**David Ceri Jones**

Adran Hanes a Hanes Cymru | *Department of History and Welsh History*

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**POSTGRADUATE CERTIFICATE IN TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

**Cylch Dysgu 2 | Teaching Cycle 2**

**The Challenge of Small Group Seminar Teaching**

**PRIFYSGOL ABERYSTWYTH UNIVERSITY**

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Teaching Cycle 2:

The challenge of small group seminar teaching: using primary sources
Introduction

For many undergraduate students the experience of seminar classes remains the most challenging element of their degree course. The dynamic and interactive nature of the seminar class is often alien to students who have become familiar with more passive forms of learning. For many lecturers the seminar can also be the most challenging element of their teaching, a constant battle against student’s unwillingness to participate and enter fully into critical discussions with both them and their student contemporaries. In this, and the following third teaching cycle, I have concentrated on the way in which I teach in seminar classes. This second teaching cycle focuses on my third year Special Subject, HY30230: Romantic Wales, 1750-1847 module, and focuses on some of the ways in which I attempted to marry my research interests with my teaching, through the innovatory use of primary sources in seminar classes. The evidence and feedback used for this teaching cycle was collected during the second semester of my second year registered on the PGCTHE course (2006-7).

Objectives

1. Bring my research and teaching into closer harmony with one another, by making my research specialism(s) accessible to undergraduate students.
2. Explore ways of increasing student participation in seminar classes.
3. Improve way in which students engaged to me, the lecturer, and one another in seminar classes.
4. Increase student engagement with primary sources on a more regular basis during the course of the third-year Special Subject module.
5. Provide training in reading source which would then feed into the two written source analyses that the students had to complete for the assessment element of the module.

1 A module handbook is included in Appendix 4: Teaching Cycle 2.
Theory

Seminars have been an integral part of the teaching of history since the earliest stage of the professionalization of the historical discipline at the end of the nineteenth century. Whilst these seminars were often long rambling affairs, invariably followed by protracted bouts of heavy drinking, the more structured seminar gradually began to take shape as the university sector grew during the early years of the twentieth century.\(^2\) Within the modern university system, while lectures are still a key element of most students’ normative learning experience, the small-group class is the environment in which most students develop and deepen their knowledge base. Indeed, Sandra Griffiths writes that ‘the interpersonal and interactive nature of small groups makes them a challenging and appropriate vehicle for engaging students in their own learning’.\(^3\) Furthermore, Alan Booth writes that in history seminar discussion is ‘rightly regarded by both tutor and students as critical to effective learning and the development of both subject understanding and transferable skills’.\(^4\)

Through participation in small groups students can be engaged in their own ‘intellectual, personal and professional development’.\(^5\) Within the relatively safe and secure environment of the seminar, students can be encouraged, even enabled and equipped, to take control of their own learning, something that is a key element of the deep approach to learning. Indeed, Booth goes on to say that there is compelling evidence to suggest that most

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\(^5\) Griffiths, ‘Teaching and learning in small groups’, p. 93.
students actually find the seminar the most enjoyable and rewarding element of undergraduate teaching, providing as it does ‘a greater sense of belonging, a greater influence on their own learning, and a real involvement not possible in most lectures’.  

Most modules taken by undergraduate students in the Department of History and Welsh History are taught through a mixed programme of lectures and seminars. The exception to this is the third-year Special Subject, which is taught solely through three hours of seminar classes each week over a ten week time-span. Traditionally, British universities have prized the close link that exists between teaching and research; students benefit enormously from being taught by individuals actively involved in researching the field which they are studying. However, Ranald Michie has pointed out that the level at which academic research is now conducted often makes it inaccessible to anyone other than the fellow specialists, and these are only to be found within select research clusters and academic conferences. Special Subjects are modules designed to be taught in small groups by a single academic who is an expert in the field by virtue of their research profile. In some ways the Special Subject is the closest many undergraduate students get to studying the past in a way broadly consonant with the professional historian.

