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2010

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TYSTYSGRIF UWCHRADDEDIG ADDYSGU MEWN ADDYSU UWCH

POSTGRADUATE CERTIFICATE IN TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Cylch Dysgu 1 | Teaching Cycle 1

A Reflective Learning Exercise

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A Reflective Learning Exercise

Overview of the Modules

I decided to carry out my first teaching cycle in January 2008 during the delivery of two core modules of the Law degree that I am co-ordinator and lecturer for. These two modules are Land Law and Equity & Trusts. Land Law is a notoriously difficult subject which is taken by students in our department generally in their second year; it is a year long subject and is worth 30 Aberystwyth credits. In this subject, students are taught the land law of England and Wales; they find this subject very dry, complex and technical. Most students find this subject difficult to relate to because they do not own land themselves and therefore have not encountered the various legal issues that can arise in relation to property.

Equity & Trusts is taken by students generally in their third year; it is also a year long subject and is worth 20 Aberystwyth credits. This module looks at the development of Equity and the use of the trust mechanism in English Law. This area of property law results more popular than Land Law with most students. Most of the conceptual basics of this course will have already been covered in Land Law. It is viewed by many students as the solution to the puzzle that is property law.

Both modules have approximately just over 200 students enrolled on each course. I share teaching of Land Law with three other colleagues and in Equity I share teaching with two other colleagues. I have been module co-ordinator for both modules in the past. Currently I am module co-ordinator for Equity & Trusts.

Rationale and Aims

Most law lecturers and students would agree that Land Law is not the most popular subject amongst law students. When I first started my law degree I can recall people who were completing or had completed the degree warning me about how boring land law was and how difficult it was to pass. Land law definitely wasn't my favourite subject at university but incredibly I did manage to pass it.
The subject came back to haunt me when I began teaching as a postgraduate tutor at the University of Hull. One thing I noticed when I was appointed to teach land law was that it was also an unpopular subject amongst lecturers to teach. Colleagues who had taught on this course for many years had lost much of their enthusiasm and were resigned to the fact that land law was never going to be understood by the students.

At first I was incredibly anxious of the fact that I had to teach on such an unpopular course, however I decided to look at things from a different angle and accept it as a positive challenge to change things around and attempt to make the subject appear less scary and impossible. I may not have turned each law student into a land law enthusiast but I have learnt that the more zest and commitment you bring to your teaching the better the student learns. I now actually enjoy teaching the subject and I have learnt a lot about my methodology of teaching and different ways in which students can learn and understand the subject more effectively.

With this teaching cycle I wanted to establish whether my way of teaching was effective in conveying the necessary information to the students, whether they had understood what I had taught them and whether they were able to apply this information when presented with a case study or discussion in the relevant area. I wanted to be able to do this through getting the students to answer in class, a problem or essay question related to a topic I had recently covered in lectures. Once they had attempted the question, answer sheets would be handed in to myself and subsequently redistributed in seminars for discussion and reflection.

The aims of my first teaching intervention were therefore:

- To allow students to reflect and assess their understanding of the subject matter
- To allow students to practice their problem answering and essay writing techniques
- To allow students to assess, comment on and critique their own work.
- To improve student contribution to seminar discussions

I decided to apply this teaching intervention to Land Law and Equity & Trusts.
**Review of the Literature**

For this teaching cycle I wanted to promote understanding of lectures through a *deep* and *active* approach to learning. I wanted to verify whether my students were making sense of what I was teaching them and whether they were able to apply the relevant information to specific scenarios. Too often such a verification is set aside by lecturers in the drive in lectures to "cover the ground" without any consideration of whether the covered ground has actually been understood by students.

According to Swanson and Torraco, the lecture was established formally years ago as a teaching process which began with a literal reading of important passages from a text followed by the interpretation of the text. Students were expected to sit, listen and take notes. Lectures continue to be the primary mode of instruction in higher education. They are an appropriate medium through which one can present material not otherwise available to students or material that is too complex for students to grasp on their own. Although the traditional lecture method conveys factual information very well, it is not well-suited to higher levels of learning; critical thinking, analysis and problem-solving must be learnt by *doing*. In a traditional lecture class the student is passive and has little control over the flow of information. Research has shown that students frequently forget, or never learn, much of the material taught through lectures.

