

The “Soft Power” of In-Class Reflection: A Transformative Experience

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This practice-based paper examines ways to activate students’ creativity, energy and drive to succeed by demonstrating how a variety of in-classroom reflective practices contribute to unveiling students’ greater potential for learning. These practices, while laddered logically and structured to gradually increase in both depth and complexity, nonetheless allow for spontaneity and experimentation on the part of both instructor and student, thus creating a stimulating and rewarding teaching and learning continuum. The intentional establishment of the atmosphere of trust and openness contributes to creating an “empowered classroom” which thrives on an instructor-student partnership model.

Keywords: “soft power” of reflection, team-based learning, intentionality, engagement, “empowered classroom”

INTRODUCTION

Reflection is one of the key components of Kolb’s experiential learning cycle and is widely recognized for its transformative value. It has been traditionally positioned between concrete experience and abstract conceptualization. Historically, reflection has occupied a particular distinguished place within the experiential learning paradigm. This paper will attempt to expand on the notion of reflection and its role in forming students’ self-identity as learners and individuals through the learning journey within a space of a singular academic course. Therefore, this paper is based on analyzing active in-classroom experimentation with several notions: reflection, student empowerment, and team-based learning. This experimentation led to the introduction of the concept of reflection as a “soft power” in experiential learning methodology. Soft power is generated by continuous classroom reflection as a cultivated and voluntarily embraced tool for personal and professional growth as well as a motivational tool behind student recruitment, attendance and retention. As well, the concept of a self-empowered classroom will be looked at from a new perspective, in particular through the lens of an active and increasingly meaningful collaboration between instructor and students as partners in both teaching and learning.

This study utilized data collection, observations, anecdotal evidence and testimonials from students in four upper-level modern History courses over three academic years. All the four courses under examination were equal in their contextual complexity, the reading loads and the assessment schemes, as well as their relevance to prominent global issues, which will be analyzed below. Subsequently the practice has been designed and iterated in which the soft power of continuous reflective practices impacted students’ habits of mind. It positively influenced their intellectual capacity, cultivated critical thinking and tested societal attitudes and values. The pivotal point in impacting students’ attitudes was an informal final group reflection in the *American Foreign Policy* class, when students asserted that the way their course was

structured taught them how to impact change in society. This was the most unexpected and pedagogically rewarding, and at the same time unintended consequence of teaching according to the new model.

Another turning point arrived when Connie Braun, a local Author and a Memoirist visited *The Soviet Union in the Cold War Era and Beyond* course as a guest speaker. The particular class was taught in a remote but synchronous mode in March 2020. After delivering their talk, the guest speaker listened to the students' presentations, and remained engaged for the entire duration of the seminar that lasted just under four hours. In a follow up with the instructor, Braun commented on the depth and quality of students' presentations and remarked that the students were indirectly engaged in "advocacy work" (C. Braun, personal communication, April 1, 2020). The guest made this observation from their personal standpoint of being a writer, a post-secondary educator and an advocate in the area of migration, displacement and cultural identity. These observations came as a surprise to students, who were unsuspecting of the broader impact of Experiential Learning that occurred within their classroom. In particular, by analyzing memoir literature, the students were inadvertently 're-telling stories' of human courage and survival, which led to their deeper learning. This practice generated empathy and transformed students' thinking about both the past and the present.

This case study is attempting to expand upon and reimagine a phenomenon of a self-empowered classroom into a model based on an instructor-students partnership in teaching and learning through continuous application of reflection as a "soft power" in Experiential Learning.

WHAT IS SOFT POWER?

Attraction Not Coercion

Historically speaking, the concept of "soft power" is not new and has been used in the field of international relations for some time. From a geopolitical standpoint, "soft power" is the ability of one state or a player in a system of international relations to obtain preferred results by attraction rather than coercion. The term first originated as an analytical tool and gradually developed as an instrumental concept used in political discourse around the world. Coming from the disciplinary background of History and Political Science and having had the experience of serving as both an administrator in Experiential Education and a History instructor, I have deliberately chosen this term precisely for its focus to generate attraction and to achieve positive results in student success.

