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POSTGRADUATE CERTIFICATE IN TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Cylch Dysgu 3 | Teaching Cycle 3

Resource-Based Learning in the Tutorial Programme

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Diary Extract
September 8th 2006

The tutorial programme is one of my favourite aspects of the job. It provides a unique opportunity to be a part of an informal environment and to have a close view on the development of skills, intellect and motivation of students participating. My approach to leading tutorials has been informed very much by my own experience of taking them as a student. Cultivating a relaxed, but structured and well organised context for coherent learning however is something that I have had to work hard at. My organisational skills are tested annually when trying to timetable a one-hour slot that students can attend every two weeks. Even more difficult has been keeping track of the assessments, topics and learning outcomes stipulated by a curriculum that incorporates the benchmark statement of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences subject centre of the Higher Education Academy (GEES) together with Academic and Personal Progress Review (APPR) components and at the same time is malleable and responsive to student needs.

Within the Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences there are currently two formal guidelines for the delivery of the tutorial. The first is the BA Level 2 Tutorial Syllabus a staff focussed document designed to provide information on in-house procedures on content, learning outcomes and assessment. The second is student based and fairly generic with information on specific skills such as citation requirements, reading loads, work expectations, plagiarism, and what to do in case of absence or non-submission of work. Neither document is particularly user-friendly or in any way synthesized, nor do they provide a detailed description of content that would be valuable as a guide during the delivery of the tutorial programme itself.

(3.3.1) Plan
Race and Brown (1998) define small group teaching as an invaluable part of out repertoire in the delivery of the curriculum. They remind us that at its best it can promote a relaxed and open learning environment in which tutors engage informally in an academic environment that is genuinely two-way. I support this position as an ideal but in practice have found particular difficulty in delivering the tutorial programmes at the Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences. I often lose track of the weeks, the times and the slots of my tutorials. I’m familiar with the topics covered of course but without a systematic guide, without being fully prepared for each of the tutorials and searching through my files from the previous year as a reminder, the distractions of lectures, administration and research mean that my own teaching during these sessions is not at its best. My intentions to remedy this recurring problem are:

• To make the best of the small-group learning-teaching scenario and achieve maximum “learning pay-off”.

• To compile and produce a comprehensive tutorial handbook for students to work from during each of the 10 sessions that make up the tutorial programme.

• To provide a range of learning support and career and professional development literatures that are relevant to the tutorial’s curriculum and intended learning objectives more broadly.
• To incorporate a range of teaching-learning activities that fulfil the ideal of constructive alignment

• To provide a single location where all student notes can be kept with essays and feedback, and a timetable of sessions so that students gain an appreciation of their skill and intellectual development throughout the module as it progresses.

• To take on the imperative outlined in Race and Brown (1998) that assessment becomes related to the small group event itself not just a written task that can be undertaken whether the student is present or not.

My plan is to compile a tutorial handbook that will be used to support resource-based teaching. I teach tutorials at level 2 and 3 of the geography undergraduate. While each module varies in content the concept of containment and accessibility is the same.

(3.3.2) Progress notes
The pages included below are photocopies of the level 2 and level 3 handbook that were bound and given out to two groups of five students in the second year and two groups of five students in the third year. During the 2006-7 academic year. These are works in progress modified by my own reflexive observations, and student comments during the sessions. As such they provide evidence of my ability to structure content and design teaching and learning activities as required in the programme and identified in the matrix to evidence of competence. In reality the handbooks’ pages are bulging with extra sheets to be included next year, with post-it-note messages to self and with various articles that make up the reading component on the tutorial programme. The sessions that make up the majority of the pages included here have been compiled from various sources. Some provided by members of staff within the department and others, teaching exercises that I have developed over the years and written up independently.
(3.3.3) Feedback
Student feedback on the tutorial module and specific commentary on the use of the handbook was sought over the Easter break. It has been compiled and is attached in the following pages. It indicates strong support for the resource-based learning approach. All students brought their copy of the handbook along to each of the sessions and thereby had something concrete and contained to make notes on the discussion that week. Further, it helped students organise their thoughts around a topic, give them an indication about what would be going on in subsequent weeks and provide them with a clear picture of the modes and topics of assessments they would encounter throughout the module. This last point is especially important and was noted with appreciation by the students several times making reference to how they would pay particular attention in lectures that overlap with future assessed work in the tutorial module. A related point emerging from the feedback is that the handbook aids the tutorial module’s extension into other courses in the degree scheme. Students used the appendix and writing guides for coursework in other modules and were aware when those other modules could be utilized to support their tutorial learning.

