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2008

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**Introduction**

This action research report outlines the cyclical (re)development of a dialogic learning experience within the lecture room. It begins by identifying the need for dialogical learning, describing the biographical context in which this approach took place, moves on to give a discussion of its implementation and progress before providing illustrative examples of feedback given by the students. It concludes with a discussion on the implications of this mode of teaching-learning for my own future practice. This course has now been operating for three years during which time opportunities to refine the approach from student feedback and my personal reflective evaluations have prompted numerous revolutions of the cycle as outlined below.

**Plan**

**Context** My appointment to a temporary lecturer position in Human Geography at Aberystwyth in August 2004 came at the end of a series of job interviews at Dundee, Lancaster, Exeter and Portsmouth. Each job interview forced me to reflect on my own personal teaching philosophy and identify a particular approach to learning and teaching in general. Particular questions asked of me during these interviews included: “What innovative teaching techniques would you employ in this post?” “You say you believe teaching should empower students. How will they be empowered?” “How would you make sceptical students enthusiastic about the subject?”

While these questions refer to different aspects of the teaching endeavour they collectively emphasize the importance of “engagement”. The dialogic learning approach outlined below is an attempt to operationalise this quite vague and indistinct notion of engagement, to understand precisely how it might be cultivated in the context of large group teaching where the conventional lecture is the expected format of delivery.

The notion of a dialogic strategy is supported by research and initiatives outside the context of higher education in the museum and heritage sector with the writings of Jack Tchen, associate professor of History at New York University. In particular, Tchen’s involvement with the *Museum of the Chinese in Americas* in Chinatown, Manhattan and his creation of an “inquiry-driven” approach to incorporate the local community as a leading voice in the production of exhibitions has been at the vanguard of current museum practice and is apt for translation into the classroom context.

The similarities between the museum and university as institutions of knowledge production are striking: they are each undergoing considerable structural and financial change, they are each experiencing a crisis of identity leading to questions about their role and purpose in contemporary society, and they are each responding to these challenges with models that move away from top-down hierarchical forms of knowledge delivery towards strategies for inclusion.

Within the teaching development literature the conventional lecture has undergone sustained critique and considerable rethinking as a context for student learning (Bligh 1972, Anderson 1994, Biggs 2003). The assumption of learning through “knowledge transmission” based on expert didactic delivery of information is almost universally recognised as flawed, inefficient and alienating. It also fails to acknowledge a surfeit of research emphasising the fundamental role of the student in the learning process who is not simply a participant but an active creator or constructor of knowledge. Calls for refreshing lecturing (Race and Brown 1999), active
learning in the large class (Biggs 2003), and dialogic teaching that rethinks classroom talk (Alexander 2006a, 2006b) are part of a collective move to reconstitute the lecture as a forum where the focus falls neither on the student nor the lecturer, but on what the student does.

To paraphrase Alexander (2004) in his article in the Times Education Supplement, dialogic teaching comprises five key components. It is collective – where teachers and students address learning tasks together as a group or class; reciprocal – where teachers and students listen to each other, share ideas and consider alternative viewpoints; supportive – where students articulate their ideas freely without fear of embarrassment over “wrong answers”, and they help each other to reach common understandings; cumulative – where students and teachers build on their own and each others ideas and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and enquiry; and finally, purposeful – where teachers plan and steer talk with specific goals.

The approach I adopt here draws upon Alexander’s work and links it to broader literatures in teaching to transform the delivery of a second year undergraduate course taught in the Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences entitled The Geographies of Late Capitalism.

The module has been on the books for many years and has typically been delivered by more than one member of staff in the traditional way following the “teacher-active-student-passive” model. The course functions as a means to introduce students to broad themes within economic and social geography; as a foundation upon which students can develop their interests within these subfields to explore the topic in more detail through their dissertation in their final year of studies.

Diary Extract 12/12/03

My own encounter with and understanding of economic and social geography is very different to that which seems to appear on the slippery acetates made available to me in vast quantities some months ago. The literature is now a little dated and the examples of inner-city redevelopment fairly dry. Furthermore, my own intellectual inclination moves away from strict Marxist interpretations of social policy and towards the critical and cultural aspects of geographical thought. So, as well as refreshing the existing illustrative case studies, I’m interested in paying more attention to emerging unconventional topics that herald what’s now being called “new economic geography”. Such a rubric concerns itself with consumption as well as production, and rejects the assumption that the social can be separated from the cultural. As part of updating the geographical content, I need to transform its modes of delivery.

