

# The Use of Padlets for Group Exercises

Final Project for TLHE

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## **Abstract**

This aim of this report is to reflect on the usefulness of Padlets – an interactive software device for student input – for group work exercise. Specifically, the report presents and discusses recent experiences with Padlets in group work exercises for small classroom teaching involving theory-driven questions. The report contains: 1) the practical and pedagogical considerations of using Padlets, 2) the student and teacher experiences with the Padlets from three classroom sessions, and 3) the implications of experiences for group work and teaching in small classroom settings. The overall conclusion is positive about using Padlets as a way to engage students and facilitate group work discussions. However, the report also raises some caution about the typical pitfalls in group work exercises, that might be exacerbated by the software.

## Introduction

This aim of this report is to reflect on the usefulness of Padlets – an interactive software device for student input – for group work exercises. Padlets provide a ‘digital canvas’ for Q&As, opinion statements, discussion forum, etc. that is highly flexible and dynamic. Put simply, Padlets are a sophisticated blackboard on which teachers and students can write short notes that is shared on the screen of every participants screen, irrespective of the device used.

Specifically, this report presents and discusses recent experiences with Padlets in group work exercises for small classroom teaching involving theory-driven questions.

The report continues as follows. First, I shortly introduce background information about the course and its intended learning objectives (ILOs). Second, I introduce what a Padlet is and how it can be used in group work. Third, I present the actual group exercises and their purpose, which was to link theory with empirical cases. Fourth, I present the evaluation of using the padlet for group exercises, based on feedback from my supervisor, students and my own reflections. Finally, I conclude by drawing some implications for group work and teaching in small classroom settings.

## Introduction of CSLM

The group work was carried out in a small class setting with 8-9 students. Groups were typically of 2x4 students. The course, Comparative Sociology of Labour Markets (CSLM), was a combined theory/thematic course at the Department of Sociology at University of Copenhagen. The course was 10 ECTS and consisted of 14 sessions, each of two hours (see lesson plan below).

The CSLM was new to the Department of Sociology, both in terms of subject content and in terms of introducing students to comparative case method. At a general level, the course had four main ILOs:

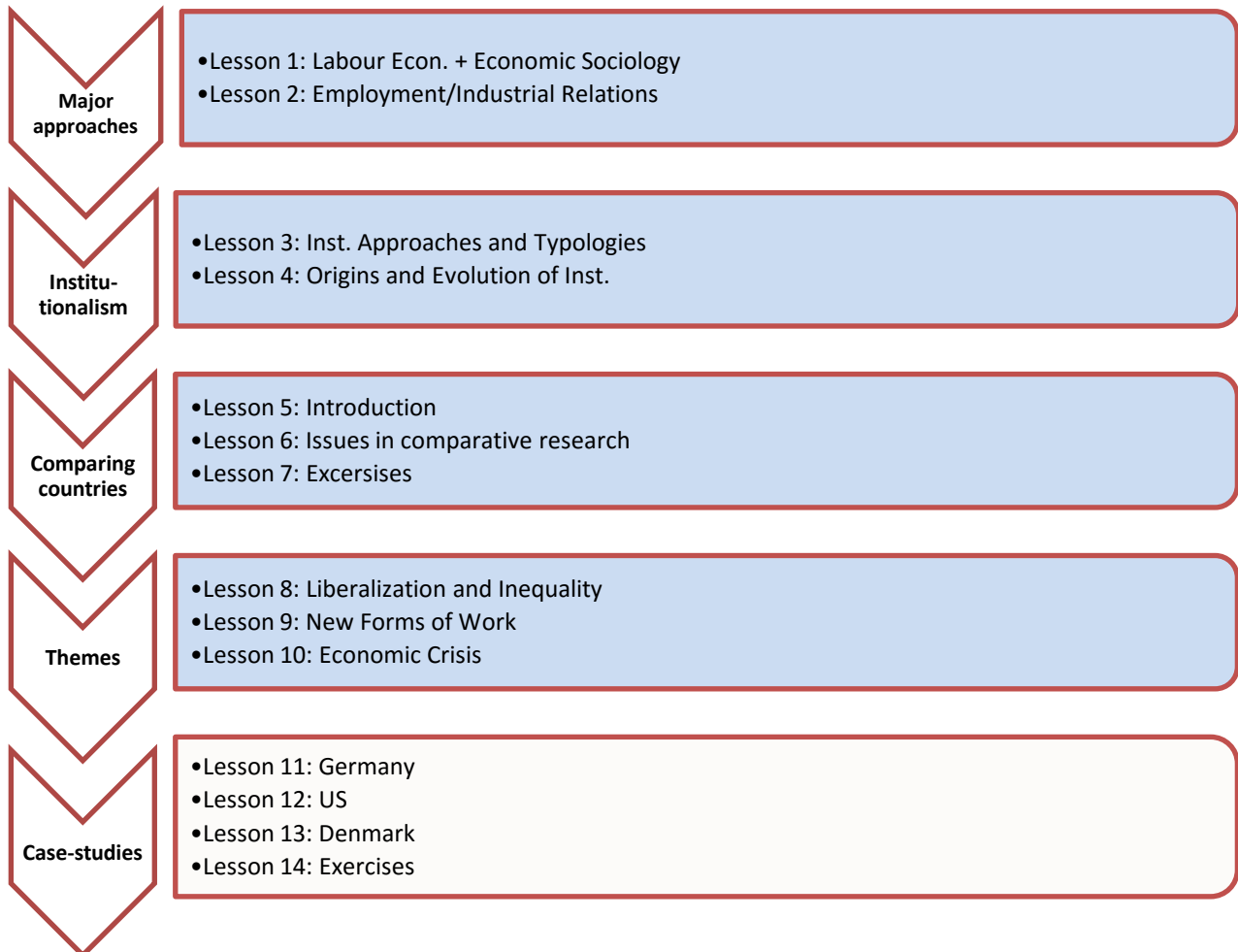
1. Identify the role of national institutions in the regulation of labour markets
2. Identify and compare different labour markets across geographical units – be they national or sub-national.
3. Apply theories of comparative sociology to explain national differences in a context of economic globalization and technological development
4. Evaluate and critically discuss the comparative analysis made in cross-national studies by international organizations like the EU, OECD and IMF.