Traditionally, some of the highly coveted and often hard to achieve learning outcomes in Experiential Learning account for a transformational experience, and a notable change in personal values and societal attitudes, as well as the ability to develop or strengthen personal agency. Ultimately, a development of empathy would ideally accompany these learning outcomes as one of the attributes of emotional intelligence and ability to relate to others, and work with people who are different in some ways from a learner themselves. The acquisition of transferable skills that apply to multiple future careers has also been a sought-after aspect of Experiential Education. In the areas of Arts and Social Sciences in particular, the aim persists to equip students with the necessary skills to start and build successful careers in professions that sometimes appear not directly linked to the core disciplines in the programs they graduate from. The most obvious way to immerse students in Experiential Learning activities is to develop opportunities in Community Engaged Learning that are either project-based or field based. These often integrate such Experiential Learning categories as undergraduate research, practicum, internship, or service learning. As a common practice, a community partner or several partners are involved in facilitating such experience. The most recent trend in Community Engaged Learning has been a collaborative consultation and curriculum co-design which makes the process of knowledge making and mobilization a much more reciprocal and valuable proposition.

When it comes to generating the same or similar impact and value without leaving a traditional classroom, a question arises: how might in-class learning lead to a transformational experience? Does an intentionally created in-class learning community contribute in any way to the facilitation of deep learning that allows students to develop inter-cultural and civic engagement competencies? How might one

experience empathy and undergo an evolution in personal values and societal attitudes without leaving the walls of a single classroom?

Teaching through the lens of the continuous reflection model creates a learning ecosystem in which all learners strive to reveal their prior knowledge and other disciplinary backgrounds if it applies. As well, the students lived experiences enhance this experiential ecosystem. According to Wurdinger, “students do not need to leave the classroom to test out their ideas; they can be engaged in the pattern of inquiry in the classroom” (Wurdinger, et.al., 2005, p. 55). Therefore, the “soft power” of reflection is based on the convergence of learning objectives on one hand, and student attraction to the subject under examination on another hand, as well as the impact of their prior learnings. This convergence becomes an overarching principle of the curriculum structure. It emerges as a counterweight to a less flexible and coercive assessment scheme that does not leave room for the creative and imaginative efforts of students, but rather imposes traditional power hierarchies.

In order for it to achieve the desired pedagogical results, the ‘attraction and not coercion’ model has to remain consistently dynamic and not cause unnecessary reflection fatigue in learners. As the practice with the four courses under the examination has demonstrated, this dynamic can be more effectively sustained if the process of continuous reflection contains reflective activities and assignments on both the content and the process of learning.

Course Design and Framework

The four courses under the examination cover the historical period spanning the 1930-1940s to the present, and share several common historical threads woven throughout. The first course in which the full continuous reflection model was practiced was taught in Winter 2017 and was entitled *The American Foreign Policy from the Cold War to the War on Terror, 1945 to the Present*. This was a newly designed Special Topics class which enrolled fully in its very first iteration due to strong student interest and relevance of the subject as one of the most important factors in the system of international relations today. The second course of this case study is another newly developed Special Topics course entitled *Spy Game: Modern Intelligence*. The course’s content covers the evolution of professional intelligence organizations of the great powers throughout the twentieth century and beyond. This course contains elements of world history, as the regions covered also included parts of Africa and the Middle East. This course was offered for the first time in the Summer 2018. Due to a nearly full enrolment and positive student reviews, this course has been subsequently added to both Summer 2019 and Summer 2020 offerings. The latter has been offered remotely due to the shift to online learning during the ongoing global pandemic. The course enrolled over capacity by forty percent. The application of the continuous reflection model teaching methodology may have contributed to a consistently high enrolment and retention rate. The fourth course, *The Soviet Union in the Cold War Era and Beyond: Rise and Decline of the Red Empire* was offered in Winter 2020. This regular course, which is considered one of the staples of the European History breadth requirement in the History Program at UFV has been taught multiple times in the past. In all of its earlier iterations the instructor has practiced a team-based learning module of seminar co-facilitation to a different extent, which consistently revealed positive results in terms of the student engagement and retention. However, none of the previous iterations of this course have produced deep learning on par with the Winter 2020 semester. This course has been traditionally based on a disciplinary context that spans decades after the end of the Second World War. It also covered several preceding decades as a backgrounder on Russian industrialization and the Russian revolution of 1917. The purpose of the backgrounder module is to demonstrate the emergence of the USSR as a new type of socio-political entity on the world stage and its impact on the system of international relations.

