4. STUDENTS CAUGHT BETWEEN EMOTIONAL AND ACADEMIC ARGUMENTS

INTRODUCTION

Research has shown that teaching and learning are closely related to emotions, regarding both the positive influence of motivation and driving forces for learning (see e.g. Illeris, 2006) and the results of negative feelings such as anxiety and fear of failure (Pekrun, 2014; Jensen, 2015). However, emotions are considered a personal and private aspect of the learning process and, as such, not something a student in higher education expects to have to address or be explicit about as part of the education. A central aspect of academic training is to learn not to pay too much attention to personal feelings and attitudes (Borgnakke, 1996), but rather to develop solid argumentation based on scientific theories, research methods, facts and findings, and to ensure transparency in the interpretations and conclusions drawn. What then happens when innovative pedagogical initiatives in higher education bring in an aspect of personal self-reflection as part of an academic module?

To investigate this, the present chapter takes as its point of departure a particular case experienced in relation to a module in a higher education study programme where students are asked to reflect on – among other things – their learning processes. Even though the assignment and exam in this module follow traditional academic standards, students have shown a propensity to put forward personal (even private) and emotionally based arguments, rather than academic reasoning, in their written assignments. This approach seems to have become a pattern in a number of cases every year, regardless of the different pedagogical initiatives taken by the teachers over the years to clarify the goals of the module and its expectations vis-à-vis the students’ academic performance. This chapter tries to investigate the reasons for this approach and understand what lies behind the students’ choice of this form of argumentation. The context for the study, a Master’s programme in learning and change studies, is described below.

THE BACKGROUND

In order to understand the complexity of the problem, the situated character of the case should be explained. The context for the research is a 2-year full time Master’s programme in learning and change studies, which admits students with bachelor degrees relevant to the study of learning. The student group is complex: some
students come with a professional bachelor degree (e.g. primary school teacher, nurse, physiotherapist) others have an academic bachelor degree (e.g. languages, communication). The module in question runs over the first three semesters (7th through 9th semester) and is titled: ‘Learning portfolio and professional development dialogue in theory and practice’. The idea is that the students gain theoretical knowledge as well as practical, personal experience on both topics: (1) through literature studies, lectures and workshops, (2) through keeping and working reflectively with individual, personal learning portfolios during three semesters, (3) by participating in individual professional development dialogues once each semester. The final assessment of the module takes place through a written assignment, exploring and documenting the theoretical knowledge related to either an organisational context or the individual student’s own learning portfolio – combined with an oral examination, where the student presents his/her work with own learning portfolio and discusses the pros and cons in general of this pedagogical method, underpinning the discussion with theoretical reflections. The exam results in a pass/fail assessment.

In terms of innovative pedagogy, this module represents a novel approach in higher education in Denmark, firstly, because of the recurring individual dialogues between the student and dialogue partner. Resources are rarely spent on this kind of attention to the individual student at university level. Secondly, the learning portfolio method, which is also focused on the individual learner, was at the time of introduction of the module (2004) a relatively new phenomenon in the Danish educational system and never seen before in a university Master’s programme.

Though a few students have had experience with some form of portfolio work or portfolio exams in their previous education, the learning portfolio still appears to be an unfamiliar method of teaching and learning for most students in the programme. What we have found – and still find – in the written assignments (and hear repeated in the oral examination) are statements like:

I have not really been working a lot on the portfolio, because I did not see the point.

It has been difficult to do the portfolio, because I did not really want to do a ‘Dear Diary’ narrative.

I could not see how the portfolio would help my learning processes.

It is not that I do not reflect on my studies and learning, but I do not see why I should write it down.

These are examples of students who in an exam situation openly express a lack of interest and work effort in relation to the module in question, and the statements are addressed to their examiner and external examiner. It is not a new phenomenon for students to find some subjects more tiresome and less interesting than others, but they rarely state in writing and orally at the examination that they did not find