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Teaching Cycle Three

Role Taking as a Tool to Enhance Students' Participation

Report based on teaching a core post-graduate module

IPM 0130 "Comparative European Politics" (2005-6), UWA

...Role-playing is a powerful and underused technique. It is very valuable in teaching interpersonal communication skills... It has been found to be helpful in changing perceptions and developing empathy...

Cannon & Newble, p.50

Background:

Teaching at a Master's level is qualitatively different from the experience I gained during my reflection on cycles One and Two. There are many differentiating factors at work that altogether make the teaching-and-learning process at a post-graduate level more challenging and potentially more rewarding for the teacher.

Teaching at a post-graduate level normally associates with:

1) a smaller size group that could vary from as few as three to a maximum of 12-15;
2) Intended learning outcomes are conventionally set at a much higher level embracing the advancement of both subject specific and social transferable skills and requiring a deep-learning approach based on broader reading, students' ability not only to better understand and analyse but also apply and evaluate the outcomes of obtained knowledge, and eventually transform as a person;
3) differing format of teaching-and-learning activities that include discussion-based groups, allowing for more interpersonal contact between the teacher and students, longer hours of interactions and more depth of knowledge embraced and more opportunities for personal impact and transformation
4) the above presumes a different format of assessment and evaluation of students' learning activities, which set to be more in-depth and demanding to include assessment of the subject-specific knowledge and wider transferable skills (writing and communicating especially)

For Teaching Cycle Three I chose to discuss my experience of and reflection on the teaching in a small-group environment of 7-10 students within the core Master's module IPM 0130 'Comparative European Politics', 2005-6. Particular challenges associated with teaching the above module included:

a formally-set nature of the core module guided by subject-specific and generic intended learning outcomes (ILOs) pertinent to the European Politics degree scheme at a Master's level;
this suggested students' general expectations of traditional teaching-and-learning activities (TLAs) based on teacher-led seminar discussions and accompanied by students' random presentations;

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Finally, standard assessment methods (AMs) applied to a Master's module: an extensive essay and examination inviting students to 'adapt and survive' rather than 'experience and learn'.

Theory:

In my planning of the module I was driven by motivation to make a learning process less conventional and more adventurous as well as advantageous for the students in order to batter their often strategic approach to learning that allows them to pass their exams but does not equip them with sufficient skills and subject knowledge for the future.

As in my previous teaching cycles I chose to work with a 'constructive alignment framework', to enable students' actual participation and real learning - by placing more emphasis on their effort to construct their knowledge independently under my careful supervision and guidance as lecturer.

To begin with, I added some novel elements within the constructive alignment framework. This included changing TLAs substantively and adjusting the MA's - to literature review and a long essay - to better reflect the nature of learning environment and the structure of the course. As part of my qualitative change of TLAs, I chose to innovate with the concept of 'role taking' in a small-group environment to enhance students' engagement and learning.

My thinking was based on negativity vividly depicted by Biggs in his description of a 'conventional seminar technique':

... The seminar is usually a student presentation on a topic that each student has researched... It seems all very student-centred, but all the teacher need do is to allocate the topics and then sit back, the presentation also doing the work of the assessment. The major, if not the only, beneficiary is the presenter, and then only with respect to learning the topic presented. What the audience get is yet another lecture given by someone with even more hazardous lecturing skills than the teacher...

Instead of having this depressing picture of what the teacher conventionally does, I volunteered for what the teacher should be able to do as a reflective practitioner - that is to become an agent for transforming knowledge, helping students to interpret and construct their own knowledge, not a passive substitution that relays pre-preformed message to them.,

In my reading about teaching techniques in a small-group environment, I came across with the concept of 'role-taking' as an enhancement tool for student engagement into the learning-teaching process, which I decided to accommodate within the framework of 'constructive alignment'.

'Role-taking', although underutilised as a method, presumes several benefits. As Piaget asserts, dialectical peer interaction necessarily promotes not only cognitive and subject-related skills but, more importantly, the ability to take the perspective of others. Role-taking, cooperation and moral reasoning come together in Piaget's assumption that 'mature concepts are largely the product of cooperation, reciprocity, and role taking among peers'.

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3 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), 221-38
4 Bigg, J., Teaching for Quality Learning, p. 89
5 ibid, p. 101
My further research has demonstrated that role taking is necessary for the effectiveness of a cooperative model of learning and becomes invaluable in a small-group process. The process is designed to create an environment where students come together in small groups not only learn but also and more importantly to teach specific course material by way of their own construction of this material to each other.\footnote{For more details see Bridgeman, D., "Enhanced role taking through cooperative interdependence: a field study", p. 1231-2}

The guiding principle of 'role-taking' in a small group can be surmised as follows:

... it is cooperation that leads to the primacy of intentionality, by forcing the individual to be constantly occupied with the point of view of other people so as to compare it with his...

