Broadening and Deepening Knowledge and Understanding Through Group Work

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Teaching Cycle Two: The "Grand Debate": Broadening and Deepening Knowledge and Understanding through Group Work

Report submitted in partial fulfilment for the Post Graduate Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education

This is a report which reflects on what I believe to be the most significant innovation I have attempted during the period of completing my tHE Certificate. The report summarises what was in many ways an experiment and as such I was both nervous and intrigued in developing and implementing the idea. This experiment (learning cycle) covers two academic years, 2004-05 and 2005-06 primarily on the undergraduate module IP33820 European Politics, but also on IP33620 Contemporary European Security, in the Department of International Politics, UWA.

The Rationale

The innovation focused on enhancing the student centred learning approach that I have tried to adopt in my first three years as a full-time university teacher. The objective was to enhance student learning by devolving some responsibility for their learning to the students themselves. Thereby I wanted to enhance their knowledge and understanding of European integration by encouraging them to reflect on the project and their progress both as individuals but, more importantly, also as a group. In my effort to focus on student centred learning I had already devolved responsibility for introducing seminar topics to the students and I had further developed this idea by also using students as immediate 'respondents' to the introductory remarks (see teaching cycle three). Therefore students led the discussion from the start with me playing the role of facilitator and mediator. Students introducing and responding were engaging in reflective learning either by reflecting on the topic to be introduced or on the introductory comments of their peers. However, I wanted to provide the students with a sense of group responsibility spanning the entire semester.

The innovation was based on two key motivations: (a) to improve group identity, dynamics and confidence within seminars, and (b) to broaden and deepen student understanding of the history of European integration through the lens of 'agency' as opposed to 'structure'. I wanted to provide each of the module's seminar groups with a greater sense of identity as I thought this may strengthen the group dynamic and enhance student confidence so that they would feel comfortable expressing their own opinions in seminar discussions. My own experiences as an undergraduate and postgraduate student influenced this reasoning as did my time as a graduate teaching assistant in Aberdeen. Within a group certain personalities adjust and become comfortable more quickly and dominant personalities can put off the quieter and less confident students. By providing the group with an identity and setting them (as a group) a task I wanted to build a group dynamic, develop teamwork skills and give the students a sense of purpose and responsibility beyond simply preparing for, turning up to and maybe contributing to a seminar as individuals. I also wanted the module as a whole to have a sense of purpose beyond attending lectures and seminars and submitting formal assessments. Hence, I decided to bring all the seminar groups together at the end of the module to present their
project findings and debate the issues and ideas raised in the final 'grand debate'. In this way it was hoped that the students would reflect on their own learning experience with a greater sense of responsibility, that they would critically reflect upon other group work, identifying strengths and weaknesses, and develop teamwork skills that are essential both in higher education but also once they leave higher education.

Group Work and Critically Reflective Learning

Group work and discussion are key elements in any attempt to develop a critically reflective approach to learning and teaching. They are also essential to the student centred learning approach discussed earlier and have been shown to be more effective at stimulating 'deep' learning over 'surface' learning.43

Tribe outlines three reasons for using group based learning: (a) active involvement is necessary if 'real' learning is to occur; (b) a varied learning environment meets the needs of different types of students; and, (c) group based learning techniques provide a basis for the development of skills required in employment.44 In reflecting on this teaching cycle it has become apparent to me that Tribe's first reason has been one of the primary reasons I have experimented with group-based learning. As mentioned earlier learning is an active process, group learning is about getting learners to think, discuss and reflect (activities) and by participating (being active) their learning is enhanced. I have used group-learning to encourage students to identify key points of an argument, the basis for and the logic of the argument; to question and challenges the literature, me and their peers in order to seek further clarification and thereby enhance learning. In short to think (reflect) and understand rather than simply assimilate knowledge.45 By setting a long term task for the whole group the idea was that these processes would be a constant throughout the module and develop as the module progressed, increasing the possibility of deep-learning through active learning.