Intensions for change

Changes to the module aims, learning outcomes and modes of assessment are prohibited without the approval of faculty and therefore my own room to manoeuvre in the first year is somewhat restricted. In very general terms I am looking to energise the course content by engaging students far more directly and making dialogue a central component of the learning-teaching process.

Specifically my intensions are:

- To provide a variety of teaching techniques and delivery methods throughout the module as a whole in order to enrich the learning experience.
- To move away from a 100% traditional lecture based mode of delivery with more participation from the students
- To provide an arena whereby students become more active, and therefore responsible for their own learning
• To establish a forum within which central themes from the course can be worked through in a less formal, intimidating context.

• To create opportunity for students to feedback their ideas on the course as it progresses.

• To enable and encourage students to fully engage with one piece of sophisticated literature that touches on broad themes of the course and illustrates how economic and social theory is applied in particular case studies.

With these objectives in mind I will initiate the dialogic approach by implementing a learning and teaching activity based on the workshop model that draws inspiration from the work of geographers Delyser (2003) in the journal *Geography in Higher Education* and publications by Cook (2001, 2006a, 2006b, 2007). The workshop is to be run towards the end of the module in session 10 of an 11*2 hour lecture programme and is used to provide a formal base around which to start infusing the whole module with dialogical strategies. Positioned towards the end of the course the workshop provides an effective vantage point for students to reflect on themes already encountered in the module.

In place of the usual two-hour lecture slot between 11am and 1pm, the time allocated is split into one hour of reading and one hour of seminar based discussion that takes place in the lecture room.

The module cohort is therefore split into 2. Group A (25 students) at 11am, Group B (25 students) at 12pm.

The seminar is introduced in the previous weeks lecture with a web link made available to an accessible article by sociologist Bob Jessop on the topic of governance, partnership and modes of urban regeneration under the labour government.

During the seminar each group is divided into two and each given a handout (see Fig 3.1) containing a series of questions that provide a basis for discussion and work as a template for short summarising presentations at the end of the seminar.

The questions have been designed specifically to encourage the students’ own application of theoretical ideas to examples they are familiar with in their own lives. Almost all can speak about an urban redevelopment project within their local area. The achievement comes when such projects start to be understood through the lens of urban theory, through broader themes of economic and social restructuring, through an understanding of governmental mechanisms set up to facilitate public-private investment.

(Figure 3.1 Thinking Through Governance Handout)
Evaluation of the effectiveness of this teaching-learning activity in promoting a dialogic learning environment would come in three forms:

- My own observations of group dynamics, conversations with the students during the discussion period, and quality of the presentations written up as progress notes.

- A post-it-note exercise where participants are asked to reflect on their learning experience at the end of the workshop. This involves providing two post-it-notes to each student at the completion of the workshop and asking them to comment on the strengths and weaknesses of the session in turn.

- A module evaluation form given at the end of the final lecture where students are asked a series of questions relating to the overall programme of delivery. The workshop is not singled out for specific appraisal – the students comments on this are unprompted and therefore, arguably, more valuable since they highlight the impact of the workshop on the module in its entirety. Evaluation results across all three years are included in the feedback section of this teaching cycle.

(3.1.2) Progress Notes
The first year this session was run, I noticed an immediate intensity in the room when it became apparent to students that they would be required to participate fully, be actively engaged in shaping the discussions and create the content on their own terms. It might also have reflected an awareness that they would have to use higher-level cognitive processes with all the associated challenges and frustrations associated with it that had not been expected of them in previous lectures. Once the discussions were underway however, I noticed the benefits of this form of teaching. It immediately made the lecture room a more inclusive place where the less confident students - those that had very little to say during previous lectures throughout the course - could find their voice and participate. Moreover, the noticeable benefits to the learning environment were not limited to the week of the workshop since I noticed the following week an improvement in the quality of student contributions.

