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CONTEXTUALIZING MIGRATION AND INEQUALITY: A CASE FOR CHALLENGE-BASED LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the integration of a Challenge-Based Learning (CBL) approach to a second year Bachelors course taught at Malmö University. It argues that, by engaging students in real-world problem-solving with local stakeholders, CBL bridges theory and practice, enhances disciplinary knowledge, and develops critical, creative, and civic competencies. This pedagogical approach promotes deeper engagement and empowers students as active contributors to democratic societies, an essential skill in a time when academic freedom and critical thinking are increasingly under threat.

Keywords: Challenge-Based Learning, higher education, co-creation, pedagogy, teaching

Sammanfattning

Denna artikel reflekterar över integrationen av ett utmaningsbaserat lärande (UBL) i en kurs på kandidatnivå, andra året, vid Malmö universitet. Den argumenterar för att CBL, genom att engagera studenter i verklighetsbaserad problemlösning med lokala intressenter, kopplar teori och praktik, stärker disciplinära kunskaper och utvecklar kritiska, kreativa och medborgerliga kompetenser. Denna pedagogiska inriktning främjar djupare engagemang och ger studenter möjlighet att aktivt bidra till demokratiska samhällen, en väsentlig färdighet i en tid då akademisk frihet och kritiskt tänkande i allt högre grad hotas.

Nyckelord: Utmaningsbaserat lärande, högre utbildning, samskapande, pedagogik, undervisning

Introduction

In a time when academic freedom and critical thinking are increasingly under threat (e.g. for universities in Sweden see Mansfeld 2024; for Hungary and the US Ignatieff 2025; for Türkiye see Blanchet 2025; for UK universities see UCU 2026), higher education institutions (HEIs) must remain stalwart allies of democracy and independent thought. Universities exist to teach students to think for themselves, in order to become autonomous individuals and responsible citizens (Ignatieff 2024). But it is also their duty to make students aware of their socio-economic, cultural and political context, and of the role they play in both exacerbating and mitigating today's societal challenges. Increasing this awareness, developing their sense of social and civic responsibility, and helping them acquire worthy principles and values is best achieved when students engage directly with such challenges in their studies (UNESCO 2022). Not all courses will be suitable to a hands-on experience, and that is fine. But, I contend, whenever possible, we should strive to acquaint students with the realities of life, through the lens of our field, for a more profound, relevant and lasting learning experience.

A Challenge-Based approach to teaching

I teach the course *Migration and Socio-Spatial Inequality* (MASSI) in the fourth semester of the BA program International Migration and Ethnic Relations (IMER) at Malmö University. Over the span of 10 weeks, students learn about how economic forces, spatial practices, and public policies shape the experience of migrants in urban and rural spaces. Drawing on critical geography, public policy, migration theory, sociology and economics, we explore the uneven spatial distribution of migrants and the forces that drive inequalities in access to housing, labour markets, education, healthcare, social rights, and political inclusion, among others. The overall objective is to help students understand the complex dynamics that shape the relationship between migration and socio-spatial inequality and to critically evaluate new developments in this regard. Yet, despite the relevance and societal urgency of the two topics – both migration and inequality are highly politicized issues, obfuscated by controversy and misinformation – students do not seem engaged or interested. The course attendance is low, as is in-class participation in discussions, some students use their laptops for unrelated tasks, while some are chronically late for lectures and seminars. Furthermore, they seem to have difficulties in connecting the theoretical discussions from the class to real world examples from their personal lives or society at large.

To offset this seeming disinterest, I am integrating a challenge-based learning (CBL) approach to the course. In CBL, the learning takes place through the identification, analysis and design of a solution to a real-world societal problem (Malmqvist et al. 2015). In the context of the MASSI course, students must propose an actionable intervention to address one dimension of socio-spatial inequality for (a specific group of) migrants living in Malmö. My expectation is that, by blending theory and practice, students will become more engaged, will acquire the disciplinary knowledge required of them, but will also develop creative and critical thinking skills, and transversal competencies (see Gallagher and Savage 2023) such as team work and project management.