The other key rationale behind my group project was to improve group dynamics. Robson argues that group based leaning will only be effective if the participants feel willing and able to contribute.46 In my experience of higher education the formation of seminar groups is largely random, based on a first come first serve basis as students sign up on sheets to the seminars that best suit their timetable. Friends may well sign up to the same seminar group but otherwise the group is unstructured. Yet, we (as teachers) generally expect the group to work more or less smoothly from the start with students feeling comfortable enough and able enough to contribute in what is initially a 'new' environment for them. While we acknowledge that it takes time for group dynamics to develop and for some students to settle in and become comfortable enough to contribute freely, often little is done to 'transform a nominal group into a cohesive unit.,47 Robson

44 Ibid. pp. 25-27
45 Ibid. p. 26
47 Ibid.
briefly explores a number of 'ice breakers' for improving the cohesiveness of a group. The advantage of my innovation is that, unlike ice breakers, it is not a one off. It begins in the very first seminar and continues for the duration of the module. Moreover, as each group is developing a similar project but with specific differences the module as whole has common sense of purpose beyond simply attending classes and this also generates a sense of group cohesion on a larger scale. This is cemented by bringing the entire module together at the end to present their projects in the ‘Grand Debate’.

The semester long project and final grand debate aimed to fulfil many of Light and Cox’s purposes of group discussion (learning): intellectual, personal, social and practical. These purposes are illustrated by Light and Cox as a figure:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intellectual</th>
<th>Personal</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive understanding</td>
<td>Providing opportunities for practice and self-expression</td>
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<tr>
<td>Appreciating other perceptions</td>
<td>Developing self-awareness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Changing conceptions</td>
<td>Encouraging autonomy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Questioning assumptions</td>
<td>Encouraging commitment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Developing oral skills</td>
<td>Weakening defensive attitudes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feedback to staff</td>
<td>Improving attitudes to the subject</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social</th>
<th>Practical</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Encouraging co-operation and awareness of others</td>
<td>Develop teamwork skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing a sense of social identity</td>
<td>Solve practical problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing a sense of community and belonging</td>
<td>Carry out specific tasks</td>
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These purposes are encompassed in Brown and Atkins’ summary of the goals of small group teaching: communication skills, intellectual and professional competencies; and, personal growth. In order to facilitate learning within this group based scenario there were two key factors: setting out the expectations (and ground rules) clearly and ensuring the students felt comfortable (or ‘safe’) in the group environment; issues raised by both Brown and Atkins and Light and Cox. Both these elements need to be taken into account in any form of group work. However, for this innovation the students would (as the project progressed) work on their own, within their sub-groups or as whole group outside of the classroom and without my presence as a facilitator; hence clear expectations were extremely important. As part of these ground rules it was essential that the students realised that they could question me and each other about this project (as well as, obviously, the seminar topic of the day). Without ground rules and expectations students

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may make them up and make assumptions that hamper the objectives of the learning cycle.\textsuperscript{50} To successfully complete the task in the spirit it was meant students had to feel safe enough to take risks and not fear making contributions, suggestions or ask questions. Hence, as Brown and Atkins suggest, a practice of rewards and risk reduction was utilised.\textsuperscript{51} Good contributions, suggestions and questions were praised while I tried to reduce the sense of risk by making my expectations clear (hence reducing uncertainty) and not ‘putting down’ students but rather taking the positive (however small) out of what they said and building upon that.

The experiment itself could be classed as a cross between what Brown and Atkins describe as a Case Study and Syndicate approach\textsuperscript{52} but also a cross between what Race terms the Snowballing and Syndicate approach.\textsuperscript{53} The case study approach, according to Brown and Atkins, involves four key phases, which I believe correspond loosely to my approach in the grand debate teaching cycle: phase one I set the objectives, clarify the rules and any problems; phase two the students, in their own time, read, reflect and summarise the information and issues; phase three in their sub-groups of three to six students they exchange their views, information and develop a common set list of facts and ideas; and, phase four is a plenary session in which the seminars present to the module as a whole.\textsuperscript{54} The syndicate model works in a similar fashion.\textsuperscript{55} The snowballing element is also a valid description as the initial task is for the individual students and as the project develops it moves up the scale to sub-groups and then the entire seminar group and ultimately to the whole module in the final plenary session that is the grand debate.\textsuperscript{56} By working from the level of the individual through small and then progressively larger groups the opportunities for self and peer reflection are multiplied significantly and allows the students, explicitly or subconsciously, to engage in the critically reflective deep learning that we as teachers hope all students experience. The next section looks how this innovation was operationalised.