Two out of three courses under examination, the American and the Soviet History courses were based on a linear historical narrative, and united by several common themes of super power relations, economic and cultural predominance and strategic preponderance in global affairs. The three consecutive iterations of the Intelligence History course were structured around thematic clusters built on chronological principles. For example, the question of nexus between intelligence gathering and analysis and policy making contained examples of how multiple countries addressed the issue in the post-World War II era. On

average, between 26 and 30 students were enrolled in each of the four courses making it an ideal group for the team-based learning and multiplicity of opinions.

Due to the contextual complexity of the three courses, it was not immediately evident how the students would relate to the courses' content from a continuous reflection standpoint. The challenge in choosing an appropriate textbook was prevalent in all three cases as research revealed an infinite number of relevant texts but an absence of a 'perfect' textbook. Even though all three courses were assigned a substantive Course Reader on academic articles specifically designed for the course, the absence of an unbiased and comprehensive textbook made it challenging. This challenge became ever so evident in the case of the *Spy Game: Modern Intelligence* class, at least until Christopher Andrew's monumental work on the history of world intelligence organizations, *The Secret World: A History of Intelligence*, was published in mid-2018. Since the *Spy Game* course has been re-introduced in Summer 2019 and 2020, the instructor utilized portions of the monograph to enhance course content. The book covers a history of intelligence from the time of ancient Mesopotamia to modern time. However, the post-World War II era in Andrew's book is surveyed in a very thoughtful but a deliberately summative way. In short, Andrew's book has not been able to constitute a perfect textbook on the history of intelligence for the students of 20th century history and international relations specifically. This propelled the instructor to build a scholastic framework for the course based on theoretical texts within an interdisciplinary framework and supplement it with a Course Reader containing historical articles and primary documents.

Therefore, the author has endeavoured to test the reflection as a "soft power" model in these highly complex but important and relevant fields. An equally important task was to investigate the process of continuous and critical reflection, and how it assists students not only in navigating a complex disciplinary and inter-disciplinary context, but also cultivating important transferable skills and strengthening self-identity. The additional characteristic of teaching these four classes was an attempt to overcome bias, either conscious or unconscious towards the subjects under examination due to the heavy thematic presence in current media coverage. The framework of these classes provided a fruitful ground to continuously experiment with and iterate the model of continuous reflection as a "soft power."

PRINCIPLES OF PRACTICE

Intentionality

I structured my courses around four clear principles, starting with the principle of intentionality. Keeping in mind that I was using reflection as a "soft power" based on attraction and not coercion, during week one, which was an overview, I tried to generate interest in the course itself, interest in students as partners in teaching and learning, interest for the instructor as a scholar in the subject, and one of the learners, and started to create a sense of a learning community in the classroom. Finally, together we reflected on the absence of a 'perfect' textbook to stress the importance of research and unbiased scholarship. I explained to my students in each of the four courses that historical studies are not static. That history as a discipline is constantly changing, growing and undergoing significant modifications in terms of the sources' availability and access, and new interpretations, and that scholars, instructors and students are all part of the process. In fact, one of the corresponding academic fields - the history of secret intelligence organizations of the great powers - is one of the youngest and fast-growing fields of study in Canada, with only a select number of post-secondary institutions offering specialized courses on the subject under the general Security Studies umbrella.

During the introductory phase of each course, during the first week, I have posed a series of questions to my students to be discussed in class. Among these were such questions as: Why am I here? What interests me? Why does this matter? Who are my fellow learners? What do we have in common in this learning environment? Subsequently, I have facilitated a number of exercises to help students continue analyzing the previously posed questions at a deeper level. The first exercise was meant to introduce students to one another and was called "What is Your Name?" After successfully introducing this ice-breaker type game into the first course, I have iterated this practice in all four courses under examination, as well as other courses taught outside the spectrum of this case study in the last two academic years. In this first exercise,