As a teaching approach, CBL is built on three pillars, namely diversity and inclusion, co-creation and collaboration, and change agents and contextual challenges. The diversity and inclusion pillar refers to the need to include a diversity of perspectives and practices, and to actively embrace different identities, backgrounds and experiences of students, teachers and external stakeholders, if we are to address today's complex societal challenges (Christersson et al. 2022). Within the MASSI course, this involves

including students, which have different gender, ethnic and racial backgrounds as well as experiences in Malmö, as migrants and with inequality; and external stakeholders such as Malmö city representatives, local organizations and immigrants themselves. Citizens, representatives of civil society and professions can play a crucial role in challenging suggested solutions, theories, and praxis (Christersson et al. 2022).

The co-creation pillar brings to the fore essential values of equality and diversity in and between ways of knowing, and challenges current pressures for hegemonic integration that can so damagingly reinforce existing patterns of exclusion and appropriation (UNESCO 2022). An essential part of co-creation is the concept of “students as partners”. This acknowledges that engaged student learning is positively linked with learning gain and achievement and argues that partnership represents a sophisticated and effective approach to student engagement because it offers the potential for a more authentic engagement with the nature of learning itself and the possibility for genuinely transformative learning experiences for all involved (Healey et al. 2014). Within the MASSI course, students have room for taking ownership of the assignment, by choosing which dimension of inequality to focus on, on which groups of migrants. This leaves sufficient room for student autonomy, and independence, and provides ample possibilities for them to negotiate as partners in the research and inquiry process (Healey et al. 2014).

Lastly, the contextual challenges pillar reinforces the importance of involving local stakeholders in the act of learning. Strengthening the links between HEIs and the local community provides a means for delivering on the goal of education as a public good, enables access to authentic situations and contexts, and to collaboration with local non-academic actors (Hall 2009; Gallagher and Savage 2023). The involvement of stakeholders is an essential part of a CBL activity (Kohn Rådberg et al. 2020). Within the MASSI course, the municipality will play an active role throughout the process, from providing background information and highlighting the aspects of the societal challenge that are most relevant and in need of a solution, to selecting the winning student proposal, and potentially implementing it. Importantly, although the broader challenge to be addressed is derived from the context of the course, as this is an issue that is actively being tackled by the municipality, we can consider them an actively supporting stakeholder (cf Membrillo-Hernandez and Garcia-Garcia 2020).

The remaining of this article describes the setup of the course.

Challenge-Based Learning in the course Migration and Socio-Spatial Inequality

“*Migration and Inequality in Malmö*” is a planned CBL activity where teams of 5 students analyse how migration influences socio-spatial inequalities within Malmö. Subsequently, they must propose an actionable intervention to address one dimension of socio-spatial inequality for (a specific group of) migrants living in Malmö. This CBL activity takes the form of a student competition, with the winning project idea to be published in Malmö University’s journal *Current Issues in Migration Research* and potentially implemented by Malmö City. The underlying assumption behind this CBL activity is that subject-based research and inquiry stimulate deep and retained learning (Healey et al. 2014).

While the course provides a global overview of the relationship between migration and inequality, with examples from the Global North and the Global South, and from migrant origin and migrant host societies, the learning activity zooms in on a particular case study, that of Malmö. The city of Malmö makes for a compelling case study for this course, both because of its diverse population and high

immigration rate, and because of the significant socio-economic disparities it exhibits. Malmö's transition from an industrial city in decline in the early 1990s into a booming post-industrial city over the past 20 years, has been hailed as an urban transformation success story (Olsson and Thomas 2024). This transformation, however, has benefitted some areas more than others, accentuating socio-spatial segregation in the city, with poverty concentrated in the peripheral areas (Holgersen and Baeten 2016). The large socioeconomic, demographic, and political differences between Malmö's different neighbourhoods are clearly visible on the city's map, with the affluent seaboard to the west, a socio-economically mixed inner city, and a more deprived southern and eastern inland (Lundstedt et al. 2024). The city is also a vivid illustration of how migration intertwines with socio-spatial inequality. In areas like Rosengård, one of the poorest and socially most deprived neighbourhoods in Sweden (Olsson and Thomas 2024), high concentrations of immigrants coincide with economic disadvantage. This spatial concentration is greatly influenced by systemic factors, such as zoning and housing policies, transport infrastructure and the availability of economic opportunities.

