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POSTGRADUATE CERTIFICATE IN TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Cylch Dygu 1 | Teaching Cycle 1

The Challenges of Large-Class Teaching

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Teaching Cycle One

The Challenges of Large-Class Teaching

Report based on teaching an optional undergraduate module
IP 37320 "Communist & Post-communist Politics", UWA

Background:

...We stack 'em deep and teach 'em cheap.  
Utah Education Association Tee-shirt slogan

The past few years have seen some truly profound changes in the higher education system in the UK and elsewhere, one of the most striking being the increase in the number of students choosing university as their preferred venue for continued professional development. The proportion of school graduates alone has risen by nearly 30 per cent since the early 1990s, in addition to those who are returning to education for further degree or new qualifications. This has had some significant implications for those who work in the sector. Given the increasingly mass character of higher education concomitant with the diversifying nature of students' needs, abilities and motivations, many scholars fear that this may erode the quality of education and lower the standards and requirements we traditionally behold for university degrees. Notwithstanding the polemics of the current debate, it is clear that both students and teachers have to adapt to these challenges and seek new techniques to ensure that the teaching-and-learning process will remain effective and advantageous.

One of the many challenges posed by a large-class teaching pertains to the limited personal contact between the teacher and the student - 'teaching is about relationship', thus ensuring a number of difficulties which, if not addressed adequately, may lead to students' subsequent withdrawal from the process of learning. As Jenkins has posited, the challenge for the modern teacher is to balance efficiency in delivering curriculum and effectiveness in ensuring that learning for students remains enjoyable and beneficial.

For this report I chose to discuss my teaching experience of the new module "Communist and Post-Communist Politics" that I offered to 2-3 year students of International Politics Department in 2004-5. Given its novel and ambitious character, I was faced with the following main challenges:

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4 Gibbs, G., "The problems of learning and teaching in large classes", in Gibbs & Jenkins (eds.) Teaching Large Classes, p.29.
5 Ibid, pp. 42-3. Gibbs listed eight main areas of difficulty including (1) lack of clarity of purpose; (2) lack of knowledge; (3) lack of advice; (4) inability to support wide reading; (5) inability to support independent study; (6) lack of opportunity for discussion; (7) inability to cope with variety of students; and (8) inability to motivate them.
6 Jenkins, A., "Active learning in structured lectures", in Gibbs, G, and Jenkins, A. (eds.) Teaching Large Classes, pp.63-76.
- as an optional new module, it became oversubscribed by students (over 90 entries). As a result, I had to deliver two lectures (from anew!) to a large group of students and run five seminar sessions per week in an overcrowded and undoubtedly, stressful environment. There were no provisions envisaged for additional teaching support to the new lecturer; - students had a varied level of awareness about the subject; varied academic specialisations (often coming from other departments) and also varied learning experience being in their second and third years of study respectively; - finally, the nature of the module was such that it aimed to provide an introduction to the vast and constantly evolving politics of the post-communist region. As a result, its 'geography' embraced over thirty different countries and its 'politics' - a considerable number of issues including references to the region's communist history. Clearly, this posed difficulty for the library, students and the lecturer who had to oversee that there were sufficient resources for everyone's use.

The principal challenge, however, was to ensure that my first-time teaching-and-learning experience would be constructive for both students and myself to bestow me with new ideas and enthusiasm for the future development.

Theory:

In my planning of the module I was inspired by several ideas, all of which in their variety had centred on 'reflection' as the key to effective teaching-and-learning.

I engaged with various learning cycles of experiential learning theories (Juch, 1983; Kelly, 1955; Pfeiffer & Jones, 1983, Kolb, 1984),7 based on a four/five-stage experience of learning - through action, observation, conceptualisation and experimentation, and discussed them with the students in the module's introductory lecture (enclosed). However, my further readings of Greenaway8 highlighted the fact that these were all about learning rather than development, which Kolb acknowledged himself by designing a new experiential learning theory of development that involved a dialectical move along the three tier cone to the top of the cycle. If I were to encourage a students' deep knowledge approach9 and their transformation as persons through learning10 I would need to seek a more comprehensive framework that would lead to the acquisition and realisation of higher levels of cognitive skills such as 'application', 'analysis', 'synthesis' and 'evaluation' in Bloom's taxonomy of knowledge.11 I would need a theory that would encourage 'understanding as the space of experiential variation,12 and produce 'reflection' that might indeed be, 'an improvement on the original professional practice'.13

I believe that 'constructive alignment' based on 'the twin principles of constructivism in learning and alignment in teaching,14 is the right framework that should enable me to

