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Intercultural and problem-based learning

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Problem-based learning supports intercultural and interdisciplinary collaboration. Since problem-based learning generally takes place during work in groups, the dynamics between team members becomes important. This dynamic can be supported – or the reverse – by differences in both cultural background and disciplinary focus. This paper will investigate how students coming from different master programs, different disciplines, different parts of the world and different learning traditions are able to establish a common platform to work from by using the ‘Aalborg model’ for problem-based learning. The argument is that not only does this model secure that students are embedded in their project work (academically) and teamwork (collaboration skills), working within this model is also broadening their competencies in understanding and solving problems from an intercultural perspective.

Theoretically, the paper draws on Kolb’s learning spiral and academic literature on problem-based learning, and the paper is based on fieldwork drawing on my own experiences in working interdisciplinary and interculturally over the past few years through interviews and observations. The findings show that being confronted with fellow students with different cultural and disciplinary background than oneself during group work and collaborating on a project, is sharpening the individual student’s own academic profile. Students discover what their own personal and academic background can contribute to the encounter with other students, who might have completely different ideas and backgrounds in addressing an academic (and practical) problem in a ‘real world’ context, which they need to collaborate on.