the students are given a scenario in which they assume a mock historical persona who enters a social setting at a certain historical location to network with the rest of the class, which was anywhere between 25 and 29 learners. The examples could include a Cold-War era conference in Berlin, an imperial ball in a royal palace in nineteenth-century St. Petersburg, or a park fair in the American suburbs in the 1950s. During this half-hour exercise the students are tasked with memorizing each other's name by asking a set of random questions. Everyone wears a badge with a number, but not a name. After thirty minutes the students take their seats and then take turns standing up, only being identified by the number on their badge. Everyone, including the Instructor, records all participants' names from memory on a prepared sheet of paper. The person who memorizes the greatest number of names wins the game and receives a symbolic prize. From this exercise, there emerges a social network of learners and a sense of inclusiveness and belonging gets activated. This exercise is succeeded by the second important activity that is embedded in the continuous reflection model. It is an individual written reflection on students' personal goals for the course, however varied these goals might be. Through this exercise, students' prior knowledge becomes more evident and the gaps are identified and acknowledged. The final exercise contains a group reflection on the guest speaker's presentation. The speaker is deliberately chosen from the courses' alumni some of whom have either continued with the Honors or Graduate programs within the same discipline or have joined the workforce but expressed interest in public speaking and knowledge sharing with the new student cohort. These guest presentations in turn become strong motivational tools.

Overall, the first week's introductions and reflections were hard to underestimate. They generated curiosity, commitment and familiarity with the course content and course participants. A critical examination of textbooks produced an incentive to engage in meaningful and unbiased research. Moreover, the first week's activities created a greater equity and inclusiveness, started to personify learning, and generated a greater comfort for learners with disabilities. These activities also stimulated an emergence of collegial thinking and team spirit by setting the stage for team-based learning. In the longer-run, they helped strengthen the attendance pattern, and as these practices showed, assisted with student retention in general. Throughout the four courses under examination, the attrition rate did not exceed 10%. The first week's activity also cultivated a sense of responsibility towards other learners, as students expressed readiness, in both written and oral reflections, to invest time and effort into the learning process. The introductory activities sparked their interest, which is "critical at the outset of the learning process, but educators may need to guide the process so that interest continues throughout the duration of the experience" (Wurdinger, et.al., 2005).

Collaboration

The principle of collaboration has been strategically embedded into all four courses under review. In particular, a co-facilitation constituted a core activity and a ladder experience for building knowledge upon the previous week's student presentations. The number of student teams depended on the number of students enrolled. On average, the teams could be composed of between three to five students. The seminar co-facilitation consisted of the planning stage, a presentation and active discussion stage, as well as a post-facilitation reflection. The planning aspect included recognition and utilization of prior knowledge. Quite often, the students have taken these courses as an elective, coming from other disciplinary backgrounds. As an instructor and mentor, I have consistently encouraged students to utilize the tools and skill sets they have learned in other disciplines. Another important aspect of the planning phase was the team work. It generated leadership skills as well as improved interpersonal communications and problem-solving. The quality assurance in curriculum design consisted of a pre-facilitation meeting with the instructor, either in person or virtually. The instructor and the student teams collaborated on coordinating the presented content and designed their portions of the upcoming seminars in a mutually complementary way. The instructor discussed the lesson plan with the student groups ahead of time and provided suggestions and critical input based on student interests.

During each seminar, the student co-facilitations included a presentation component, designed by a student group and sometimes co-edited by the instructor, and an interactive component. These activities involved various domains, including cognitive, affective, attitudinal, behavioral, and others. According to

Hutchings and Wutzdorff, “learning acquired through several modalities is more likely to ‘stick’ as psychological research has clearly confirmed” (Hutchings and Wutzdorff, 1988, p. 12). The student-driven creative facilitations have also been able to spontaneously generate additional reflective practices. Among the most popular examples of student-led creative facilitations were real time polls, interviews with historical actors, student-facilitated guest speakers pre-approved by the instructor, role play, debates, mock trials, poster art, and interactive educational games.