The 'Grand Debate' Experiment

Summary
Within the module on European Politics (IP33820) each seminar group (total of five groups) was given a name based on high profile European politicians or thinkers of the Twentieth Century. Each group had to develop an in-depth political knowledge and understanding of their person’s impact on the process of European integration - positive or negative. The guiding question in their investigation was: In what way has person X had an impact (positively or negatively) on the European integration process. The five groups would then come together at the end of the semester to present and debate the topic: Which person has had the most significant impact (positively or negatively) on the European integration process? In order to facilitate the development of a 'pool' of

\textsuperscript{50} Light and Cox, Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (2001) p.121
\textsuperscript{51} Brown and Atkins, Effective Teaching in Higher Education (1988) p. 60
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid. pp. 66-67
\textsuperscript{53} Race, Phil., The Lecturer's Toolkit (London: Kogan Page, 1998) pp. 150-151
\textsuperscript{54} Brown and Atkins, Effective Teaching in Higher Education (1988) p. 66
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.p. 151
knowledge and exchange of ideas I decided to use Blackboard as an additional teaching and learning resource.

Implementing the teaching and learning experiment

When students signed up for their seminar group they did not simply sign up to a convenient time slot but also to a person, an identity. Interestingly when I pointed this out to them in the preliminary seminar meetings most students were not aware that they had signed up to a particular group name or identity (even though this was indicated in colour at the top of the sign-up sheets); they had only noted the day, time and place. The personalities were political actors that had had a significant impact (positively or negatively) on the politics and process of European integration. In the first year I ran this (2004-05) there were five groups (one Welsh medium group run by a different member of staff) each with its own political personality attached to it; the personalities were: Konrad Adenauer, Charles de Gaulle, Jean Monnet, Alterio Spinelli and Margaret Thatcher (Appendix G). In the second year (2005-06) there were three groups: Jacques Delors, Vaclav Havel and Helmut Kohl (Appendix G). I also ran this innovation in my European Security module using security organisations as the group identities: the EU, NATO and OSCE (Appendix G). However, I am basing most of this reflection on the IP33820 module.

Prior to the first preliminary seminar meeting I had set up 'group pages' on Blackboard, the electronic teaching resource that UWA make available for every module. Only members of a particular seminar group could access their group page. Each group page had the availability of: the 'group discussion board', 'file exchange' and 'send email' facility. The Group Discussion Board was where the initial research findings of the individual group members would be stored and was the most used facility. The file exchange and send email facilities were used subsequent to the initial data collection to further the opportunities for intra-group reflection and exchange of information as the group presentation developed during the semester.

At the preliminary meeting I outlined the idea behind this initiative, my initial objectives and the ultimate task that the students would have to perform (hence setting out the ground rules and expectations as advocated by Brown and Atkins and Light and COX).57 I then gave the students a few minutes to reflect on the idea and provide me with their initial thoughts, feedback and suggestions. Surprisingly, despite this adding to their workload the large majority of students seemed keen, or at least intrigued, by this idea. I then set them their first task. By the first formal seminar, the following week, each student, individually, had to post one 'significant' fact, relevant to the task, about their person on the Group Discussion Board. This was the first step in the snowballing (or pyramiding) strategy58 to be used in this group based learning experiment. Once a fact was posted on blackboard subsequent contributions had to add to the knowledge pool - i.e. no repetition of facts. As all facts could be read by all group members the discussion board allowed the quick and efficient dissemination of knowledge and opinion and

58 Race, The Lecturer’s Toolkit (1998) p. 151
generated an immediate sense of teamwork and progress among the seminar groups. All the while I, as module convenor, could monitor progress for each individual group as the module convenor was a member of each seminar group. In this way, as Brown and Atkins suggest, I was a coordinator, summariser and a resource and for each group.\(^59\) By the first seminar all but a couple of students had posted their 'facts'. The students that had yet to post a fact on Blackboard were encouraged to post their information by the following seminar and the other students were asked to reflect on quality of the information already posted in preparation for a discussion in the next seminar.