The traditional method of lecturing encourages a surface approach by the student to learning. The surface approach was derived from original empirical research by Marton and Saij among many others. In the surface approach the student reduces what is to be learnt to the status of unconnected facts to be memorised, which means that the learning task becomes to be able to reproduce the subject matter at a later date. Where a teacher uses the traditional method of lecturing the student is not encouraged to do anything other than process the information and write it down. What is being written down is not necessarily understood by the student. The student will have been taught but may not have necessarily learnt.

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3 Marton, F. and Saljo R, *On qualitative differences, outcomes and process (1 and 2)*, British Journal of Educational Psychology, 46, pp4-11
Promotion by a lecturer of a deep and active approach to learning has been described as the key to effective lecturing. With the deep approach the student attempts to make sense of what he/she has learnt in lectures, and involves the student in thinking, seeking integration between components and between tasks, and 'playing' with ideas. The active element of the learning process involves the students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing. Active learning includes a range of teaching and learning activities. The lecturer needs to create a learning environment which fosters activities that stimulate the thought processes of the student. As Wynne Harlen and Mary JAMES put it "students have to be active in their own learning (teachers cannot learn for them) and unless they come to understand their own strengths and weaknesses, and how they might deal with them, they will not make progress."

My main aim therefore in this teaching cycle was to create an active learning environment which encouraged "deep" as opposed to "surface" learning. In order to do this I had to select teaching and learning activities which would do what I wanted them to do in the specific teaching context. I needed to also ensure that my teaching was "student centred", "knowledge rich", "goal oriented" and "community-valued". For this cycle I had to think of activities which would stimulate and facilitate the student's understanding of the module.

The Teaching Intervention

For this teaching intervention I involved the students in a **class problem answering exercise**.

**Method 1**

Once I had completed lectures on a specific topic the students were informed that in the following lecture they were to take part in a class exercise which constituted answering a problem or essay.

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6 Gibbs, G. *Twenty terrible reasons for lecturing*. SCED Occasional paper no. 8 at: http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsd/2Ieamtch/20reasons.html
question which would be featured in a future seminar on that area. The idea was for students to apply what they had learnt in lectures to a case study or essay discussion and to later reflect on what they had written in the class exercise during seminars.

The students were notified of the impending exercise in lectures and by email. Students were provided with the following information.

- Student is required to answer ONE question from the seminar sheet which will be provided by the lecturer during the class exercise. (Lecturer will specify which question you are to answer)
- The exercise is to be completed in 40 minutes
- All textbooks and notes are permitted in the lecture theatre
- All answers are to be submitted to the lecturer and will be re-distributed during allocated seminars
- Non-attendance at the exercise lecture will result in the student not being allowed to attend their seminar

Once the students had completed the exercise (either a problem question or essay question) and submitted the answer sheets I eventually re-distributed the answer sheets to students according to their various seminar groups. The answer sheets were re-distributed purposely unmarked. Research shows that students gain the most learning value from assessment when feedback is provided without marks or grades. Where marks are provided, they often seem to predominate in students' thinking, and to be seen as the real purpose of the task.  

During the seminar the tutor was required to go through how to structure and answer the problem/essay question the students had been asked to do for the class exercise. Following the explanation the tutor would ask each student to reflect and assess whether their initial attempt at answering the question had been successful or not.

The main aims behind this exercise were the following:

- For students to apply principles they had been taught in lectures to a problem/essay scenario while it was still fresh in their minds

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• For students to be able to critically reflect and analyse their work
• To encourage student participation and discussion in seminars
• For students to practice problem answering and essay writing techniques in timed circumstances.
• To facilitate the student’s understanding of the area

I used Method 1 of the class problem answering exercise over two semesters in 2007-2008.

Method 2

I applied this teaching intervention in a slightly different manner during 2008/09 and the first semester of the 2009/2010 session. In the same way as the previous method, once I had completed lectures on a specific topic the students were informed that in the following lecture they were to take part in a class exercise which constituted answering a problem or essay question on that topic.