Despite the positives, there were two main limitations with the workshop model as it operated in the first year of the innovation. First, overseeing conversations amongst several groups simultaneously and being ready to step in momentarily if things stall was a logistical difficulty. Second, the workshop was a fairly isolated experience in the context of the module as a whole. It worked on its own terms and provided me with practice, experience and confidence to encourage student contributions beyond the “safe” controlled and structured environment of the workshop.

(3.1.3) Feedback
Post-it-notes
In general terms the feedback was positive identifying the benefits expected from this change in format. The exercise was summed up expertly by the simple and pithy phrase from one student: “was good because it works like a conversation”. It is, however, useful to elaborate and draw out some of the themes present in the feedback in order to identify more precisely how and why the workshop functioned as an effective dialogic mode of learning and teaching. I have included a series of comments that illustrate recurring themes.
“Deep” as opposed to “surface” learning:
Really enjoyed it! Discussion is a great way of learning and was good to have ideas and understanding off other people, far less regulative than a lecture and more engaging; Easier to understand if discussed; helped understand key terms and words; less writing! able to discuss ideas as a group and develop thought that perhaps wouldn’t do in normal independent study.

Inclusion
Enabled more opinions and different perspectives; less intimidating to talk in; builds confidence in speaking in front of people; got more people involved than in a normal lecture.

The benefit of group dynamics
It was good talking about this like a group as it did highlight where all this theory is applied in the UK; helps by getting ideas and points across to others; developed relations between us as a group – more confidence; learn off other people – helps highlight areas that you didn’t pick out.

Less positive responses fall within the themes listed above. To some extent they confirm the effectiveness of the exercise. But they also work to highlight that some students among the group evidently prefer modes of learning that are passive and lecture based rather than active and problem based. For example, post-it-notes commented: not highly academic, not a lot of expert opinions, prefer lectures and work such as essays where I can prepare what to say, too much preparation work for workshop, lectures are better this way.

Module Evaluation
The student evaluation forms completed at the end of the module highlighted the workshop session as a beneficial exercise specifically. In answer to the question:

10. GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY WHAT WOULD YOU CHANGE?

Responses included: Possibly more workshops, I found it useful to understand a difficult concept. Perhaps include more workshops/discussion sessions as these made difficult concepts clearer.

Insight into the students response to the changes outlined in this module can be seen from the most recent period of evaluation in December 2007 through short answers given in the department’s generic module questionnaire.

Please add any further comments you wish to make about the module.

Unanswered Responses
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Given Answers
- An interesting module, with challenging concepts to understand! Was made interesting by the lecturer, Gareth Hoskins
- Very interesting module that actually inspired me to go out and do some reading into the subject at my leisure, not just for academic purposes!
- This module was effective in making me consider how easily it is just to let everyday life just pass by without actually considering what is happening and why.
- I really enjoyed the more interactive sessions, as it made the course more interesting. The film was good along with the reading and I enjoyed the Jessop session.
- workshop was helpful
As mentioned previously, the individual workshop activity was intended to provide a starting point or launch-pad for a more general dialogic approach that would be rolled out in the rest of the module as my experience and confidence developed. The workshop session gave me the opportunity to practice and test the effectiveness of conversational learning techniques and activities in a controlled and structured environment. This section gives an account of how the module has developed in the years since the workshop exercise was initiated. It charts my own attempts at being a reflective practitioner - responding to expected and unexpected limitations with various modifications and new initiatives.

1 Student Facilitator (Peer Tutoring)
The first limitation identified with the workshop model was the logistical difficulties of managing several separate but simultaneous group discussions. In recent years I have used student facilitators who were enrolled on the course in previous years. “Peer teaching” “supplemental instruction” or “cross year tutoring” has long been advocated in the teaching literature (Sabertaon 1985, Goodlad and Hirst 1990, Topping 1996) and is defined by Biggs (2003, 114) as the situation where “second or third year students who passed the 1st year subject exceptionally well and are judged to have appropriate personal skills are trained to model, advise and facilitate.” It’s benefits are summed up by the phrase “there is no single best method of teaching – but the second best is students teaching other students” (McKeachie quoted in Biggs 2003, 112).