Over the course of 10 weeks, students engage with the course literature, Malmö City representatives, and immigrants themselves, to explore the relationship between migration and socio-spatial inequality and the lived experiences of migrants. The student teams conduct field research, investigate spatial inequalities in Malmö's neighbourhoods and design an actionable intervention aimed at improving a dimension of inequality for (a specific group of) migrants. The most feasible and innovative proposal is judged by Malmö City representatives, with the winning proposal being published and potentially implemented. This activity blends research skills development, community engagement, and applied learning, aligning with the broader course learning outcomes. It also offers students a practical and familiar context in which to connect complex theoretical knowledge with meaningful societal challenges. For example, students translate the labour market segmentation theory (Waldinger and Lichter 2003; Reich et al. 1973) to Malmö, to explain how immigrants from certain backgrounds are disproportionately represented in the secondary sector of the economy, due to barriers such as language proficiency, non-recognition of foreign qualifications, discriminatory hiring practices or limited social networks and capital. Similarly, they learn about segmented assimilation theory (Portes and Zhou 1993) to explain the diverse pathways of integration for first and second generation immigrants in Malmö, emphasising how structural factors like race, ethnicity, and socio-economic contexts shape educational and socioeconomic outcomes for certain groups of immigrants.

Design and implementation

The implementation of the learning activity follows the three Challenge Based Learning Framework (The Learning Institute 2018) phases, i.e. engage, investigate, and act.

In the engage stage, students familiarize themselves with the literature on the effect of migration on socio-spatial inequality and initiate a critical inquiry. In this initial stage, students are assigned reading materials explaining the concepts of inequality and migration, as well as the relationship between them and are presented with the essential question that guides the CBL activity and their work throughout: *How does migration contribute to socio-spatial inequality in cities, and what can be done to address it?*, focusing on Malmö as a case study.

Ideally, the CBL activity would be based on a truly open-ended challenge, allowing students to discover both a problem and a solution (Brophy et al. 2008). However, based on previous experiences with the

course, and the relatively little research experience of the students, I consider it better to point them into a direction at this stage. As they will learn from the course literature and from the research process, they have ample possibilities for zooming in on a more detailed aspect of this issue (i.e. a specific dimension of socio-spatial inequality) at a later stage, and to take ownership of their own learning process (Hernández-de-Menéndez et al. 2019). This approach aims to strike a balance between guidance and freedom of initiative and thought, and to encourage active learning (Arrambide-Leal et al. 2019).

The investigate phase enables students to deepen their understanding of the issue through intersectional analysis and engagement with real-world actors, such as Malmö City, immigrants themselves, and potential local NGOs. Students work in teams to conduct case study research on the city of Malmö and investigate how cities shape migrant inclusion and exclusion. Working in teams encourages peer-learning, as well as developing more general skills such as communication and teamwork (Leijon et al. 2022).

At this stage, students must gather qualitative and quantitative data through several means of data collection, including interviews with Malmö City representatives, local NGOs, urban planners, local officials, or service providers, to obtain background information and learn about past policies and future strategies; analysis of policy documents and urban development plans, to gauge housing developments, zoning plans, urban renewal projects; analysis of local socio-economic indicators (e.g. employment rates, housing prices, infrastructure, etc.) to gauge the extent of inequality, how it affects different groups, and how it is distributed spatially and across demographic characteristics; interviews with immigrants from a specific neighbourhood or from different neighbourhoods about how they experience inequality; and maps and online tools to visualise spatial inequality patterns, such as housing, transportation, schools, healthcare, green spaces, or bike lanes availability. This dimension constitutes the technology-infused aspect of the learning activity (Van Den Beemt et al. 2023), whereby students use technological tools to make sense of the information and data at hand. This stage enables students to actively develop data collection and analysis skills better than focusing on strict disciplinary learning objectives (Gallagher and Savage 2023).