Prior to the second seminar I printed off the list of facts and in the seminar provided them to the students as a handout (Appendix G). I then gave the students some time at the beginning of the seminar to reflect upon the 'facts' that had been collated and a discussion was held to decide which facts or groups of facts were to be further investigated and utilised for the final presentation and debate. The students were also given the opportunity at this stage to put forward other suggestions of information to be used in the presentations. The seminar groups picked between three and five facts to pursue further and around which they would structure their group's presentation at the end of the semester. I then sub-divided the relatively large seminar groups into smaller sub-groups of three to five students each based around one key fact (stage two of the snowballing or pyramiding process). The students were asked to volunteer to join a particular sub-group. Within their sub-groups they were then to self-manage the collection of further information based around their key fact or theme and begin to formulate a set of discussion points. The smaller group size would make students feel more comfortable to express their views and facilitate more focused and effective learning while still allowing for a range of knowledge, opinions and methods to be used. The sub-group communication would be partially facilitated by the use of Blackboard, but face to face meetings were strongly encouraged. Each week towards the end of the seminar I would enquire as to progress within the sub-groups and they were able to ask me for advice and clarification, about empirical or theoretical issues or about further resources. Here rather than dominating the group or the sub-groups I was acting as the facilitator, breaking the sense of dependency groups can have on the teacher to direct developments.\(^60\)

Devolving this responsibility encourages the active learning I was trying to develop. With these updates the whole group got a sense of how the overall presentation/project was developing. In these discussions students could suggest additional avenues of investigation to other sub-groups generating a critically reflective learning environment led by and owned by the students. As the ultimate objective for each seminar group at the end of the semester was to make the case for their personality having had the most significant impact on the politics or process of European integration, I was able to develop a sense of friendly competition between seminar groups. This had two principal impacts, it gave an added incentive to develop the best presentation possible in the time allowed and it further engendered a sense of group identity. This was evidenced by improved group dynamics, not just in regard to the particular project but, crucially, in the

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\(^{60}\) Light and Cox, *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* (2001) p.118
more ‘formal’ seminar discussions (Appendix L). Students were more familiar with each other and felt ‘safe’ expressing their own opinions in seminars, however underdeveloped or advanced their ideas were. This was one of the central objectives of running this experiment.

However, the project was only halfway through. In the fourth seminar (of eight) I provided the whole group with a floppy disk onto which they would bring together their information in the form of a presentation. This required a single member of the group to take responsibility (and in some senses a leadership role) for the group’s efforts. However, I made it very clear that the student was not responsible for the content of other sub-groups work or for any missing contributions; rather they provided a focal point for the collection of the information. The sub-groups were then given a further two weeks to finalise their information/presentation points based on their key fact or theme and to email it to the disk holder. By this point most groups were already self-motivated and my role was merely to provide guidance, monitor progress and answer any questions. Prior to the sixth seminar the disk holder emailed me the information that had been gathered and the draft presentation that had been developed (Appendix G). In the seminar I showed this to the whole group and we reflected on progress and content and discussed finalising the presentation. The project had now moved to encompass the whole seminar group, another level up in Race’s snowballing technique. Issues such as content, design and structure of the presentation were raised and collective decisions were made by the students (I was merely an observer to most of the discussions except when called upon for advice). This was another key point in the development of the student’s critical reflectivity skills and was the most significant example yet of the student-centred learning approach that I had hoped to foster through this innovation.