On occasion, these experiences took a significant portion of the class time to complete. One such precedent occurred over a period of three hours, during which a student team took control of the classroom by creating an immersive and interactive environment through historical re-enactment, dramatization, use of primary sources, and role play on the subject of the Vietnam War. These types of activities have been welcomed by other students and served as prime examples of simulation and experimentation in the classroom. A student who has participated in the aforementioned activity comments: “A memorable group project was the game carried out for the Vietnam War topic. The two students designed such a detailed activity, and it engaged the class so well you could tell they really had a passion for the topic and wanted to do it justice” (S. VanWinkoop, personal communication, December 13, 2020). These experiences empowered students to build confidence in their knowledge in and fluency with the subject matter and increased personal agency. The same student has been enrolled in all three courses under examination and summarized their experience as follows: “Designing and carrying out seminar co-facilitations helped me become more passionate about the material and also gave me confidence as a student. It was rewarding to witness my fellow classmates willingly engage in the activities I helped design. It was insightful to hear a variety of views on the topic my group led for discussion” (S. VanWinkoop, personal communication, December 13, 2020). Often, students use their multidisciplinary backgrounds, mentioned earlier, and showed pride in sharing their unique disciplinary skill sets, tools and methodologies with their peers. Examples of disciplinary backgrounds that proved complimentary in the continuous reflection model include criminology, political science, marketing, psychology, physics, biology, and theatre studies. In addition, the instructor facilitated a post-seminar facilitation reflection that took a variety of forms. These included in-class written reflections, and in-class silent or mental reflections for which there was no assessment required, but great value was assigned. Alternatively, the instructor provided students with a take-home reflection to complete. The types of questions that could be built into these assignments were highly analytical. For example, “How did this learning experience change or add to my understanding of the subject and my relationship with it? How did my attitudes and perceptions on the topic change after this seminar?”

The most important outcome of this collaborative model is the emergence of instructor-student power sharing: towards the middle of the semester, students would often enthusiastically take over the lectern and the instructor would assume a supportive role as a mentor and facilitator of student learning experience.

Another example of a mid-semester high-impact practice has been a student-designed interactive game consisting of seven steps. Firstly, a team of three student facilitators delivers a creative presentation based on supplementary reading that provides contextual background. Secondly, the team launches the game by dividing the class into groups of between five to six students each. The groups have four phases to complete before being given the fifth and final task. Thirdly, each phase is based partially on a critical examination of historical content, and partially on skills development. The latter includes memory training, concentration, leadership development, analytical thinking, interpersonal and intercultural communication, and grammar. Once the teams complete a particular phase, the student facilitators release the next phase’s task. The team who finishes all five tasks first, assemble a small custom-made puzzle and receive a symbolic prize. Once all five teams complete their individual puzzles, the whole class is invited to combine their puzzles into a single puzzle. The combined puzzle contains a message that underscores the most important disciplinary concept learned through the game.

Following both the instructor-led and student-led presentations and interactive activities, the classes reflected either collectively or individually on either content or the process of learning, or both. Students were invited to answer the following sample questions: in what ways did I relate to today's class? What were the most effective methods of learning? How did today's discussion change my opinion or perception

on the subject if at all? To what extent did my peers stimulate my interest in a particular topic? Would I modify my paper topic because my peers' presentations piqued my curiosity in a particular aspect of research? A student from the *Spy Games* class has asserted: "These reflective exercises helped contextualize the theoretical and historical material taught and ground it in pre-existing understandings" (D. Herd, personal communication, December 11, 2020).

The aforementioned activities became a much more engaging alternative to a traditional lecture that "does not help students to retain information after the course is over, develop an ability to transfer knowledge to novel situations, develop skill in thinking or problem solving, or achieve effective outcomes, such as motivation for additional learning or a change in attitudes" (Fink, et.al., p.3).

Design Thinking and Risk-Taking

The principle of design-thinking fits in organically within the "reflection as a soft power" model and constitutes its distinct feature. Design thinking manifests itself in an innovative practice of keeping the courses syllabi open-ended and iterative in nature by allowing for spontaneously generated student-led reflective activities that are subsequently built into the assessment schemes by the instructor. As well, an instructor-generated, spontaneous, reflective activities often take place in addition to those originally integrated into the course curriculum. In order to accommodate such spontaneity, a certain percentage of assessment points need to remain flexible. On average, a maximum 10% 'float' was pre-allocated in the marking scheme to be left for flexible course redevelopment as a result of experiential opportunities and/or activities that could be developed during the course as a result of the collaborative teaching model. This 'float' module allows us to spontaneously generate and implement new activities and achieve a better learning outcome. The key to the success of this innovative design is to encourage students to accomplish more within the course instead of less, without making it feel like an onerous task. Contrary to the perception of creating a top-down framework to produce additional work, the continuous reflection model stimulates a natural progression within the semester where reflection becomes a personal necessity and a stimulus to succeed.