Log of Progress

Refinement and Modification through practice To have a full hard-copy version of the tutorial handbook at hand was very useful throughout the delivery of the course and provided a means to record any necessary modifications inevitable in a first run. Each of these minor innovations will be included the next years handbook along with a series of more extensive support materials and reading lists for tutorial topic essays. The beauty of having the handbook compiled together in this fashion is that it works as a template for further refinement, modification and addition.

(3.3.4) Implications for Future Practice

Rolling the handbook out to the whole geography undergraduate cohort
There are already many A5 size handbooks available for each of the degree schemes at the Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences - for the undergraduate dissertation and for the fieldtrips on offer at level two. These handbooks are formal in style containing necessary regulations and formatting instructions. The tutorial handbook I have compiled is different. It is more a teaching/learning based resource, designed to be used by students and staff in dialogue to structure tutorials individually and the tutorial module as a whole. Several students and staff within the department have remarked that the handbook should be made available to all students participating in the tutorial programme and while this would seem a positive addition to our learning resources there are a series of limitations in making this standard practice which will need to be overcome. First, a standardised model, is prescriptive and lacks the responsiveness required for the unique dynamic set up between staff and student in the tutorial context. Second, it inevitably dictates a certain kind of progress that may not be suitable for all students or all forms of tutorial teaching.

By posting the handbooks via email to other staff involved in tutorial teaching then the work becomes a collective effort which all staff can contribute to, modify and improve. The handbook as it appears here will become a starting point for further developments in the provision of resource based learning in the tutorial programme.

I envisage a future tutorial handbook being an important staff and student resource. Ideally, to create flexibility and allow bespoke teaching to individual groups with differing topic interests or career plans the number of topic based sessions would exceed the ten slots available in the tutorial programme to give staff and students a series of options around which they would most like to cover, which best suits their own interests and which would contribute most effectively towards their degree and future professional interests.
(3.3.5) Final Reflections
Facilitating tutorials is an element of teaching which I have the largest amount of experience. My job as a tutor for First year geography undergraduates began in 2001 during the first year of my PhD at Aberystwyth through my role paid role as tutor in human geography (2003-4), my position within the department as temporary lecturer in Human Geography (2004-5) and as a full time member of the teaching staff since 2005. And yet, it is only this last year that I can say that my tutorial teaching has been a real success. This is no doubt due to the tutorial handbook that provides structure and coherence to the module as a whole, allows for an explicit sense of progress of the students and creates an awareness of the skills and knowledges developed as the group moves from session to session. At the same time it provides an element of flexibility and can be modified to respond to student needs.

After word
Writing in December 2007 and in the middle of the second year this handbook has been operating I have encountered a further series of problems and accomplishments with this resource-based teaching initiative that is worth noting here. First, the handbook has, to some extent become a victim of its own success. The start of the 2007 academic year led to several new appointments that requested copies of the handbook as a guide for their own tutorials. This led to an unexpected run on books listed in the original handbook since so may of the students were now sharing the same reading lists.

Second, this year in particular I have found the handbook to work very effectively for the random and unexpected issues that arise as part of day-to-day teaching. In particular, one student who has been unable to attend any of the sessions due to illness has nevertheless been able to continue his studies using the handbook to keep track of readings, tasks and assessments. For this student the module has become a vital “correspondence course” which although not prefect, has at least encouraged him to persist and not withdraw from university. Another student, who opted to change degree schemes at the middle of the tutorial programme, has benefited a great deal from the handbook by having a detailed record of previous work and being able to catch up on missed sessions.

Third, I have received informal feedback from a number of staff about their own varying use of handbook where some sessions are seen as more effective than others. At this time the Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences is undertaking a systematic review of the tutorial teaching across the degree schemes and the tutorial handbook is due to play a key role in identifying best practice. Collating the comments and observations of staff that have now adopted the handbook will provide invaluable information on the direction taken by tutorial teaching across the Institute in future years.