'Micropolitics' and Communication:
An exploratory study on student representatives' communication repertoires in university governance

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this study is to gain an understanding of the communication repertoire which student representatives in university governance use to negotiate and represent student interests and to gain a first understanding of obstacles influencing communication behaviour. Moreover, it seeks to situate student representatives' communication practices in the micropolitical context of universities. Students are the largest stakeholder group at universities and representative roles for students are formally embedded in universities' institutional structures. The conceptual framework in this research project defines universities as micropolitical systems with students being citizens of these political entities who possess specific rights and duties relating to this status.

For this study, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with interviewees who

research in this field particularly interesting. First, for many students, their representative function at university is the first political office that they ever held, which is an interesting starting point

with Ellström's study of theoretical approaches to educational organizations in which the 'political model' describes educational institutions as a systems 'of interacting individuals and subgroups pursuing different interests, demands, and ideologies through the use of power and other resources' (1983, p. 233). On the basis that 'politics form an inherent aspect of social processes, including education and its administration', Milley (2008, p. 54) expands this idea by locating it both in the institutions themselves (as explicated in the previous passages) and at the same time taking into account that nation states have a political interest in overseeing formal education. This study will mainly focus on the former – namely political processes and structures embedded in universities and universities as political systems on a miniature scale. In line with this perspective, Ball established the term 'micropolitics' in order to 'establish a conceptual framework for a micropolitics of organizations'

Moreover, conceiving students as citizens helps to steer clear of oversimplifications and prevents limitations on how we theoretically and practically approach this multi-faceted group. Discourses emerging from new public management, which describe students as 'consumer or customer or purchaser' (Silver & Silver, 1997, p. 168) do not give credit to the extent of agency or power that students may possess. By focusing on students as consumers, these discourses exclude the political dimension, and thus impede the application of concepts such as political culture, social movements and practices of resistance. Finally, if one of higher education's main purposes is the 'preparation for life as active citizens in a society' (Bergan, 2004, p. 24) and if 'education can influence so profoundly the thought and character of individuals and of nations' (Lester Smith, 1965, p. 17), describing one of its main stakeholder groups with consumerist rhetoric would neglect its broader social, ethical and political implications.

Student movements in the 1960's and their effect on university governance

This section will focus on the late 1960's and early 1970's — a period of substantial public student activism and widespread student movements in which students' engagement and

broader political concerns such as the Vietnam War or the 'undemocratic democracy' (p. 41) prevalent in post Second World War West Germany.

Although the nature of the effects and legacy of these 'angry' and 'activist' (Levine & Hirsch, 1991, p. 119) student movements is highly debated (Lehousse, 2008), they brought to the fore a number of questions and issues surrounding higher education, universities, students and their role in society, which still resonate today. Ferns emphasises the 'increasing importance' of universities for society (1967, p. 276) and criticizes the trend of outside interference from political actors. In a similar vein, demands are voiced that 'the object of university reform should be a more sensible relationship between universities and society as a whole' ("Student politics," 1967, p. 225). The concepts 'student power', 'student voice' and 'student participation' appear in higher education discourses and are contested in numerous struggles about who should have a say in which matter of university governance and to what degree students should be involved, for examp

university: Persson's survey of student participation in higher education governance in Europe indicates that most European countries have legal frameworks ensuring students' participation in higher education on an institutional level (2004, p. 35). In the German Framework Act for Higher Education (Hochschulrahmengesetz, § 37), students constitute one of four participant groups (in addition to teaching staff, academic staff and other staff) which must be involved in decision-making processes at university. In the UK, 'the representation of staff and students on the governing body is important in all [higher education] institutions' and providing '

A few publications cover the importance of allowing students to participate in higher education governance. Menon (2003) demands more co-determination for students in defining the goals of higher education, Planas et al. (2013) conducted fieldwork at a Spanish university and interviewed students as well as teaching staff regarding their opinion on

after the 1970's, no studies were published which investigate how students use communication to fulfil their representative role as well as which communication strategies and repertoires they employ. This is a surprising lack of research, especially when considering that students' position as rather weak stakeholders and status group in a governance system is linked to key questions in communication research: How can

As previously mentioned, universities can also be described in a more organizational or policy-oriented fashion: as systems of governance which are continuously involved in decision-making processes that are, amongst others, influenced by organizational and behavioural factors. Pope's (2004) study on the role of faculty trust in higher education governance, for example, suggests that communication processes which facilitate a high 'level of inclusiveness' (p. 80) are beneficial for successful governance. Thus, in addition to political culture, students' engagement in university governance is also strongly influenced by

With the intention of closing the link between students' political situation and their communication practices, the study also tries to provide an overview of the main challenges affecting students' communication repertoire.

As previously illustrated, there is a general lack of research on students' engagement in university governance, a particular academic void concerning the issue of students' communication practices in formal representative offices. This study aims to be a first step towards closing this research gap and will thus contribute to a broader understanding of phenomena in students' communication and participation in university governance.

members of the social milieu' (Gaskell, 2000, p. 41). On the one hand, this generates a comprehensive account of students' communication in university politics and highlights similarities between the interviewees – on the other hand, it also enables a comparison of diverging attitudes and opinions. In order to assess students' communication repertoire, both approaches are needed: Parallels between the respondents indicate probable communication norms and standards whereas differences emphasize individual phenomena.

While students' communication repertoires and strategies in university governance are a field which is characterized by a research deficit, interviewing is a methodology particularly suitable for exploring a previously unknown field of research and obtaining a first overview and orientation in the field: Berger (2011, p. 138) states that interviewing yields information which could not have been obtained any other way and emphasizes that it can generate 'unexpected information that other forms of research might not discover' (1998, p. 57). Especially when conducting research on a relatively unknown field, it is important that the research method provides enough space for surprising findings and does not predetermine or restrict the scope of possible findings.

