-europa.politik.uni-freiburg.de/> for the first, and https://wb-iliad.uni-freiburg.de/iliad.php?ref_id=194694&cmd=frameset&cmdClass=ilrepositorygui&cmdNode=xy&baseClass=ilRepositoryGUI for the second seminar.

⁷ The evaluation polls are accessible via <https://international.politics.uni-mainz.de/staff/friedrich-plank/>.

REFERENCES

- Baroncelli, S. and Farneti, R. (eds) (2014). *Teaching and learning the European Union*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Bell, S., Douce, C., Caeiro, S., Teixeira, A., Martín-Aranda, R., and Otto, D. (2017). 'Sustainability and distance learning'. *Open Learning*, 32(2): 95-102.
- Bergmann, J. and Sams, A. (2012). *Flip Your Classroom*. Eugene/Washington DC: International Society for Technology and Education.
- Biggs, J. and Tang, C. (2011). *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill/Open University Press.
- Boevé, A.J., Meijer, R.R., Bosker, R.J., Vugteveen, J., Hoekstra, R. and Albers, C.J. (2017). 'Implementing the flipped classroom'. *Higher Education*, 74(6): 1015-1032.
- Bonk, C. and Graham, C. R. (eds) (2006). *The handbook of Blended Learning*. San Francisco: Pfeiffer.
- Brame, C.J. (2013). *Flipping the Classroom*. Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching. Online: <http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/flipping-the-classroom/> [accessed 02 December 2017].
- Brühl, T. and Henneberg, I. (2016). 'Standortübergreifende Ringvorlesung – Erfahrungen eines Lehrprojekts zum »Islamischen Staat«'. *Zeitschrift für Friedens- und Konfliktforschung*, 5(2): 274–282.
- Carpenter, C. and Drezner, D.W. (2010). 'International Relations 2.0'. *International Studies Perspectives*, 11(3): 255–272.
- Garrison, D. R. and Kanuka H. (2004). 'Blended learning'. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 7(2): 95–105.
- Garrison, D.R. and Vaughan, N. D. (2007). *Blended Learning in Higher Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Goldsmith, M. and Berndtson, E. (2002). 'Teaching challenges for Political Science in Europe'. *European Political Science*, 1(3): 69–80.
- Gormley-Heenan, C. and Lightfoot, S. (2012). *Teaching politics and international relations*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Graham, C. R. (2006). 'Blended Learning systems'. In: C. Bonk and C. R. Graham (eds), *The handbook of Blended Learning*. San Francisco: Pfeiffer: 3–21.
- Guasti, P., Muno, W., and Niemann, A. (2015). 'Introduction – EU simulations as a multi-dimensional resource'. *European Political Science*, 14(3): 205–217.
- Hastie, M., Hung I.-C., and Chen, N.-S. (2010). 'A blended synchronous learning model for educational international collaboration'. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 47(1): 9-24.
- Henneberg, I. (2018). *Best-Practices und Voraussetzungen zur Durchführung standortübergreifender Ringseminare*. Online: <https://freidok.uni-freiburg.de/fedora/objects/freidok:15874/datastreams/FILE1/content> [accessed 02 December 2019].
- Ishiyama, J., Miller, W.J. and Simon, E. (eds) (2016). *Handbook on teaching and learning in political science and international relations*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Keegan, D. (1996). *Foundations of Distance Education*. London: Routledge.
- Lage, M.J., Platt, G.J. and Treglia, M. (2000). 'Inverting the Classroom'. *The Journal of Economic Education*, 31(1): 1-30.
- Lambach, D. and Kärger, C. (2016). 'Aktivierung von Studierenden im Inverted Classroom'. *Zeitschrift für Friedens- und Konfliktforschung*, 5(2): 263–273.
- Lambeir, B. and Ramaekers, S. (2006). 'The Limits of 'Blackboard' are the Limits of My World'. *E-Learning and Digital Media*, 3(4): 544–551.
- Lieberman, S. (2014). 'Using Facebook As an Interactive Learning Environment in European Political Studies'. *European Political Science*, 13(1): 23–31.
- Lightfoot, S. and Maurer, H. (2014). 'Introduction: Teaching European Studies – Old and New Tools for Student Engagement'. *European Political Science*, 13(1): 1–3.

- Martin, F. and Parker, M. (2014). 'Use of Synchronous Virtual Classrooms'. *MERLOT*, 10(2): 192–210.
- Maurer, H. and Mawdsley, J. (2014). 'Students' Skills, Employability and the Teaching of European Studies'. *European Political Science*, 13(1): 32–42.
- Maurer, H., Niemann A. and Plank, F. (2020). 'Introduction: Innovative Teaching in European (Foreign) Affairs'. *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, 16(1): 4-12.
- Mc Brien, J. L., Jones, P. and Cheng, R. (2009). 'Virtual Spaces: Employing a Synchronous Online Classroom to Facilitate Student Engagement in Online Learning'. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 10(3): 1–17.
- Middleton, D. (2010). 'Putting the Learning into E-learning'. *European Political Science*, 9(1): 5–12.
- Mihai, A. (2014). 'The Virtual Classroom'. *European Political Science*, 13(1): 4–11.
- Muno, W., Niemann, A. and Guasti, P. (eds) (2017). *Europa spielerisch lernen*. Wiesbaden: Springer.
- Osguthorpe, R.T. and Graham, C.R. (2003). 'Blended learning environments'. *The Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 4(3): 227–233.
- Plank, F., Henneberg, I., Kobusch, A., Bürger, M. et al. (2019). 'Standortübergreifende Lehre in der Politikwissenschaft: Nutzen und Beitrag eines innovativen Ringseminars'. *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, 60(1): 127-146.
- Plank, F., Muno, W. and Niemann, A. (2017). 'EU-Simulationen im Vergleich: Didaktik und Praxis von aktivem Lernen'. In: W. Muno, A. Niemann and P. Guasti (eds). *Europa spielerisch lernen*. Wiesbaden: Springer.
- Quaintance, K. (2014). 'Teaching IR with New Media'. *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen*, 21(1): 129–141.
- Roder, K. (2014). 'Teaching European Studies: Field Trips to Brussels'. *European Political Science*, 13(1): 43–52.
- Smith, R. (2003). 'Thinking With Each Other'. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 37(2): 309–323.
- Strayer, J.F. (2012). 'How learning in an inverted classroom influences cooperation, innovation and task orientation'. *Learning Environments Research*, 15(2): 171–193.
- Talbert, R. (2012). 'Inverted Classroom'. *Colleagues*, 9(1), Article 7.
- Uhl, V. (2003). *Virtuelle Hochschulen auf dem Bildungsmarkt*. Wiesbaden: Deutscher Universitäts-Verlag.
- Usherwood, S. (2014). 'Constructing Effective Simulations of the European Union for Teaching'. *European Political Science*, 13(1): 53–60.
- Wang, Y. and Chen, N.-S. (2009). 'Criteria for evaluating synchronous learning management systems'. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 22(1): 1–18.