The first three ILOs required students to bridge theories of comparative sociology with empirical knowledge of cases through comparative case method. This was a high-abstract learning objective, which demanded a lot from students who were often unfamiliar with all three elements; theory, cases and method. It became apparent early in the course that the fourth ILO would not be the main focus due to the already challenging task of fulfilling the first three.

Group work was deemed an appropriate teaching and learning activity (TLA) to bridge the first three ILOs. Students could lean on each other through discussion in the group, where after class-discussion could give me a possibility of adjusting or correcting misunderstandings. Group work lasted 40-45 minutes, including class-discussion of group answers using the Padlets. Below I elaborate on the concrete group work exercises through two examples. Group work using Padlets took place during the last module of the course, i.e. the

case-studies in lesson 11 (Germany), 12 (US) and 13 (Denmark), respectively. I reflect on this order of the cases.

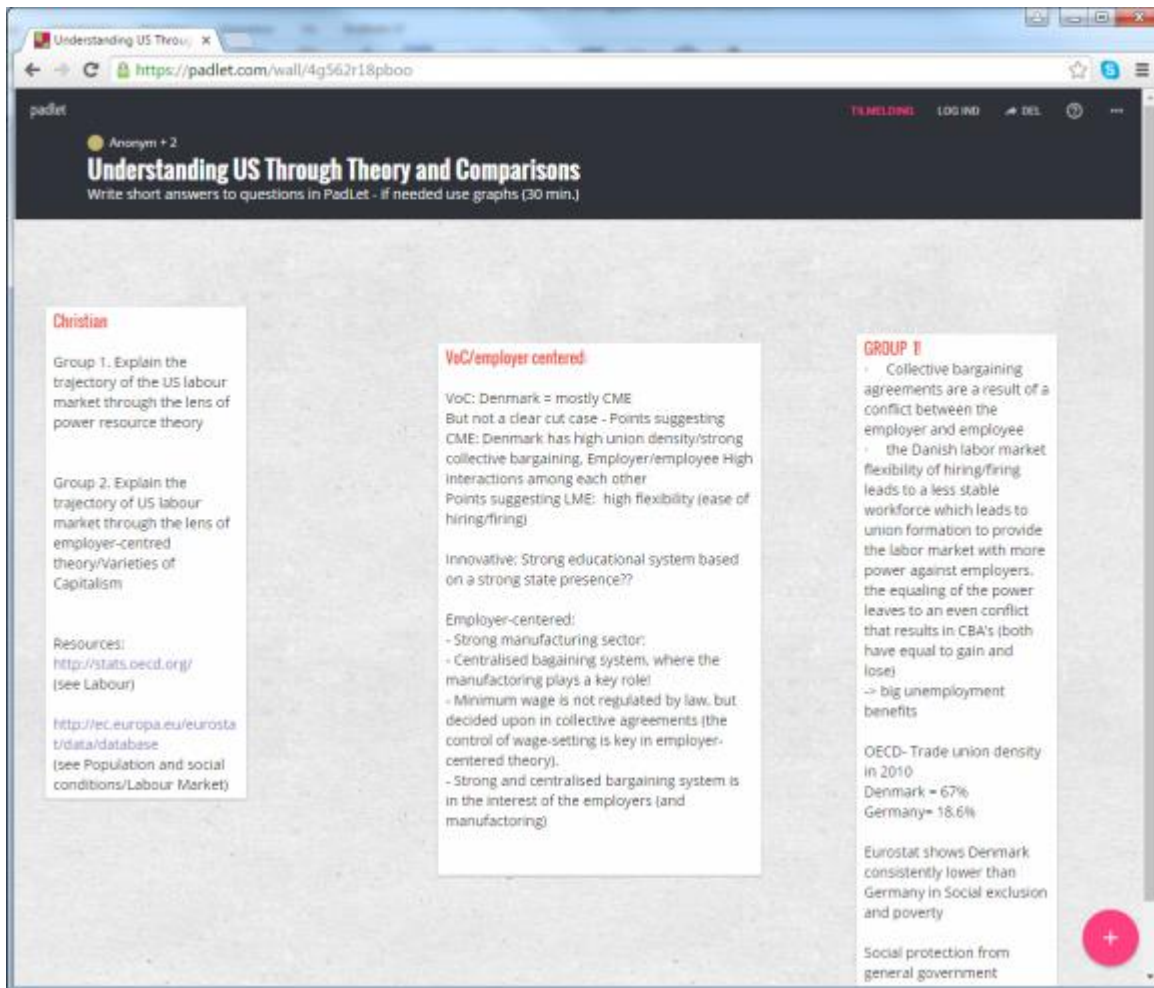
**Figure 1: Outline for Comparative Sociology of Labour Markets**



## Using Padlets for Group Exercises

What is a Padlet? Padlets are a free software – although more sophisticated features are made accessible after payment – that provides a ‘digital canvas’ for Q&As, opinion statements, discussion forum, etc. that is highly flexible and dynamic. Put simply, Padlets are a sophisticated blackboard on which teachers and students can write short notes that is shared on the screen of every participants screen, irrespective of the device used (see screen snapshot below). Any user can go in an create a new padlet which is given a URL (a link), that is disseminated to students in the class. Once the padlet is created it is accessible after the class and students can thus consult answers/notes from previous classes.

Figure 2: Screen snapshot of a padlet



In the below table, I have summarized some of the general strengths and weakness of the padlet for group work exercises. As noted above, padlets in its simply usage provide a modern black board, which engages students through their input on their own screens. Due to the instant upload of notes/answers time is saved for group work discussion that hitherto suffered from slow ‘analogue’ writing on a black board. Because notes can be moved around easily, it makes structuring of discussion easier. For example, you can place dissenting views against each other. Also, because every participant has the same padlet in front of them, this engages students in the common discussion. Padlets, moreover, still has some ‘novelty’-value to them, as it utilizes digital tools for teaching. The option of posting videos or pictures is also appealing to students. Evidently, the ‘novelty’-value will diminish over time.

The general weaknesses include first and foremost the potential loss of control over input. Quickly, notes/answers can become too many or dispersed which makes it easier to loose overview. Evidently, this problem increases with class-size. If there are too many inputs, it also becomes harder to organize input. Finally, off-topic input – in particular mischievous ones – can quickly derail students. While it is possible to delete the unwanted input, the damage might already be done. With the paid option, Padlet gives more options to control both participant and input for Padlets (consult: <https://padlet.com/premium/backpack>).