Students were informed of the following information regarding the exercise during lectures and by email:
• Students will be provided with a problem/essay question at the beginning of the lecture which must be answered in 40 minutes
• All textbooks and notes are permitted in the lecture theatre
• Names and email addresses of those who attend the lecture will be taken by the lecturer
• At the end of the 40 minutes students are required to swap answer sheets with their neighbour
• Remaining 10 minutes the lecturer will go over the answer to the question in class using a power point slide show.
• Power point slide would then be emailed only to students who attended the problem answering session

The main aims of this method were the following:
• For students to apply principles they had been taught in lectures to a problem/essay scenario while it was still fresh in their minds
• For students to be able to critically reflect and analyse their peers and their own work
• For students to practice problem answering and essay writing techniques in timed circumstances.
• To facilitate the student’s understanding of the area

Implementing the teaching intervention

Method 1

When I first notified the students that this intervention was going to take place I carefully phrased the session as a class problem/essay exercise session and not a test. I made the students aware of the fact that at the end of each topic I covered in either Equity or Land Law I would be taking a lecture slot to do the class exercise. I made them aware that the exercise was a way for them to apply what they had learnt in the previous lectures to a problem or essay question and it would also aid them in their preparation for exams at the end of the year. Attendance at the lecture was required in order to be able to attend their allocated seminar.

The first round of exercises was very well attended by both modules. Most students who could not attend had emailed me prior to the exercise with reasons for their absence. I provided them with the question sheet via email and they were required to send the answer by a specific time via email.

After the exercise had taken place I distributed the answer sheets between the relevant seminar tutors. The seminar tutors subsequently gave the answer sheets back to the students unmarked. The reason why the sheets were unmarked was that the point of the exercise was for the student to reflect on the answer they had given during the class session. Most students found that their answers were on the whole quite an accurate reflection of the model answer the seminar tutor had provided them with during the seminar. The seminar re-affirmed what they had learnt and filled in gaps they may have missed in their answer. For students whose answer was incorrect, the reflection process was a way for them to appreciate where they had gone wrong and rectify their answer.
This exercise proved on the whole to be very successful and welcome amongst the students. Not only did they have an opportunity to test their intellectual abilities in a specific area and practice their critical and writing skills, all students were also required to participate in seminar discussions. I carried out these problem answering sessions over two semesters in 2007/2008 and on the whole each session ran very smoothly.

Preparation for each main session was not too tedious because all that was required was a seminar sheet with the question for the students and a copy of the answer to the problem question for seminar tutors.

There were a couple of things however which did take up some time when doing these sessions:

1) Firstly students with special needs who usually had extra time in exams needed to be catered for when arranging these sessions. Before the session, for students who made me aware of their special needs, ie: separate room, extra time) I arranged for separate rooms to be booked.

2) Re-distributing answer sheets for each seminar group was a very time consuming process. With over 200 students in each class it took a while before I had separated each sheet in the right group. In some cases students had failed to put the name on the sheet which made it even more confusing when allocating them to the groups.

Another problem tutors found was that some students would fail to turn up to the right group because of illness, laziness etc. and so their answer sheet would be in another pile or with another tutor.

At the end of the year after having evaluated the whole session I was happy with the exercise. I decided to use it again the following years but in a different manner which I shall explain below.
Method 2

Following the success of my first year of attempting this teaching cycle I decided to take the positives from the first method and continue using them albeit in a different manner.

In a similar way to the first method, once I had completed lectures on a specific topic, students were informed in class and by email that in the following lecture they were to take part in a class exercise which constituted answering a problem or essay question. I made the students aware of the benefits of the exercise, that it would help them in the understanding of the topic and that it would be beneficial for exam preparation.

The difference with the first method was that at the end of the 40 minutes that students were allocated to answer the question in class, they were required to swap their answer sheets with their neighbour. In the last 10 minutes of the lecture I went through the model answer with them on a powerpoint slide. Students who were present for the session were required to sign their names and provide email addresses so that after the lecture I would provide them with copies of the powerpoint slides. Students who had not attended the session without good reason were not emailed a copy of the slides.