Additionally, the model remains flexible in regard to styles and lengths of assignment submissions. Students are granted approval to produce much lengthier papers upon request, including but not limited to papers that represent low-stakes, reflective assignments. These are accomplished without the promise of a bonus mark and are based solely on the student's personal initiative and motivation. Extra-curricular research is also encouraged, and results are reflected in the participation marks. Such extra-curricular research is positioned outside the main term paper and is often inspired by the earlier seminar co-facilitations.

Another characteristic of the "soft power" of reflection model is an option to gradually and partially replace the summative tests and pre-planned quizzes with additional creative reflections. Although this feature depends on the student audience and could be scaled up and down depending on class' response to the topics under examination. This replacement of preplanned quizzes with spontaneous reflective activities normally occurs halfway through the semester. By then, reflections become a natural occurrence that are seamlessly integrated into the assessment. As well, by mid-semester the students have grown more comfortable in sharing their disciplinary backgrounds and knowledge with the rest of their working groups during team led activities, and with the rest of the class during general discussions. Their approval of and an interest in gamifying curriculum by other student groups have also grown. On one occasion, one student's leadership and creative game design led to them successfully securing a marketing job with Amazon. Other rewarding outcomes of the model were increased attendance and retention, as well as higher quality of student work. Throughout the second half of all semesters under examination, nearly hundred percent attendance was recorded during guest speaker visits, film viewings and final presentations.

Finally, risk-taking played an important role in the structure of the courses selected for this study. The student teams were given an option to take a lead in the lesson plan design. At the same time, the instructor has assumed a facilitator role and was ready to instantly augment the lesson plan with special presentations and supplementary activities. Once in a while, this risk-tolerant model reached its optimal formula by deliberately authorizing a student-led facilitation without prior coordination with the instructor in terms of

content delivery. In other words, the pre-planning phase has been intentionally omitted for the sake of greater experimentation and creativity boost. As practice demonstrated, this type of experiential learning in the classroom can only happen due to an extensive amount of preparation for and investment in the subject on the part of both the students and the instructor. If these conditions are met, all parties enjoy a highly rewarding and reciprocal learning experience. There is one caveat worth noting: the presenting team who achieves this ultimate result is usually composed of students with stronger academic skills. However, by applying the equity lens to student performance, there are multiple cases of individual student work that demonstrated excellence in the face of adversity. These students' performances served as role models for others in terms of content delivery and creative thinking. In turn, the presenters enjoyed a confidence boost through peer recognition. The mentees became mentors.

Based on the implementation of design thinking and risk-taking principles, students continued to build important transferable skills such as independent and critical thinking, verbal and written communication, teamwork and collaboration. An unintended consequence of practicing the continuous reflection model was a culture shift from earning grades to seeking knowledge. Students gave priority to learning over grades according to their own observations. This echoes the findings by Wurdinger and Carlson who proposed that "if external motivators such as grades were deemphasized and learning focused on demonstrating knowledge in ways other than taking tests, then educators could allow more time for students to practice what they are learning, resulting in better-educated students who could solve problems and think for themselves" (Wurdinger and Carlson, 2010, p. 102).

The value of 'attraction and not coercion' reflective model was further validated when seventeen written assignments came out of the *American Foreign Policy* class instead of the original plan of thirteen. This increase happened spontaneously over the course of the semester and was largely student-driven. For instance, the students were asked to analyze in class a presidential speech from YouTube. Subsequently a number of students expressed interest in producing a written reflection on the speech. Another example invoked an instance when several students continued to submit reflections on documentaries viewed in class when none were formally required. At the start of the semester, the class has already written a reflection based on a single documentary. When the students viewed another lengthy documentary, they completed another reflection as a habit of mind, thus demonstrating a greater connection to the course content and being intellectually present. In the same class, the students identified mindfulness as one of the achieved learning outcomes. These conclusions demonstrated student empowerment, which resonates with the new UFV mission to engage learners, transform lives and build community. This empowerment also aligns with the work conducted by UFV's Centre for Experiential and Career Education (CECE). Liana Thompson, the CECE's Director comments: "Classroom simulation and experimentation help our students to practice defining a goal, assessing a situation, and taking risks in a safe and coached environment... Also, experiencing failure and choosing to re-think our ideas and choose alternatives builds resilience and grit. Having the opportunity to practice these important career and life skills in a classroom prepares our students for their future careers" (L. Thompson, personal communication, December 7, 2020).