Finally, I sought volunteers to present in the final ‘grand debate’ itself at the end of the semester. This was again largely a group decision with the only stipulation being each sub-group should be represented by at least one person. While, naturally there was some reluctance at first given that there was already an increased sense of group responsibility and identity it was actually a relatively smooth process with students volunteering themselves or being nominated by members of their sub-group. However, as this was a group effort I suggested that as well as the speakers the entire group would go to the front in a show of support for their speakers and to identify themselves with that group and the presentation.

Once this was decided the group was encouraged to meet separately outside of seminar hours to finalise their preparations over the following two weeks. Interestingly, I was asked at this point whether groups could collect information on the other group’s political personality to use ‘against’ them in the final debate. This showed an encouraging degree of engagement with the broader project and a degree of initiative by the students and illustrated that the students on the module as whole were interacting with each other. It also demonstrated a clear sense of seminar group identity and cohesiveness (a main objective of the exercise). Within reason I saw no harm in this and simply reminded students of the need to be courteous and, while supposed to be fun, this was also an

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academic exercise and therefore their questions and information had to be relevant to the overall theme of the debate.

Devolving responsibility to the students had led to increased confidence, initiative and willingness to participate in group work and take decisions for themselves as a group. Crucial student skills such as listening to others’ ideas sympathetically and critically, collaborating and thinking creatively were all in evidence with the seminar environment. Final preparations for the presentations were entirely left to the students.

In the ‘grand debate’ itself the culmination of the sub-group and seminar group work was presented to the other groups and the students of each group then had the opportunity to question other groups about their presentation and their political personality. At the beginning of the session I laid out the procedures and structure of the debate and reiterated the ‘ground rules’ - the students had to feel ‘safe’ enough to fully express themselves. The running order of the presentations was given, the groups were reminded of the time they were allowed to present (five minutes) and the format of the question and answer session was repeated for all. I had prepared countdown cards to hold up to the groups presenting giving them a two and one minute warning to help them stay within time (Appendix G). As one of the groups presenting was the Welsh medium group (presenting on Charles de Gaulle) me and my teaching partner on this module had arranged for translation facilities to be provided and the procedures for this were also explained. While I was apprehensive about how this might work it actually added to the sense of occasion and replicated how the European Parliament works (which turned out to be a nice touch on a module about the European Union). I explained (again) that that the judging would be carried out by me and my team teaching partner (Appendix G) who had kindly agreed to help judge the presentations and the following debate. The criteria for judging were again explained (having been outlined earlier in the semester). The key elements were: content, structure, time keeping, style, flair and finally, how they questioned other groups and answered other group’s questions.

The amount of effort put into the presentations was very impressive. Each group had exceeded my (and the other member of staffs) expectations. There were well polished power point presentations, posters and even an EU flag (Appendix G). The students had clearly run through the presentation before as four of the five kept very close to time. They used their visual aids well and some injected a sense of humour into their presentations. The question and answer session was very lively and conducted in the competitive yet friendly spirit I had hoped for. Here too some of the groups had clearly done some good preparation for questioning and challenging the other group’s claims about the significance of their personality’s impact on European integration. Devolving responsibility had given the students confidence to run with the idea further than I had expected. After a brief period of consultation the judges decided on the ‘winning’ group. Prior to announcing the ‘winner’ and awarding the prize I provided some feedback on some general strengths and weaknesses of the presentations as whole and encouraged students to come and see me about feedback on their own group or any specific points they had. I then awarded the prize to the ‘winning’ group. A nice touch that seemed to

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provide some 'evidence' of a wider group identity within the module was that the victorious group shared their chocolate winnings with the entire module.