Michie has identified ten key skills integral to the typical Special Subject which all students should ideally acquire. These include acquiring a detailed knowledge of a specifically defined subject; the ability to test historical interpretations against original evidence; the ability to critically engage with a large body of secondary literature; the development of independence of thought in assessing primary sources and the opportunity to express considered opinions through engagement with both the lecturer and the rest of the

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6 Booth, ‘Effective Teaching in History Seminars’.
9 The Department of History and Welsh History at Aberystwyth University limits each Special Subject to no more than 12 students.
The way in which each Special Subject achieves these objectives is necessarily divergent, since each reflects the different kinds of historical periods under consideration, and engages with the past in a different way.

My own Special Subject, which I taught for the first time during the second semester of the academic year 2006-7, grew out of my work on Iolo Morganwg and the Romantic Tradition in Wales between 1750 and 1914. My Special Subject is designed around the writings of Edward Williams (better known by his pseudonym, Iolo Morganwg), who was the focus of the romantic reinvention of Wales and Welshness at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries. The module begins by looking at Wales and the mid eighteenth century Enlightenment, before spending five weeks engaging closely with Iolo Morganwg’s ideas through a comprehensive analysis of his voluminous writings, especially his correspondence. The module then goes on to look in detail at the wider Welsh scholarly renaissance, looking at how Welsh identity was refashioned by romantics, nonconformists and Victorian revivalists in the nineteenth century. The subject matter for this module arose directly from my previous appointment as a Research Fellow at the University of Wales, Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, and from the extensive publications which I produced during that appointment.

Methodology

Reading primary source material is, of course, one of the most basic tasks of the professional historian. Most undergraduate history modules attempt to encourage students to engage with primary sources, however limited those attempts might at times prove to be. The

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10 For the complete list of these core elements see Michie, ‘Teaching your Research: The Special Subject in History’.
11 This has recently been published. See Geraint H. Jenkins, Ffion Mair Jones and David Ceri Jones, The Correspondence of Iolo Morganwg (3 vols., Cardiff, 2007).
12 See the module handout in Appendix 4.
difference with the Special Subject is that the bulk of the module is designed around a close engagement with primary material. This fact necessitated careful thought as to how my Special Subject was originally designed. During each of the ten weeks of the duration of the module I selected a different theme for discussion. The three-hours of timetabled seminars were then divided between a one hour seminar at the beginning of each week (usually Monday) in which the theme for the week was introduced and the foundational knowledge outlined. Towards the end of the week I organised a two-hour seminar (usually on either a Thursday or Friday) to look in more detail at the themes raised earlier in the week; these sessions either utilised primary sources or involved a close reading of selected secondary texts.

My innovations with primary sources were concentrated around the four middle sessions of the module, which involved a close engagement with the life and career of Iolo Morganwg. These sessions looked at four distinct themes;

- Iolo Morganwg and Romanticism
- ‘The truth against the world’: the politics of forgery
- Druids, bards and the Gorsedd
- The development of a Welsh radical tradition

I provided students with primary source handouts for each of these sessions, which included a list of questions which we were going to discuss, and which were intended to guide them through the sources and provide them with a sense of the kind of questions which they needed to ask of them.\textsuperscript{14} These source bundles were distributed to the students at the end of the first seminar early in the week, with the assumption that the sources would have been read carefully for the two-hour seminar later in the same week.

\textsuperscript{14} Two of these handouts, for illustrative purposes, are included in Appendix 4.
During the two-hour seminar, the class was further divided up into a number of small clusters. In the first half of the session I divided the class into smaller buzz-groups,\textsuperscript{15} each to look at and discuss a different source. These buzz-groups then later rejoined the larger seminar class for the second half of the two-hour session, during which they reported back their findings and insights to the larger class. At this stage the rest of the class could offer their own readings of the particular source under discussion also. This was intended to facilitate high-level inter-action with the primary sources under study, informed by the guided secondary reading that the students had been given; the intention being to show the close link between primary and secondary historical literature, but also the validity of discussion as a means of sifting evidence and reaching historical opinions and judgements.