Towards the end of the semester, the students addressed one another as well as their instructor as colleagues, a completely unprompted outcome. As a result of this close instructor-student and peer-to-peer collaboration, I have subsequently co-presented with five students at the professional development conference at UFV in April 2018. After the presentation, the students were invited by faculty members from other disciplines to speak in their classrooms on learning and teaching, mindfulness, and other key learning outcomes they experienced as a result of this learning model.

Throughout participation in this experiential learning model, students also found their reading loads more manageable, given the fact that reading loads within the Historical discipline are traditionally heavy. Relatedly, a significant number of UFV students have a job commitment outside of their studies and are continuously faced with a challenging task of accommodating both work and school commitments. Remarkably, the reading load in most of the courses under examination have slightly increased as a result of the continuous reflection mode. And the required length of reflective assignments has also increased proportionally. However, students have largely embraced the new reading framework.

CONCLUSION

The teaching practice under examination was based on four principles including intentionality, collaboration, design thinking and risk-taking. The continuous reflection model was integrated throughout each semester in a dynamic way, while avoiding repetitions and reflection fatigue. The distinct feature of the model became a reflection on both the content and the process of learning, both individually and collaboratively.

The design of the model in which reflection can organically flourish was based first and foremost on creating a social network of learners built on interpersonal relationships and trust. As well, the instructor generated additional interest in courses' content by constructively critiquing the existing scholarship and incentivising student undergraduate research, facilitating peer-mentor academic presentations by the courses' alumni, and providing self-assessment opportunities to students to examine their personal learning goals for a given class, as well as existing knowledge gaps in the area under study. These activities resulted in the formation of learning communities based on mindfulness, mutual and self-respect, and the sense of peer-to-peer and peer-to-instructor collegiality. On average, by the middle of all semesters under examination, a functioning empowered classroom mode of course delivery emerged.

The student groups in all four courses have actively engaged in curriculum design portions allocated specifically for this purpose. A significant portion of the assessment scheme was dedicated to team work, seminar co-lecturing and co-facilitations, and student-proposed reflective practices. The collaboration flowed between an in-class and out of classroom learning spaces, and utilized individual students' leadership skills, technical abilities, as well as prior learning and versatile disciplinary backgrounds. All these became the contributing factors to completing assignments and meeting the course and program learning outcomes.

The process of continuous reflection accompanied all these collaborative efforts and manifested itself in a variety of forms. Such as written, verbal and non-verbal reflections, as well as optional take-home and in-class reflections that a majority of learners voluntarily completed. Reflection was also built into most of the student-driven gamified portion of the curriculum and gradually became a natural attribute of all weekly seminars. As a result of this experimental approach, the number of the originally designed assignments per class was exceeded by 20% on average.

The intentionality and collaboration principles of the teaching practice under examination were strengthened by the application of the principles of design-thinking and risk-taking. The students were prepared and encouraged to think experimentally and experientially, and take informed risks in student-driven activities, show flexibility and responsiveness, as well as challenge the traditional in-classroom power hierarchies. This contributed directly to the creation of a self-empowered classroom that transitioned into an overall empowered classroom in which students and the instructor become partners in teaching and learning. On their part, the instructor's role as a sole context provider decreased and a role as a mentor-facilitator increased significantly.