I ran the ideas in the second semester of 2004-05 on my European Security course and again received some very positive feedback. Therefore, in 2005-06 I ran the seminar group work and grand debate idea again on European Politics. Having reflected on the feedback of the students and my fellow judge I made some slight adjustments to the 'grand debate itself (for example lengthening the presentation time to eight minutes) but ran the group preparation in a similar manner. I only had there seminar groups this time round and decided to pick three different identities (Jacques Delors, Helmut Kohl and Vaclav Havel). I did not want students simply to repeat what the previous year's students had done (perhaps even by getting their work through friends and acquaintances). I ran the whole build up process in the same way. However, the innovation did not live up to the very high standards as of previous year. It did achieve its core objective of improving group cohesion (and hence seminar discussion), but the level of student 'ownership' did not seem as great as the previous year. This was reflected in the final presentations which, while much better than I had thought they were going to be, were not quite as polished as the previous years'.

Having reflected on my own efforts, on the feedback from students and from the teaching observation carried out by my fellow judge (Appendix B) I have identified a number of possible reasons for the slight dip in student engagement. First is obviously the fact that no student or group of students are the same and perhaps this cohort needed a greater sense of direction from me as the teacher. They were perhaps less comfortable with the devolving of responsibility. Hence, as the first iteration of the project had run very well I assumed if I did the same again I would have the same success. This simply verifies the argument that learning to teach never stops and methods, ideas and procedures continually have to be responsive to changing environments and the different learning needs of different students. Second, the student feedback (formal and informal - Appendix L) raised the issue of the debate and the essay deadline being too close together. This highlights the importance of module design and the very careful and detailed planning that must go into creating a module. Third, I believe the selection of 'personalities' that were to be investigated actually had an impact. I thought that more contemporary people would make the subject even more immediate for the students, but some of their verbal feedback suggested that more historical figures were both more interesting and easier to research. Despite my own slight disappointment there were several very encouraging comments in the student feedback about the group work and the [mal debate (Appendix L) and on the day the students really got into the spirit of the 'Grand Debate' event. Hence, my faith in the innovation and the format has not been dented. As I stated earlier I applied a similar project in a module on European Security (IP33620) with each seminar group assigned a European security organisation as their identity and this worked very well in the second semester of 2004-05 with great student involvement (Appendix K). This demonstrates that the formula is transferable. I will be making some revisions and experimenting again in the coming year.
Reflections and Conclusions

Having reflected on running the 'grand debate' for two years I have identified a number of key elements that have been crucial in my process of learning to teach. The 'grand debate' itself had encouraged the students to listen critically to the arguments put forward, to reflect critically on the strengths and weakness of those points and to think critically about the types of questions they could pose and the answers they may need to provide. This should help in developing the reflective learning environment advocated by Brockbank and Gill and so central to higher education. This was an event centred solely on the students and demonstrated that devolving responsibility for elements of student learning to the students themselves can have a number of very positive benefits. This point is made clearly in the literature on group work as a learning tool, such as Brown and Atkins and Light and COX.

The immediate informal verbal feedback that I received from the students and my colleague who attended as the other judge was very encouraging. The students had really enjoyed the event and the preparation for it. They said it had added to their learning about European integration in an innovative and engaging manner. The formal feedback in the module evaluation forms was also very positive (Appendices K and L) and some useful suggestions were made for future 'grand debates'. The peer feedback was also very encouraging (Appendices B and G) highlighting the innovative approach and making valuable suggestions (such as allowing more time for feedback at the end of the session and asking students for more feedback on each other). Even the after the debate in the second iteration (which I was less pleased with) the students said (in formal and informal comments) they had really enjoyed the session and it had given them another way of looking at European integration or security (Appendices K and L).

The key objectives of the experiment had, to a large extent, been met. I had developed another method to focus on student-centred learning; I had encouraged the students to engage in a critically reflective approach to their studies; group cohesion had been improved and thereby group discussion improved. These factors are highlighted as crucial in the literature on developing student centred learning and team teaching (Brown and Atkins, Light and Cox, and Thorley and Gregory). The lessons I have taken from the teaching cycle is to be even more aware and adapt still further to the individual and group learning needs of students. That if a format worked well one year it does not mean it can run in exactly the same format again, changes and adaptation must be incorporated. I must continue to reflect upon my teaching and that I am continually learning to teach. The experiment has been very encouraging and has cemented my critically reflective approach to learning and teaching in higher education.

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