Strengths	Weaknesses
Engaging	Easy to lose overview
Great for small group work	Not great for large/many groups
Modern black board	Hard to control input
Good for dissenting views and discussion	Hard to organise input
Free!	Limitation on each note
Uses technology actively	Limitation on text size/fonts
Facilitates input for class-rooms	
Flexible tool	

### Group Exercise: Linking Theory and Cases

Group exercises were introduced in the last module of the course. Three lessons on three country cases concluded the course (the last lesson was about the exam and feedback/supervision on ideas for student essays). Each lesson on the country cases followed a similar structure. In the first half, I would give a lecture to introduce them to the country. Thus, the focus was on repeating and understanding the empirical knowledge from the required readings. Students were nevertheless encouraged to participate with questions and comments, and I would ask them directly about the country to probe their level of preparation.

In the second half, we passed on to group exercises using padlets. In both lessons – on Germany and US, respectively – I presented the group exercise on a power point slide, the content of which can be seen below. I divided the students into two groups, each of four persons. Students were then to log onto the padlet by typing in the URL. In the padlet, the actual questions were outlined. I explained what I expected from the and I explained how they could type in answers.

There were one question for each group in the padlet (see text box below). Each group had to explain the trajectory of change in the country's labour market using their particular theoretical lens. They were encouraged to use comparative data from online resources, e.g. OECD, ILO or Eurostat, and to use examples from the readings. In the first lesson on Germany, the students were given 20 minutes and I had not indicated resources. After the 20 minutes, we would have a class discussion about their answers and how well each theoretical lens explained the country's trajectory. In the second lesson on the US, the time was extended to 30 minutes and I had now indicated appropriate online resources for answering the questions. Students were still divided into two groups and giving a theoretical lens each (the lesson on Denmark followed the format of the lesson on the US).

**Group Work: Lesson 11****Understanding Germany Through Theory and Comparison**

1. Log on to: <http://padlet.com/wall/yge7hqatibyf>
2. In groups, write short answers to questions in PadLet (20 min.)
3. Class discussion of answers

**Group Work: Lesson 12****Understanding US Through Theory and Comparison**

1. Log on to: <https://padlet.com/wall/4g562r18pboo>
2. In groups, write short answers to questions in PadLet (30 min.)
3. Class discussion of answers

## Evaluation

In this section, I present the evaluation of using padlets for group exercises. I report the feedback from three sources: 1) my academic and pedagogical supervisors, Mikkel Mailand and Peter Josef Wick, 2) four students taking the course, and 3) my own impressions. My supervisors gave oral feedback after the first lesson on Germany and I took this feedback into the second lesson on the US. The four students gave oral feedback after the course had ended and they had received their grades.

My supervisors focused their feedback on issues that are general to group exercises and issues that are specific for using padlets. Their first remark was that the exercise was relatively hard as it asked students to apply theory to cases using data to support their argument. This task requires abstract thinking but also empirical knowledge of the country case. In other words, even if students were prepared – which is not a given – the group exercise could quickly degenerate into no exercise at all. Moreover, asking the students to use online resources to back up their argument turned out being too time-consuming because students didn't know what to look for (based on their theory), or where to look for it. My supervisors remarked that I had to give a lot of instruction even when the exercise had begun – and by consequence I became part of answering the questions for both groups. The advice I got from my supervisors was two-fold: First, indicate which resources they should use and what they should look for. Second, give them more time for the group work. I followed both suggestions for the second lesson, which meant that students much more quickly could start solving the task of explaining the case through theory.

On the specific use of the Padlet, my supervisors were generally positive. They liked the interactive element of having instant input from students on the screen once the groups started answering the question. Moreover, the idea of having concrete application of theory that students could consult after the class was appreciated. A normal black board exercise would not be saved and shared digitally. In a normal black board-exercise, the answers of each group would be written on a black board, but not shared by students. However, they also remarked that the simultaneous introduction of a new tool, the padlet, as well as posing a hard question that entailed application of theory to cases, was perhaps too ambitious. My supervisors

suggested that I wrote direct links to the online data resources, that could take students straight to the relevant data. As noted, I followed their suggestion and this made the search for data much quicker and easier for students who could then focus more on discussion and application of the cases.