\textit{Feedback and Reflections}

Gaining feedback from the students on my Special Subject proved easier on this particular occasion since there were only six enrolled on the module. For some elements of the module the students, therefore, had almost one-to-one tuition. Feedback for this teaching cycle was drawn from three main sources. Firstly it was gathered orally as students responded to the themes of the module, engaging with the reading which was assigned and participating in the various other activities which were set. But at the conclusion of the module I also circulated a departmental student questionnaire, which allowed the members of the class to respond anonymously to a series of questions on various aspects of the module, including the seminar classes.\textsuperscript{16} Thirdly, the success of the student’s engagement with the primary source material was evidenced through the module assessments which included two 1500 word source analyses and two essays in which the use of primary source material was actively

\textsuperscript{15} For guidance on different ways in which to create smaller groups within seminar classes see the discussion and suggestion in Griffiths, ‘Teaching and learning in small groups’, pp. 98-9. See also S. Habenshaw, T. Habenshaw and G. Gibbs, 53 \textit{Interesting Things to do in your Seminars and Tutorials} (Bristol, 1988).

\textsuperscript{16} These questionnaires are included in Appendix 4 of the present portfolio.
encouraged. Their reflections from these three sources, together with my own reflection on the worth of this particular teaching innovation, form the basis of my comments in this part of my report.

The regular use of primary source material throughout the Special Subject was something which the students found refreshing and valuable, giving them a real feel for the period and facilitating understanding of much of the secondary reading which they were required to undertake. Student feedback pointed out that the regular use of ‘primary sources helped to understand the subject better’, ‘made the module more interesting’ and ‘added a different dimension to the reading material’.

From my own perspective, the level of engagement in the seminars in which primary sources were used over the two introductory sessions, which were more traditional seminars in which I attempted to chair a discussion based on the reading of some relevant secondary literature, was observable and marked. Whilst this may have been attributable to an occasional lack of preparation on the part of some students, the provision of source material to work on within the class, allowed even poorly-prepared students the opportunity to participate fully in the class. The positive effects of this variation in activity within the seminar classes corresponds closely to John Briggs’ discussion of Bligh’s model of the effect a change in the teaching technique has on the quality and effectiveness of student learning.\textsuperscript{17} Changing, or varying activities in a seminar, according to Briggs, stimulates student attention, maintains enthusiasm, and thus enables and enhances the deep learning process.\textsuperscript{18} From my own observations of the enthusiasm with which the students discussed the primary sources which they were given, both in the buzz-groups and when they reported back to the larger class, this certainly proved to be the case.

\textsuperscript{17} Biggs, \textit{Teaching for Quality Learning at University}, p. 103.
\textsuperscript{18} ibid., p. 102.
For some students such extensive use of primary sources within seminars was a steep-learning curve. One complained that they were sometimes ‘difficult to comprehend’, probably a response to the obtuseness of some of Iolo Morganwg’s more esoteric writings than anything else. The most considered response came from a student who found the training in reading primary sources given in seminar classes invaluable, and which reaped significant dividends in the quality of the two written source analyses that were submitted during the module. For this particular student, the engagement with primary historical material during the module came as something of a revelation, feeding directly into the preparation of the undergraduate dissertation which was going on at the same time as the Special Subject module.

The main problem which I encountered during this teaching cycle concerned the difficulty which some students found with contextualising the primary source material – seeing how it related to the wider themes that were under discussion. Some admitted that they would have liked more time to read the sources and the accompanying secondary material, something I addressed directly when I taught the module for the second time in the first semester of the 2007-08 academic year. At time I also encountered difficulties in getting students to focus on the key points to be drawn from the sources, or at least the major themes that I wanted them to address. Sometimes the discussion of sources got bogged down in the historical minutiae, not always grasping the bigger picture. This was despite my provision of questions to discuss during the seminar that I handed out with the sources themselves. I have subsequently attempted to be far more prescriptive in the questions I get the students to address to the primary sources, maintain a closer link between the questions for discussion and the sources themselves.
Conclusions

I started this report with a discussion of some of the problems associated with the traditional method of teaching within seminars. On reflection creating small buzz-groups to study primary sources within the seminars had a wholly positive effect, empowering students with the tools to engage critically with the historical subject under consideration, and move from surface learning to much deeper and more integrated modes of learning. From my own perspective as an actively engaged researcher in this period, the enthusiasm with which the students responded to the material was a rewarding experience. Although I had to work hard to distil the insights of my research, making it more digestible and accessible, the perceptive way in which the students interrogated many of the sources raised questions which drove me back to think through some of my own opinions on the subject once more, reinforcing the close link between my academic research and my teaching in a wholly positive way.