Quite apart from the obvious practical benefits of having additional support facilitating group discussion, use of a student facilitator has created numerous avenues valuable dialogue. First, between myself and the facilitator who has a year to reflect on the workshop and returns to it with a different perspective, second, between existing second year students enrolled on the module and the third year facilitator who shares their own experiences of the module and can remark on its benefit to subsequent studies. Finally, an important opportunity for dialogue is been established between myself and the students on the course since the contact with a third year student facilitator provides a rare opportunity for longitudinal reflection of the degree scheme as it relates to economic and social geographical themes.

2 Extending dialogue beyond the workshop
The main problem with the workshop as a teaching and learning activity during the first year it was in operation was its exceptionality. It was as if conversational dialogue was confined to one week of the semester. Over time, however, and through a series of teaching and learning activities, the conversational approach has become less unique, gradually being rolled out into now commonplace discussions on particular themes at the end of most lectures and within the main body of the lectures themselves. There were two principal exercises that helped establish this as part of the culture of the module. The first, a non-assessed student presentation performed as a group on commodity chains, and the second, an additional workshop based on the research of economic geographers Julie Gibson and Kathy Graham (1996, 2000) concerning the ways in which capitalism gains its appearance of inevitability. The Iceberg Exercise entails identifying the alternative non-capitalist forms of economy that are in operation everyday but tend to be excluded or hidden. Figure 3.2 gives an impression of a completed example of the iceberg where the underwater sections are filled in by participants.
3 Guided reading To emphasise the point that teaching innovations are always in process and forever have the potential to be refined, this year, a number of students pointed out that the handout question sheet provided during the thinking through governance workshop might be given out earlier so that students can read the article with the questions alongside. The students have, quite rightly identified a failure in constructive alignment where the intended learning outcomes of the activity are not made clear to the student while they are performing the activity i.e. reading the article set before the workshop. To emphasise, Biggs notes “We must have a clear idea of what we want students to be able to do at the end of a unit of study, and communicate these intended learning outcomes to students so that they can at least share in the responsibility of achieving them. However, we know that students will inevitably tend to look at the assessment and structure their learning activities, as far as they are able, to optimize their assessment performance. We must therefore make sure that the assessment very obviously does test the learning outcomes we want to achieve, so that by being strategic optimizers of their assessment performance students will actively be working to achieve the intended learning outcomes. In other words, the I.L.Os, the learning activity and the assessment must all be aligned” (Biggs, The Higher Education Academy http://www.engsc.ac.uk/er/theory/constructive_alignment.asp).

(3.1.5) Final Reflections
The overall intention with the workshop model was to foster a dynamic, challenging and unpredictable classroom culture where students are far more active in the learning process. With the discrete activities described above now firmly embedded into the structure of the course learning and teaching the module has become a far more interactive experience where student expectations for participation and individual levels of confidence are far higher than had been the case under the previous formal lecture mode of delivery where the student remains largely passive recipient of the lecturer’s expert knowledge. Under a dialogic classroom environment, students have been encouraged to engage with and take positions on debates, theories, literatures and case-study illustrations associated with economic geography. The course’s sense of dynamism is attributable directly to the students’ efforts, investment and commitment to learning about the topic. To quote Ian Cook’s introduction to his own final year geography module taught at the University of Birmingham “the course will be what all of us help to make it” (Cook 2006, 3).
The success of the dialogical approach has forced me to re-think the value of the lecture as a device for teaching and learning more generally. It has enabled me to acknowledge many of my own deficiencies at the outset of my career as a lecturer where grappling with new material and establishing authority are perceived challenges met with the delivery of lots of content. As my own experience, confidence and awareness of the student learning process has grown, the dialogical approach outlined in this action research teaching cycle report has been infused into other areas of my large group teaching.

Finally, looking back over this cycle, I am aware of a certain lack of precision. The objectives are broad and because of that slightly vague. They are neither fully operationalised or measurable in a direct and definite way. One of the most important things developed through my reading of the literature on teaching and learning research has been an ability to scrutinize, categorize and break down aspects and stages of the teaching and learning process that I had previously not been conscious of. The value of models such as 3P and constructive alignment (Biggs 2003) is in their capacity to enable precision and scrutiny in the presage, process and product stages of student learning. It’s my intension to make these instruments of measurement more evident in the second teaching cycle.