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Teaching cycle 3: The challenge of small-group seminar teaching; from seminars to mini-symposia
Introduction

This third teaching cycle builds on the innovations that made-up my second cycle, in that it once more focuses on the teaching techniques which I employ in small-group seminar classes. In that second cycle, I experimented with the use of small buzz-groups to discuss primary source material in seminar classes; in this cycle I have attempted once more to break free from the traditional method of teaching seminar classes. For many students the kind of work carried out by professional historians remains something of a mystery. My innovation attempts to bridge this divide by incorporating realistic research techniques into the preparation that students undertake for seminars, transforming the seminar itself into a workshop or mini-symposium, in which students each report back on their research findings, by giving short-papers, in much the same way as professional historians do at academic conferences.¹ This cycle therefore experiments with a form of research-based teaching. For this teaching innovation, I used my part two option module; HY36130: Civil War and Revolution in Stuart Wales, 1603-1714. The teaching innovations which constitute this cycle were carried out during the second semester of the 2007-8 academic year, the final semester of my registration on the PGCtHE course.

Objectives

1. Bring my own research interests and teaching commitments into closer harmony with one another, using my research interests in the religious history of early modern Wales.

2. Facilitate and encourage greater student participation in seminar classes.

3. Address some of the problems associated with the traditional practice of presenting summary papers at the beginning of seminars.

¹ The ideas for this teaching cycle were inspired by a course I attended on Research-based teaching: reinventing the undergraduate curriculum, led by Dr Chris Rust of The Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research, Oxford Brookes University, during September 2007.
4. Give students a flavour of academic research and the process of presenting that research to contemporaries.

5. Create a ‘safe’ and affirming forum in which students can do research, present their findings and engage with one another on the basis of that research in a more structured and planned way.

6. Create a sense of mutual responsibility among the members of each seminar class as each student depends on the other members of the class to share material and push forward the class’ knowledge of the given topic.

Theory

In 1870 Alexander von Humboldt, the German naturalist and explorer, wrote that:

In both teaching and research universities should treat learning always as consisting of not yet wholly solved problems and hence always in research mode.2

The importance of research-based teaching is something that has become increasingly recognised, and there has been a considerable amount of research into the subject in recent decades. Much of this research culminated in the findings of the American Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University, whose report on Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America’s Research Universities was published in 1998. It called for ten changes in undergraduate education, four of which focussed on the need to make the link between research and teaching far more explicit.3

Informed by John Dewey’s educational theories, particularly his observation that ‘learning is based on discovery guided by mentoring rather than on the transmission of information’,4 the commission recommended that research-based learning should become standard practice.

They wrote:

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3 See http://naples.cc.sunysb.edu/Pres/boyer nsf/. For more on Boyer’s ideas, see E. L. Boyer, College: The Undergraduate Experience (New York, 1987).

Learning is based on discovery based on mentoring. Inherent in inquiry-based learning is an element of reciprocity; faculty can learn from students as students are learning from faculty.\(^5\)

Whilst much of this theoretical work was carried out with the either the sciences or social sciences in view, and with the distinct aim of actually getting undergraduate students involved in professional academic research at some level, some of the insights from this research can be utilised by academics in the humanities, history included.

Historians are, of course, a wide-ranging group whose interests, skills and expertise can cover a vast range of historical periods, countries, themes and subject matters. Similarly, many historians adopt an inter-disciplinary approach to their research, utilising the insights and tools of inquiry borrowed from disciplines as diverse as theology, anthropology, archaeology, the social sciences and economics to name but a few. Much historical research is highly specialised by its very nature; the result of this is that it can often be very hard for historians to involve undergraduate students directly in their research projects, unless they happen to be managing a large research project like that on slavery in the Deep South at the University of Virginia.\(^6\) For many historians their day-to-day research can often be far more mundane and prosaic, involving fairly solitary trawls through primary manuscripts in libraries and the detailed reading and analysis of secondary literature. The results of this kind of research are then usually presented as a paper at an academic conference for peer review, or published in a referred academic journal or form part of a larger book-length project.

Methodology

What I wanted to try and do for this teaching innovation was to turn my seminar classes into mini-academic conferences or symposia in which students could present the findings of their research for the seminar to their peers and then answer questions and gain feedback on their research.\(^5\) Quoted in Alan Jenkin, Rosanna Breen & Roger Lindsay with Angela Brew, *Reshaping Teaching in Higher Education: Linking Teaching with Research* (London, 2003), p. 23.

\(^6\) See [http://www.sunysb.edu/reinventioncentre/conference2006/edayers/summary.htm](http://www.sunysb.edu/reinventioncentre/conference2006/edayers/summary.htm). This project was used as a case study during the Research-based learning training course mentioned above.
research. In the experience of most students seminars usually proceed by one or two members of the group preparing a presentation paper which acts as the lead-in to a wider group discussion in each session. For many this can be a counter-productive experience as the papers presented rarely move beyond being of an introductory nature, merely setting the initial agenda for the seminar class rather than being an integral part of the session. This teaching innovation, therefore also attempts to address the problems associated with the giving of student presentations in seminars by actually magnifying their importance, turning them into mini-research projects. Presented in greater detail during each session, they thereby turning the seminar classes into symposia or workshops in which research findings are exchanged, shared and discussed.

To achieve this I firstly re-wrote my Stuart Wales module handbook to reflect this new emphasis. I included a section in the handbook explaining the way in which seminars were going to proceed, which included a detailed outline of what I expected from each of the students in order to make the seminars a success. This stressed that the seminars were not going to be run along traditional lines, but that the students were going to be encouraged and enabled to take responsibility for setting the agenda for the discussions to take place within them, and for providing the historical content on which those discussions would take place.