Bridgeman's research indicates that cooperative interdependent learning not only enhances one's cognitive learning, but also role-taking skills in other social environments. Previous studies also showed an enhancement in self-esteem (Blaney \textit{et al.} 1977) and in positive ethnic perceptions (Bridgeman, 1979), which are essential to the development of self concurrent with the ability to take roles (Mead, 1934).\footnote{Ibid, 1937}

Thus, it seems likely that a person whose self-esteem is enhanced as a result of cooperative learning may be better able to understand another person's perspective. Hence, as Bridgement concludes, "role taking seems to be a rich and effective construct that can assist one in actively processing social learning experiences".\footnote{Coutu, Walter, "Role-playing vs. role-taking: an appeal for clarification", \textit{American Sociological Review}, Vol.16, No.2 (1951): 180-87 (p.180)} However, one should always bear in mind the conceptual difference between role-taking and role-playing, as Coutu clarifies, for whom 'role-taking' means a "strictly mental or cognitive or empathic activity, not overt behaviour or conduct".\footnote{Robinson, Peter, "Role-playing and class participation", accessed in April 2007 at \url{http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/reprint/XXXV/4/384.pdf}, p. 385}

Despite some compelling benefits of 'role-taking' primarily related to cognitive and social learning, there are also two specific problems posed by 'role-taking' in a small-group environment. As Robinson\footnote{Pitts, Virginia and Edelson, Daniel, "Role, goal and activity: a framework for characterizing participation and engagement in project-based learning environments", \textit{Proceedings, 6th International Conference on Learning Societies} 2004, accessed in April 2007 at \url{http://portal.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=1149126.1149177} (p. 420-1)} argues, one is 'correction' - that is how and when to correct mistakes without disrupting the flow of action and language; and 'participation' - that is how to involve the rest of the class in a scene being played by a small number of participants at a specific point of time.

Furthermore, if role-taking were to be successful in maximising learning and social benefits, it is also very important to establish a clear connection between three essential elements of TLAs. There should be clear (i) task allocation, (ii) goal setting - which will serve to improve students' understanding of activities planned and (iii) engagement - 'roles for all', no matter how time-specific their impact could be.\footnote{Bridgeman, D. & Aronson, E. "Jigsaw groups and the desegregated classroom: in pursuit of common goals", \textit{Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin}, Vol.5, No.4 (1979), pp. 438-46; Mead, G. \textit{Mind, Self and Society} (Chicago: University Press, 1934) - all cited in Bridgeman, D., "Enhanced role taking through cooperative interdependence: a field study", p. 1236}
Overall, 'role-taking' when done properly, 'enables students to maXimise their learning potential through using their skills in a real-life manner. We now apply the concept of 'role-taking' to my strategic reflective planning/running of the module 'Comparative European Politics' (2005-6).

Strategic reflective planning:

Defining Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)

The ILOs as set by the nature of the module and departmental requirements, included development of the following skills in students:

- detailed awareness of key scholarly debates in the study of European Politics;
- advanced knowledge of central issues in the study of contemporary European Politics;
- knowledge of, and the ability to utilise comparative methodology for the purpose of critical analysis and evaluation;
- And finally, substantially enhanced research and writing skills.

As observed at the beginning, it is in nature of any post-graduate module to include broader ILOs - not only subject-specific, but also related to social and transferable skills, as has been reflected above. In order to undertake these tasks, I dedicated the first two seminars to explaining the nature, requirements and expected outcomes of the module; to discussing the nature and importance of comparative method and finally to 'discovering' with students the themes of the module by connecting them to each other and the module in general.

There were ten seminars, which were run on a weekly basis and lasted for two hours, being student-led and tutor-guided.

Designing Teaching and Learning Activities (TLAs)

In order to enhance students' learning by participation, I chose to apply the concept of 'role-taking' in seminars. Thus, each student was allocated a role - either of a presenter, or discussant, or a commentator - which enabled them to fully engage with preparation and participate in seminar discussions.

Each seminar was based on the following general format:

The teacher provided a brief summary of the previous discussion, thus recapitulating key points and alluding to specific issues of the new session and the module in general. This was a novel element to expose students to the logical thinking and ability to relate different themes of the module to one another in order to synthesise a broader picture on completion. Then, 'presenters' (usually 2-3 per session) were invited to give their 'qualified' introduction to the session by choosing to present on one of the questions of the seminar (arranged prior to the session) - each taking a maximum of 5-7 min. 'Discussants' (usually 2-3 per session) were invited to reflect on what presenters had to deliver and constructively engage with presenters' arguments - by raising questions or commenting on the above - each taking maximum 5 mins. This part of the seminar was designed to pursue broader ILOs related to the nature of transferable skills: (i) it necessarily teaches students new skills of ad hoc critical reflection of their fellows' contributions; and (ii) also allows the convenor to observe the level of students' reading preparation, as well as the issues they are most interested in. The second part of the session included an open-floor discussion structured around the issues, that module convenor considered most essential to students' understanding of the