However, interviewing also has methodological weaknesses which have to be considered and minimised as far as possible in order to yield relevant and reliable findings: First, qualitative interviewing produces a vast amount of information (Gaskell, 2000, p. 43; Southall, 2009, p. 325)

regarding the results of this research, for example, whether the information the students provided is reliable and valid or whether the actual fact of being interviewed influenced students' answers. Being aware of the limitations of interviewing as a research method, carefully assessing the nature and validity of interview findings and preventing incorrect generalisations and quantifications will be used in this dissertation as means to counteract these weaknesses.

The alternative method for inquiry into the topic of students' communication practices was surveying. As it is based on questionnaires which yield more focussed and manageable data, it can take into account answers from a significantly higher number of people. Moreover, 'numbers hold a preeminent status in our scientific culture' (Stone, 2012, p. 183), and thus surveys' findings are often seen as more valid and are less contested than results from

Interview form

In order to establish rapport (Berger, 1998, p. 60; Southall, 2009, p. 323) and encourage the respondents to feel at ease, ten minutes before the actual interview began were used to engage in small talk with the respondents. Afterwards, the themes defined in the topic guide were covered by adapting their order to the individual course of the interview. Usually the length of interviews ranged between 25-45 minutes, however, two interviews were significantly longer than one hour.

Analysis

The transcription of the interviews was followed by computer-assisted qualitative data

ANALYSIS

The following analysis first sets out to provide an overview of the context which student

representative roles. This double workload creates what one respondent referred to as 'precarious working conditions' – especially given the low expense allowance that they

on boards and committees. In many cases, they also reported that once they started to be engaged in university governance, one office led to other offices and responsibilities – e.g. working in a student representative board and afterwards being elected as student representative sitting on the faculty board or participating in an appointment committee. Indeed, many of the interviewees held more than two offices.

Apart from the overall representative function that students working in university governance fulfil, their responsibilities are manifold and usually depend on their individual focus and engagement:

> It's kind of strange that the job is kind of... it is what you make of it. So there's some things you're required to go to, different things you're required to do [...] but you also have a lot of your own say in what you want to do. (Respondent 10, 2013)

In some cases, students had been assigned specific topics to work on, e.g. student welfare or education. The

Some participants said they were legally liable for the actions and statements of the groups or representative bodies they represented as well as for how money matters in those

Importance of communication and main functions of communication

Without exception, all the interviewees saw communication as crucial means to accomplish
their goal to re36cm B33oom /TTm /TBT 0.04 ( ) -33 (s (omt (u) -4 (d) -4 (e) -2TBT 0.04 ( ) -2 (i) 1TBT 0

Many respondents expressed a dislike for exerting direct pressure in order to achieve their goals, because they felt it could destroy harmonious working relationships between them and staff members. However, there seemed to be a tendency to resort to means which exert pressure in case the overall situation could not be changed by alternative strategies. Pressure was usually created through publicizing issues and campaigning:

> And then being separate to the school and then having this campaign which they try and kind of pressure the school with. So often when you go along to these meetings you sit there, you might get a say on something, but it doesn't really change something, you're kind of there just symbolically. Whereas actually when you have these campaigns [...] it provides something that we can kind of challenge the school with. (Respondent 10, 2013)

One interviewee illustrated how she tapped into the potential of using publicity as a measure for gaining political leverage

> So, generally, we can always achieve something. Just being outvoted doesn't mean anything, right? We at least have the bargaining tool 'We are going to the press'. The universities are broke, we are all in debt. [...] All that remains for them is their reputation. If you would damage this by some kind of press release...wow, recently they do react so quickly to that. (Respondent 11, 2013)

Communication channels

The interviews indicate that students use a broad variety of communication channels or media to communicate. As shown in the following table, communication channels used by student representatives can be grouped into 6 categories.

Respondents often explained how they tried to tailor their use of communication channels to the respective audience that they want to reach. Two respondents from different universities reported how they conducted surveys amongst their students as to what media channel they would prefer for receiving different kinds of information. After a statistical evaluation, the findings were used to improve communication strategies and foster more effective information distribution.

Face-to-face communication was often characterized as being the most effective or influential way to relate to students as well as academic or administrative stakeholders:

> The biggest problem is communicating to the students, which is depending on […] having one representative in each year […] who knows the people in person and talks to them in person. This is how it de facto works. If you don't have a representative in a specific year, then reaching out to the people is very difficult.

> Clearly face-to-

Underlying communication strategies

While the last sections already gave an introduction on students' strategic approaches to communication, this section seeks to explicate on three underlying communication strategies often brought up by respondents.

Based on students' lack of agency to directly influencing decision-making at university, informal negotiation was the most prevalent communication strategy illustrated by the interviewees. Taking on many forms such as e-mails, phone calls or informal face-to-face meetings before assemblies and committee meetings, students used it to bring their message across, to inform other stakeholders about their plans (as opposed to surprising them in official meetings), and to obtain relevant information or strategic advice from other

to be the group from which she received verbal abuse, threats, and attacks such as being spitted at. Therefore, student representatives are prone to risks relating to backlashes from different stakeholder groups at university.

CONCLUSIONS

The key finding of this study is that students strategically employ a diverse communication repertoire to represent students' interests and to improve their chances of bringing about changes at university.

The micropolitical framework in which student representatives work is characterized by hierarchies and occasional conflicts of interests and thus can be best described with Mouffe's agonistic pluralism model (1999). In the systems of university governance in Germany and

that students strategically tailor their use of media towards the respective audience they want

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