Rather than hold ten weekly seminars of fifty minutes duration each, I timetabled five fortnightly two-hour seminars. These were arranged around five broad thematic topics that encompassed most of the key areas that needed to be discussed in more depth during the course of the module. The rationale behind this was for the themes of the seminars to be broad enough for students to select an area for further research that engaged their interest, rather than to have to research an area selected for them by me that they might not necessarily be that interested in. The section of the handout outlining the work for each seminar began

7 For a copy of this handbook see Appendix 5 of this portfolio.
with a general overview of the theme for the week, setting out its main contours and the
broad areas that I hoped that the seminar would cover. This rubric then included an indicative
list of research topics from which the members of the class could choose if they wished. This
was not intended to be an exhaustive list, merely suggestive. Each seminar outline then
included a detail reading list with sufficient material to cover most aspects of the seminar
theme.

A few days before the actual seminar itself, I emailed the students asking them to let
me know in advance the topics that they were preparing for the seminar. This inquiry usually
elicited a range of different themes, reflective of the disparate interests of the students
themselves. The material garnered during this inquiry then enabled me to put together the
seminar itself. I then put together a single page handout of points for discussion,8 questions
which we were going to discuss in the seminar itself which corresponded to the material that
the students had intimated that they had prepared. In the seminar itself, I initially circulated
these points for discussion as the agenda for the session. In the seminar itself, we then worked
through the list of discussion points, each discussion beginning with a short presentation
(usually no more than 5 or 10 minutes) from the student who had researched that particular
area of the topic under consideration. On the basis of this presentation, other members of the
seminar group were then invited to respond and discuss the salient issues in more detail. Each
seminar therefore proceeded with between eight and ten of these mini-presentations
(depending on the number of students in each class and the attendance that particular week),
leading into a more detailed discussion of the main points. In this way the seminars were
transformed into mini-symposia in which the research work that the students had done in
preparation over the previous fortnight became indispensable to the effective and successful
working of the seminar.

8 The five of these which were used during the course of this teaching cycle are included in Appendix
5.
Feedback and Reflections

My feedback for this teaching cycle is drawn from the departmental module questionnaires which I distributed to the class towards the end of the module. The specific feedback which I collected on the seminar classes was almost overwhelmingly positive. Students found the five fortnightly two-hour sessions engaging, rewarding and academically rigorous. One even claimed that ‘the seminars have been some of the best of my undergraduate degree course’. Allowing for the hyperbole in this comment, what it does demonstrate is that my innovations in these seminars gave students ownership over and responsibility for the classes. The students set their agenda, did the preparation, led the discussions and debated with one another in a mature and at times sophisticated manner, thereby gaining valuable experience of the kind of historical discourse engaged in by ‘professional’ historians.

My more detailed reflections on the progress of this teaching cycle are outlined in the extended comments on the three elements that made up the teaching innovation below;

1. The student’s research:

The first benefit of this innovation was placing responsibility for the subject matter to be discussed in the seminars in the hands of the students themselves. I selected a broad theme for each session, the students then spent time researching an aspect of that theme which grabbed their attention or appealed to their intellectual curiosity. With some careful negotiation to ensure that there was no overlap in the preparation done by the different members of the group, most seminars drew on a different area of research from each member. The most obvious result of this was that the quality of the research undertaken was both more sustained and more detailed. This empowerment of the students also seemed to encourage

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9 These questionnaires are included in Appendix 5.
them to actually prepare in far more detail than was sometimes strictly necessary, some producing highly detailed papers, others detailed handouts to accompany their presentation.

2. The student’s presentations.
Clearly having done more research for the seminars, the quality of the presentations given by the student was also significantly higher. While students had received fairly strict guidance not to speak for too long (between 5 and 10 minutes ideally), some found the exercise in brevity a challenge; those who tended to read their papers word-for-word fell into this trap most easily, with the result that their presentations ran the risk of becoming potted lectures! The best papers came from those students who had acquired a clear and concise grasp of the subject which they had researched, and gave a presentation which summarised the main points succinctly and which included plenty of examples and illustrative material. Some went further and produced handouts for the rest of the class summarising their main points, and highlighting the main areas for discussion that arose from their presentations.

3. The seminar discussions
Ensuring that the students were fully prepared for the seminars classes through taking ownership of the research process and putting together presentations that showcased their research, made the discussions in the classes themselves much more animated and engaging. Again the quality of the discussion was best when the discussions arose naturally from the student’s preparation; in those instances where students themselves had identified questions for further discussion this often occurred seamlessly. Where the discussion had to fall back on the generic points for further discussion which I had prepared in response to the material that I knew the members of the class had been looking at, discussion proved slightly more stilted, even semi-detached. Having all of the members of the class prepare a presentation for
each meeting also injected a sense of momentum into all of the seminars; each seminar class had considerable ground to cover and I had to ensure that the research done by each individual was given a roughly equal opportunity to be engaged with by the rest of the group. This kept discussions flowing at a steady pace and ensured that they focussed on the main points in question, rather than turning into more aimless discussions on issues not always germane to the theme under consideration.

Conclusions

My reflections on the successes of this teaching cycle have reiterated the view that by making the students accountable to one another for the smooth and effective running of the seminar inevitably pays handsome dividends and rewards. This third teaching cycle has shown that by making students responsible for the planning, research, agenda and discussion of the seminars an effective learning experience can be created. From my own perspective as a facilitator of this learning experience, watching students engage closely with the subject-matter of the course and witnessing them interacting with one another at a fairly sophisticated level has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my first three years as a full-time university lecturer. The two teaching cycles in which I have attempted to change the way that my seminars have taught are united by my determination to make my seminar teaching more student-focussed and also student led. In my experience thus far, this has created a more creative learning environment in which students have often engaged in deeper forms of learning than might otherwise have been the case.