The outcomes of implementing this innovative model in four aforementioned classes exceeded the instructor's original expectations and can be divided into several categories. First, on the administrative side, the model assured high levels of student retention. Relatedly, all four courses became a tangible recruitment tool for the program. The experiment resulted in offering one of the three courses three times within the span of three academic years. Typically, there exists a two-year rotation model for upper-level History courses at UFV. Second, the model cultivated a number of transferable skills, that are critical not only for successfully completing an academic degree but correspond to the most in-demand employment skills for the new knowledge-based economy including creativity, critical thinking, coordinating with others, emotional intelligence, cognitive flexibility, and others. Concurrently, a higher average GPA across all four courses has been achieved. Third, the new practice cultivated mindfulness and inclusivity and resulted in the increased level of cross-cultural awareness, competency and dialogue. It extended beyond academic life and into social life that contributed to forming long-lasting friendships and relationships among peers. The empowered classroom also demonstrated a direct correlation between peer mentorship

and student success. It also showed greater overall student satisfaction with the process of learning and their own role in a co-designed educational experience.

In conclusion, this innovative model based on reflection as a “soft power” revealed several long-lasting effects. The students who have previously felt largely disengaged from an active learning process or have not fully experienced belonging or personal agency within the post-secondary environment, have boosted their confidence and ability to learn and showcase their knowledge. Through collected anecdotal evidence, it became evident that previous disengagement was a result of multiple factors, including a gap between a personal learning style and teaching strategies, student personal circumstances, and lack of social capital. This model has afforded the students an opportunity to build social connections and form friendships while at the same time finding a comfortable and safe environment to acknowledge their skills gap. Once such acknowledgment was made, it allowed for more meaningful mentorship opportunities. Moreover, those students who normally won’t actively verbalize their points of view in class and shy away from discussions have now experienced much greater freedom to express themselves and a subsequent appreciation on the part of their peers. After implementing the model four times, it became apparent that normally disengaged students have not lacked self-identity, but instead have not had a chance to fully express it in the past. The continuous reflective model has not only provided an avenue for such active expression, it became a safe ground to test out one’s potential in accordance with individual intellectual and personal needs. According to further observation offered by Liana Thompson, “the Experiential Learning- integrated courses shift the power to the student and the student identifies the outcomes and decisions required. As students begin to chart their direction and take action, they build confidence with each step toward their outcome. Each step forward increases their awareness that they are in control and their decisions and actions directly impact their outcomes. EL integrated courses build a student’s confidence, decision making, and self-awareness which all lead to our students feeling empowered” (L. Thompson, personal communication, December 7, 2020).

This model, albeit more easily implementable for upper-level courses and partially dependent on the audience in a given class, resulted in a transformative experience for the learners and reaffirmed the value of High Impact Practices in Experiential Learning. The author also came to the conclusion that this model is easier to implement in a class structure based on thematic rather than a chronological approach. It remains to be seen to what extent this model or parts thereof are possible to fully implement in the online teaching environment (as post-secondary institutions around the world have switched to remote teaching due to the ongoing global pandemic). Two promising observations emerged to date. First, while switching from face-to-face to remote learning, the students from the *Soviet History* class continued to build on the strengths of their in-class social network. They delivered meaningful reflections throughout the rest of the semester, carried on the peer-to-peer mentorship practices, and have produced final papers that reflected on the group-based reflective exercises. Secondly, the Summer 2020 iteration of the *Spy Game: Modern Intelligence* course that lays outside the four courses examined has been offered fully online. By using portions of the “soft power of reflection” model the course demonstrated student empowerment, peer-to-peer mentorship and student success. In fact, the writing components of the class have undergone the greatest qualitative change. The papers resulted in a lengthier and more original expression of student learnings. The GPA rose on average from a B- to B and B+. The Summer 2020 course increased enrolment from a maximum of 30 to 42 students which resulted in facilitation of an additional section.

While the continuous reflection model demonstrates flexibility, adaptability and responsiveness to students’ interests and needs, it is critically important to sustain all of the aforementioned qualities in the future course iterations. Roberts warns educators against experience being conflated with activity and states that “neo-experientialism frames a particular way of thinking about and enacting experiential projects in the curriculum. While values such as “freedom,” “choice,” and “autonomy” are lifted up within such a frame, they too often revolve around personal preference rather than the ethics of democracy” (Roberts, et.al., p. 100). He further encourages educators in the field of Experiential Learning to “base their practices upon the ideals of participation, deliberation, community and responsibility” (Roberts, et.al., p. 101). Going forward, this model will continue to be geared towards student self-empowerment, cultivation of life-long

learning as well as strengthening students' personal agency to contribute to their communities, locally and globally.

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