Method 2 has also proved successful with students. The majority of students have turned up for classes and most feel they have benefited hugely from the exercise. The fact they get the answer in class helps them assess their own answers straight away and verify whether they are on the right track or not. The fact that their peers will be reading their answers makes them contribute that little bit more to the exercise.

There are a couple of drawbacks to this method too:

- In relation to students with special needs I need to arrange rooms for them beforehand so they can participate in the exercise as well.
- Having to email only students who have attended is incredibly time consuming when I am dealing with a class of 200 students
- I am not able to verify whether the students are writing anything on paper. Some students may just sit for 40 minutes and wait for the model answer to appear on the slides. Swapping answers may be a deterrent to this but no so much when the people sitting next to each other are friends and may be doing the same thing.
**Evaluation**

At the end of the first year of both methods of my first teaching cycle I sought feedback from the students on the class exercise in the form of a questionnaire. From a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being *Not very Helpful* and 5 being *Very Helpful* students were required to answer two or more questions. Most students participated in providing me with feedback.

**Method 1**

**May 2008**

- *Land Law*

  **Question 1**
  
  **How have you found the in-class problem answering sessions?**
  
  70% of students chose 5, 20% of students chose 4, 8% of students chose 3 and 2% of students chose 2, 0% chose 1.

  **Question 2**
  
  **Have they helped your understanding of Land Law?**
  
  69% of students chose number 5, 16% of students chose number 4, 14% of students chose number 3, 1% of students chose number 2 and 0% chose number 1.

- *Equity*

  **Question 1**
  
  **How have you found the in-class problem answering sessions?**
  
  68% of students chose number 5, 20% of students chose number 4, 11% of students chose number 3, 1% chose number 2 and 0% chose number 1.

  **Question 2**
  
  **Have they helped your understanding of Equity & Trusts?**
  
  69% of students chose number 5, 18% of students chose number 4, 12% of students chose number 3, 1% chose number 2 and 0% chose number 1.
I received additional feedback from Equity and Trusts students through feedback questionnaires regarding the module as a whole. The class exercises were viewed by quite a large proportion of students as a positive welcome to the course and a great benefit to students' learning and understanding of the area. Some students however did feel that they would have benefited more from the exercise if the lecturer had marked the assignments rather than leave it to the students to reflect on their assignments by themselves.

Other positive feedback I received regarding the in-class sessions came from student representatives in the Law & Criminology department Staff Student Consultative committee in March 2008. Katherine Soliban, an undergraduate student member to the committee voiced her appreciation of the class exercises on behalf of the third year students and proposed that more lecturers should follow suit and use these tests in their courses.

Method 2

Dec 2009

- *Land Law*

Question 1

**How have you found the in-class problem answering sessions?**

74% of students chose 5, 20% of students chose 4, 6% of students chose 3 and 0% of students chose 2, 0% chose 1.

Question 2

**Have they helped your understanding of Land Law?**

69% of students chose number 5, 17% of students chose number 4, 13% of students chose number 3, 1% of students chose number 2 and 0% chose number 1.

* Equity & Trusts

May 2009
Question 1

How have you found the in-class problem answering sessions?

68% of students chose number 5, 20% of students chose number 4, 11% of students chose number 3, 1% chose number 2 and 0% chose number 1.

Question 2

Have they helped your understanding of Equity & Trusts?

67% of students chose number 5, 19% of students chose number 4, 13% of students chose number 3, 1% chose number 2 and 0% chose number 1.

I have received additional positive feedback on these Model 2 sessions by the majority of students on both Land Law and Equity & Trusts either by word of mouth or through email. Students welcome the practice they get in answering problem and essay questions. Many of them have commented on how helpful these sessions are in relation to preparation for exams. Often students who cannot attend lectures make the effort to email or come and see me to try the questions out for themselves.

Conclusion

On the whole this has been the most successful teaching cycle out of the three I have completed for this course. By adopting these class exercises as part of my teaching I feel like I am contributing effectively to the students’ learning process and verifying whether my teaching is getting the necessary information across to the students. Students have also welcomed the class exercise and I find that the great majority of them attend the class because they are aware of the benefits in doing so. This method of teaching has been welcomed and adopted by other members of staff in the department in their teaching.