15 Robinson, p. 386
topic, accompanied by discussion and exchange of knowledge and opinions on them - that is when 'commentators' (usually 2-3 per session) were primarily invited to engage, without precluding the others from contributing to discussion. The result of this role-assignment was that everyone was anticipated to contribute to discussion at some point of time, thus avoiding the dilemma of 'free-riders' and motivating students to interact and reflect on each other's perspectives. At the end of the session, the convenor would provide a brief summary of the ideas discussed at the seminar and link it to the future session.

This organisation of seminars - by way of involving everyone at some point of time and also allowing for teacher's careful steering of discussion - avoided some potential problems (of correction and participation) discussed above.

Roles were rotated to allow students to practise their varying skills - of presenter, discussant & commentator - up to three times in the running of the module, thus equipping them with an excellent opportunity to improve their skills and discuss them with the teacher who was readily available for further communication and feedback.

**Devising Assessment Methods (AMs)**

I altered 'traditional methods' of assessment (exams and essays) to bring an element of the literature review - as students' first written assignment (40%), and to maintain a substantial essay - 4500 word long - as their final assignment (60%). Operating within the 'constructive alignment' framework I believe that by introducing the former element would connect students' 'role-taking' activities and also prepare them for the forthcoming writing of their dissertation in Term 3 and a possible PhD undertaking in the future. It also linked the 1st method of assessment to the 2nd one - a substantial essay - by allowing students to undertake a literature review for the topic they may chose to investigate for their 2nd essay. In other words, both methods allowed me to align not only ILOs and TLAs to MAs, but more importantly, to encourage development of students' independent research skills and treatment of two assessments as parts of the one project.

Given the relative novelty of the 1st assignment, I provided students with the full set of instructions with some additional references to pursue independently, if required.

**Evaluating the outcomes - becoming a reflective learner**

Given a rather informal environment at seminars, feedback was instantaneous, if any of the issues were raised. Departmental feedback applied at the end of the term was a formal way to receive student comments and assess their satisfaction with the module.

**Progress notes:**

'Role taking', within the framework of *constructive alignment*, has yielded some positive results.

Following students' feedback, I can confirm that they felt positive about their 'role taking' experience and learnt to engage and challenge each other *before* seeking lecturer's qualified opinion and advice.

As a result, seminars were never a daunting experience for either party - the teacher or the students. They involved students' full engagement with the module through role-taking and also showing independent initiative (bringing their own material - from newspapers, articles and other scholarship for discussion).
The lecturer did not use media tools to facilitate TLAs - inappropriate for a small-group environment, but occasionally resorted to the use of hand-outs. Presenters at their own initiative were providing the class with occasional handouts and other supporting evidence.

Evaluation:

Overall, I believe the role-taking experience was positive and satisfactory for all parties involved. As students' feedback indicated, my teaching of the above module came third in the ranking of all modules taught in semester two 2006 (see enclosed).

All students strongly agreed (ranked as '5' - the top mark) that (i) lecturer was very enthusiastic about the teaching; (ii) was accessible to students when needed; and (iii) they were overall satisfied with the quality of the course. The majority of students believed that the teacher was good at explaining things; made the subject interesting and provided good advice on study choices (4.8). Students also found that the module helped them to present themselves with confidence and that their communication skills had improved (4.6), which concurred with the chief learning outcomes of the module and my interactive 'role-taking' technique chosen for the module.

The lowest score (3.8, which was still considerably higher than the average) was given to the provision of library resources reflecting more on the quality of library provision rather than on the actual teaching (students were supplied with study packs of core readings). The overall score, however, was very encouraging (4.52) which can be summarised in the following student's remark:

...I wish more courses were structured like this one. The tutor conducted the course superbly. A perfect balance...

The points I need to reflect on in the future (which were partially realised in this year's module) were:

- provide a quicker/timely feedback to students' essays
- to make reading material more accessible: this time I placed core reading text on Blackboard (if e-version was available) and supplied students with paper copies otherwise. I also put more emphasis on e-articles and on-line material - to improve accessibility and polemical nature of the literature
- although, students generally commented that 'role-assignment' was rather time- and labour-consuming the benefits of learning, in the end, outweighed these considerations. I am now set to seek other ways to diversify students' experience within the constructive alignment framework with a role-taking element: introducing different formats of discussion and delegating more teaching responsibilities to students themselves.

Overall, I had a very successful and fulfilling cohort of students, and wish to thank them all for making my teaching experience more interesting.