Similarly to the supervisor feedback, the feedback from four students can be grouped into issues that are general to group exercises and issues that are specific for using padlets. On the first issues, the students all agreed, that the level of the questions was very high. Especially in the first session, it was unclear that the two theories were opposing. It was also hard to find evidence supporting the theories and it therefore took too much time to answer the questions. One student appreciated that I had provided links to online resources, but they also asked for more guidance about what the key variables were. The other students agreed and suggested that this kind of help would be good in the beginning after which it could be phased out. I agreed with the students on this latter point but challenged them on identifying the key variables for them since linking theories with variables was part of the exercise. One student also remarked that because the exercise was challenging, she did not show up because she hadn't read the material and therefore didn't feel up for the exercise. Another student, conversely, said that the small class environment and my personal teaching style had made her feel confident about her answers. Crucially, this meant that it was ok to speak up, even if the answer was not entirely right. In sum, the students found the exercise challenging to begin with but also worthwhile once I had provided some more guidance and resources.

On the specific issues for using padlets, the students were generally satisfied. They noted that padlets were a good tool to make class room discussion more engaging. At the most simple level, there was a novelty factor. At a more abstract level, the instant visibility of input by one group made the group discussions shared by the other group, hereby pushing the latter group to come up with answers. One student lamented the feeling of pressure, this competition to produce input created. Specifically, it was hard to write fast and clearly enough for the padlet format (short sentences). However, she also acknowledged that the competitive pressure pushed the group discussions on since group exercises often start off with social chat instead of discussion of the exercise question/task. Another student suggested that the groups could wait with posting answers until the end of the exercise. The advantage would be that the answers would be more rounded and complete – the disadvantage being that answers were not being shared instantly and the element of competition would be lost. All four students were very happy that the padlet input was accessible after the class. Moreover, the padlets gave a useful overview of the link between theories and cases. Thus, students would use the padlet inputs for their exam papers.

My own experiences with padlets for this type of exercise conform quite well with the supervisor and student feedback. The padlet is only a tool and it cannot remedy bad group exercises. Thus, many of the issues that supervisors and students mentioned – principally the difficulty of the exercise and lack of time – are general to group exercises and not particular pertinent for padlets. Nevertheless, the use of padlets can facilitate discussions of hard questions as gives a way to structure input that otherwise could go in all kinds of directions. I believe that the instant input is superior to waiting with input to the end of the exercise. It's superior because the teacher can react instantly to the direction that groups are taking. Moreover, by creating the 'competitive' pressure, groups will more quickly start the actual work. Evidently, there is a flipside to the coin. If student input is off-topic and no control of this input is exercised, the padlet can quickly become unmanageable. For this reasons, I also believe that the padlet is mostly suited for small to medium sized class rooms and few persons/groups writing on the padlet. Beyond number of inputs, I believe that my group exercises should have be facilitated better by providing more resources and guidance on the actual padlet.



Moreover, I should have thought more in progression, i.e. giving easier tasks and more help in the first session and then gradually giving less assistance in the subsequent sessions.

## **Conclusion: Implications for Teaching**

This report presented and discussed my recent experiences with Padlets in group work exercises for small classroom teaching involving theory-driven questions. On the basis of feedback from my supervisors and students together with my own impressions, I have summarized my implications for teaching into eight points:

1. Padlets are good for small groups – no more than 3-4 answers!
2. Allow time for exercise and subsequent discussion
3. Provide links to resources and point students in right direction
4. Make sure the Padlet-link works and that students are connected
5. Avoid anonymous answers
6. OK to set hard tasks involving high-level of abstraction
7. However, questions/exercises should be manageable for 150 word answers
8. Repeat, Progress and Repeat!

The last point is maybe the most important. I found that students became much more comfortable with the padlet and the type of exercise I had given them in the second and third lesson. Repetition and progression were key to the success, which should come as no surprise to educators. Specifically, padlets are a great tool, but no silver bullet. They give great overview, they are novel (at least at the moment) and they store group exercise discussion in an easy way. Of course, there are limitations because the input can quickly get out of control, but for exercises in small to medium sized classes, they are very helpful.