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7 For more information see Greenaway, R, Powerful Learning Experiences in Management Learning and Development (Lancaster: Centre for the Study of Management Learning, 1995) and on Kolb - C. Davies, University of Leeds Learning Development Unit (accessed in April 2007), http://www.ldu.leeds.ac.uk/ldu/sddu_multimedia/kolb/static_version.php
8 Greenaway, R Ibid, p.5
9 For more detail see Biggs and his elaboration on functioning knowledge in Teaching for Quality Learning, in Ch.3, pp.41-3.
11 Bloom, Benjamin, Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1984)
13 Biggs, Teaching for Quality Learning, p.7
14 Ibid, Ch.2, pp. 11-34 (p.11); and also Biggs, J., "The reflective institution: assuring and enhancing the quality of teaching and learning", High Education, Vol.41 (2001), pp.221-38
accommodate the challenges of modern teaching and secure students' effective learning, especially in a large-group environment. As suggested by Biggs, 'constructive alignment' has two aspects:

...The 'constructive' aspect refers to the idea that students construct meaning through relevant learning activities... something learners have to create for themselves... The 'alignment' aspect refers to what the teacher does, which is to set up a learning environment that supports the learning activities appropriate to achieving the desired learning outcomes. 

In other words, the teacher needs to create such an environment, in which the learner will be voluntarily 'trapped', and would find it difficult to escape without acquiring intended learning outcomes. This framework presumes alignment of four principal areas, around which I planned my module:

- defining the intended learning outcomes (ILOs)
- designing appropriate teaching-learning activities (TLA)
- devising adequate assessment methods to match what is intended (AM)
- evaluating the outcomes - becoming a reflective learner.

Strategic reflective planning:

Defining Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)

Given the above-mentioned complexities of teaching, I decided to reduce the general objective of the module to merely introducing students to the area problematique. Students were not required to circumscribe themselves to a declarative knowledge of post-communist governments and their specific characteristics. Instead, they were expected (i) to develop an understanding of the logic and extent of change that took place in post-communist Europe, (ii) to apply/evaluate that logic to their individual country experiences and (iii) to synthesize and compare differences/commonalities of change on a regional level at seminars.

Hence, the ILOs for the module were specifically devised to reflect the introductory nature of the course and students' divergent needs and learning experiences. As a result, there were ten main ILOs that could be grouped in three main categories:

- to be aware about the nature of communist rule/philosophy
- to understand the logic, nature and problems of transitions
- to apply the logic and their 'expert' knowledge of individual countries to the region as a whole to be able to explain a varied success of transitions across Europe.

The module was constructively aligned (i) to provide conceptual guidance in lectures; (ii) to encourage students' hands-on learning by way of becoming individual country-experts; and (iii) to share their country experiences at seminars in order to draw a bigger picture of change across the region - thus, developing a 'functioning knowledge' of the subject.

Designing Teaching and Learning Activities (TLAs)

16 Biggs, Teaching for Quality Learning, p.42
17 See the module handbook enclosed, p. 9.
18 Biggs, Teaching for Quality Learning, p. 42
I based my strategic reflective planning of TLAs on the following considerations. In order to ensure that students' academic activities were meaningful and worthwhile I sought to combine the advantages of teacher-controlled, peer-controlled and self-controlled activities - appropriate for different tasks - into a coherent chain of TLAs that will be aligned with the above-outlined ILOs. As a result, my lectures aimed to give students a sense of direction and inspiration by using PowerPoint presentations (as a virtual Blackboard handout), and various visual aids and techniques (e.g. 5-10 min video-clips; a Russian doll of successive Russian presidents; provocative or oxymoronic questions; buzz-time sessions; article-reading; graphs/tables; map-chart, etc) - teacher-controlled activities. Furthermore, students were required to choose a country of their 'specialisation' from a list of 30, and on the basis of country reading lists, provided by the teacher, to learn about its transformation - self-controlled activity. In addition, students were required to attend seminars, during which they would undertake group work - by bringing their country expertise together to analyse the extent of change for various regions - in order answer seminar questions - a peer-controlled activities.

Furthermore, based on Boyle and Nicol's research, I incorporated both class-wide discussions in lectures and peer-group discussions at seminars - to differentiate and accommodate students' divergent needs and concerns, which proved effective judging by students' feedback (enclosed). Given a large-class environment and varied learning experience of students involved (especially coming from different departments, including Law with medium-size groups and Drama - with small-size groups), I was insistent on retaining the features of traditional teaching, to which so many students were accustomed, and on combining it with students' individual active learning - through their country studies - which was followed by their joint cooperative learning - through regional group work at seminars. As Machemer and Crawford's research has suggested in a large-class environment the vast majority of students will value more traditional and active-learning (individual) methods of TLAs (the mean scores for both were 3.92 and 3.99 out a maximum of 5 respectively). The students would feel more apprehensive of TLAs based on peer cooperation (3.3 score), but would value it as an addition to the traditional and active learning.