The data collection and analysis stage will be guided by (evolving) questions, such as: What visible patterns of inequality emerge in Malmö? Which dimensions of spatial and social inequality are observed, and how are they interconnected? (i.e. education, employment, health/care, gender, ethnicity, etc)? What factors have contributed to these outcomes? How does migration status intersect with gender, race, ethnicity to produce spatialized forms of exclusion and shape spatial experiences? By the end of this stage, each team of students should have prepared a synthesis of their findings, identifying the main themes and, if the case, the target demographic (migrant) group.

In the act phase, students must apply theory and data to design an actionable intervention, relevant to the context of Malmö. Using the data and information they have gathered, each team proposes an intervention (e.g. policy recommendation, urban design proposal, community program, digital platform) aimed at reducing the selected dimension of socio-spatial inequality for migrant communities. Potential solution concepts may involve a campaign to educate or inform on an issue; an interactive digital tool (e.g. map) or an app that addresses a specific issue a community project proposal, etc. In the final seminar of the class, each team delivers a pitch presentation to one or more representatives from Malmö City, who then select the winning proposal based on feasibility and innovation.

Assessment Criteria

The assessment envisages attempts to strike a balance between product-focused assessment and process-focused assessment (Van Den Beemt et al. 2023). To that end, there will be two types of assessments at the end of the module. The first assesses the product, i.e. the solution proposed by the student teams, and is conducted by a representative from Malmö City. In this case, the “product” is evaluated based on its implementation feasibility and its innovative aspect. The second assesses the process, and whether students have obtained the knowledge and skills (Wiliam 2011) included in the course learning outcomes. The (evolving) criteria for this learning aspect includes:

- (i) relevance and depth of research, use of appropriate methods, integration of theory, spatial data, and critical insights;
- (ii) analytical connections between migration and spatial inequality;
- (iii) engagement with affected communities and stakeholders; and
- (iv) presentation quality and depth of reflective analysis.

There are three forms of learning that students are envisaged to rely on during this CBL activity. The first form of learning entails self-reflection. Throughout the process, from data collection and analysis to solution proposal, students will be encouraged to consider their own experience of migration and/or inequality, and to reflect on the experience through the lens of the Inner Development Goals framework.

The second form entails peer learning. Students will be encouraged to share their experience of migration and/or inequality with their teammate. An attempt will be made to have a Malmö local student in each team, to provide an overview of the city through their own experience and understanding.

The third form entails the acquisition of practical skills throughout the CBL activity, from learning to conduct interviews, to analyse policy documents and socio-economic indicators, to using online tools to visualise spatial inequality patterns.

Conclusion

With its focus on real-world, open-ended challenges (Van Den Beemt et al. 2023) that help students to develop contextualized learning experiences and conduct rigorous, content and concept-based research, CBL is one of the most promising teaching approaches to achieve the learning goals of my course, *Migration and Socio-Spatial Inequality*. Both migration and inequality are complex issues, and the link between them can be at times difficult to grasp. Using Malmö City as a case study not only allows students to identify the abstract notions they learn about in the course, but the familiarity of the context helps them become more engaged with the research, encouraging more reflection and a deeper understanding. Working in teams on a real-world, and close to home, issue encourages students to collaborate, to develop deeper subject knowledge, and to share their experience (Nichols and Cator 2008). The research component of the activity provides students with hands-on experience with several forms of data collection and analysis. In this case, CBL is an effective approach to help students acquire knowledge, develop methods skills, and engage with complex topics such as migration and socio-spatial

inequality. By bridging theoretical inquiry with real-world application, and by fostering collaboration among students and local stakeholders, this approach not only enhances disciplinary understanding but also cultivates civic awareness and critical agency. In doing so, it aligns with the broader mission of higher education to empower students as autonomous thinkers and active contributors to democratic society, the society shapers of tomorrow.

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