Devising Assessment Methods (AMs)

In order to make teaching-and-learning effective and correspondent with the ILOs the assessment is an essential part of the 'constructive alignment' framework as it reflects the end of the teaching sequence of events, but also signifies the beginning of knowledge acquisition.

19 Biggs, Teaching for Quality Learning, p.82
20 A particularly positive effect of 'interactive windows' in a large-class environment was documented by Huxman in his research of learning from conventional lectures. For more details, see Huxman, M., "Learning in lectures: do 'interactive windows' help?", Active Learning in Higher Education, Vol.6, NO.1 (2005): 17-31
21 Seminar groups were constructed in such a way that they would usually have 2-3 students representing specific regions - say, Central Europe (Hungary & Czech), the Balkans (Macedonia & Serbia), Eastern Europe (Belarus & Ukraine), the Caucasus (Georgia & Armenia), etc) - to allow regional and cross-country comparison
23 Buzz-sessions were particularly popular with students, and helpful to the teacher when attempting to establish the level of students' awareness about an issue, or simply to show its complexity by highlighting the whole range of opinions and definitions of an issue.
24 Peer-group discussions were useful as they provided additional peer-pressure to individual learning when a group of 2-3 students had to draw comparisons about their region in order to contribute to the general group discussion.
transformation for the student. Furthermore, as Winter repeatedly emphasised in his research:

... learning is a process which takes place gradually, so students need time to 'digest' their learning, to make sense of it. This 'gradual' model of learning as 'making sense over time' lies at the heart of assessment. .. 26

Therefore, to expect students to achieve mastery over a short period of time of grappling with new ideas is fundamentally unrealistic goal. Hence, as Winter advanced, our assessment of students' work should be more seen as a 'patchwork' of the 'unfolding drama of gradual discovery', the 'drama of learning',27 Furthermore, the extent of teacher's realisation of the ILOs cannot be meaningfully captured by the marks obtained, but rather by the sought-for quality of performance associated with the depth of argument and reflection of students' opinion.

With this in mind and operating within the constructive alignment framework I introduced three ways of assessing students' knowledge:

- students' participation in seminars - oral contribution to discussions (10%)
- students' country reports demonstrating individual active learning (30%)
- students' final essays based on regional comparative experience (60%)

Furthermore, students were given the opportunity to formulate essay questions themselves (with convenor's prior approval) to allow them degree of freedom/responsibility of decision-making. The above methods aimed to enhance both individual and interactive group learning combined with a careful guidance received during lectures and tutorials from the module convenor. Module's reading lists were designed to provide further help with students' individual and group work: they were structured both thematically and also country-specific thus offering a diversity of material for students' use.

Evaluating the outcomes - becoming a reflective learner

Constructive alignment is more than criterion-driven assessment, especially given the difficulties illustrated above with respect to students' gradual learning and patchwork activities. It certainly includes it, but draws wider by bringing together the ILOs and TLAs in a joint effort to enhance students' constructive learning. Hence, there should be an equal emphasis here on assessment but also students' feedback received during and in the end of the course.

With this in mind, I adopted a combination of feedback methods to include:

- Post-it notes of yellow colour (as 'Go-Ahead' suggestions) and orange colour (as 'No-Go' suggestions). This was undertaken in the middle of the course (Lecture 8) with my commentary given to students in Lecture 9.
- Minute-paper, in which I asked to comment on (i) most useful things the students learned during the course; (ii) 'the muddiest' points of our TLAs and (iii) any suggestions for the future. This was undertaken towards the end of the module (Lecture 14) with my commentary given in Lecture 15.28

26 Winter, R., "Contextualizing the patchwork text: addressing problems of coursework assessment in higher education", Innovations in Education and Teaching International Vol/No.2 (2003), 112-22 (pp.120-21)
27 Ibid, p.121
28 Stead in his research of the effects of one-minute paper concluded that the 'OMP - a simple, flexible and widely applicable technique - can produce very beneficial results for a modest amount of time and effort... the
Standard Departmental feedback session undertaken during the last seminar, with results computerised and released to the teacher at a later stage.

Progress notes:

My strategic reflective planning, based on the framework of constructive alignment, has yielded some positive results.

Almost all my lectures were fully attended (not a requirement!). The students found them informative, entertaining and thought-provoking (see feedback enclosed). On three occasions students requested additional film-viewing slots based on video-clips observed in the class, which gave us an excellent opportunity for informal extra-curricular discussions.

The use of interim feedback from students was helpful and constructive. On a positive side, the students particularly appraised the idea of using country reports as a way to complement their lecture and seminar learning experiences. This reiterated my confidence in continuing to apply constructive alignment to encourage students' full and active learning and also to diversify my response as a teacher to their divergent needs. Students also positively commented on the wide use of different media resources including Blackboard, which appeared to be a useful structured guide for their individual work. Some found group work based on their individual country experiences enlightening and beneficial for coping with the final assessment of the module - comparative essays. Students also commented positively on detailed reading lists provided by the lecturer.

On a negative side, the students found the size of seminar groups too large and discussion often dominated by the lecturer; the reading lists too complicated and the material coverage at lectures too broad and my teaching manner too fast. Many complained about the paucity of library resources, which was negatively affecting students' individual learning. This helped me to fine-tune my TLAs to be able to respond better to students' needs and concerns. For example, I altered the format of seminars to allow more debate and peer-group discussions; I reduced the intensity of the intellectual content of my lectures to allow more opportunity for interaction and questioning; and also considerably slowed down my pace of delivering lectures. I provided more guidance as far as the assessments were concerned and put detailed instructions on Blackboard. I also attempted to reduce the deficit of library resources by providing more on-line referencing and alternative resources (copies of articles, NLW).

Taking all amendments in consideration, the final feedback from students was very encouraging and constructive. The majority found the course stimulating and enjoyable, well organised and structured, introducing new ideas, meeting its objectives and being well delivered, with seminars usefully complementing the lectures and students' individual work (all these questions received a mean of 3.8). All students conceded that the visual material used during the course was extremely helpful and illustrating; and the idea of developing "country expertise" functional and dynamic.

Major criticism related to the unavailability of reading materials in the UWA library due to high demand and limited number of copies held. There were still some complaints about the organisation of seminars: groups were too large, seminars too short and insufficient clarity as to how students' seminar contributions would be assessed.

Evaluation:

Reflecting on the module as a whole I found my first teaching experience of a large group battering but enjoyable. In my strategic reflective planning of the module I found many theoretical ideas and techniques inspiring and useful. In particular I benefited from discovering and applying the concepts of experiential learning cycles for development; taxonomy of knowledge (including distinction between declaratory and functioning types) and also variable understanding which students construct for themselves. In the heart of all these concepts was the idea of reflection and when personified, of becoming a reflective practitioner.

I found especially enlightening and useful the framework of constructive alignment which allowed me to broaden my teaching techniques and adjust my assessment methods in order to achieve a better correspondence between ILOs and students’ learning. This seems to have found positive support amongst the students, who approved of a combination of a country specialisation with regional group work and lecture guidance.

The particular points, however, I need to address in the future, however, are as follows:

- to make reading material more available and equally accessible to everyone
- to reassess my organisation of seminars in order to make them more equal, participatory and better structured
- to provide more clarity (and in advance) as far as the assessment criteria, the ILOs and TLAs are concerned
- to alter my assessment criteria to focus more on country reports and regional essays
- to encourage more peer-group work - for students to be able to share their country expertise and by that to learn about different countries from each other
- to make the title of the course more focused (either on Central Europe; or expand it to include the communist countries around the globe)
- to provide PowerPoint handouts, especially those containing graphic materials, in advance of the lecture - to allow students more opportunity to familiarise themselves with lecture’s content.
- to organise film-viewings and more fora for informal/extracurricular discussions and interactions in order to encourage students' further engagement with TLAs.

On further reflection of my teaching of the module, I believe I have learned a great deal myself. My initial greatest fear was not to be able to demonstrate enough authority and expertise with respect to individual countries/events, which would have had some detrimental implications for my self-esteem and future confidence. Instead, I could confirm that the students, by becoming 'country experts' themselves taught me a great deal, which now partially enables me to apply Schön’s definition of a reflective practitioner to myself:

...I am presumed to know, but I am not the only one in the situation to have relevant and important knowledge. My uncertainties may be a source of learning for me and for them ...

More importantly, however, for me was to discover that some students, after taking my course, decided to continue with higher education on the same subject, some travelled to Central and Eastern Europe to discover its diversity in practice, and some stated:

... I really enjoyed this module. I felt that I learned a great deal and that some of my views have changed in the course of this module. I have very much enjoyed taking this module...

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29 See how some of them have been developed in Teaching Cycle Two on group learning.