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Teaching Cycle 2:

Lecture Strands and Learning Styles

Introduction

Whilst the first teaching cycle was concerned with a lack of engagement by Welsh language students in a subject matter, and in a discipline, that is dominated by English language literature and texts, the second teaching cycle turns its attention to education through the medium of the English language. However, this teaching cycle shares some of the same background as teaching cycle 1, and is a continued attempt to use one ‘problem’ module to test new approaches to teaching in various parts of the teaching and learning process. This teaching cycle also deals with a lack of engagement in the student body to the visual and literary material in the course ‘The Documentary Tradition’. However, in this case, the English/Welsh language issue is not part of the problem nor can it be a contributory part of the solution.

I will now outline the particular challenges that faced the students taking ‘The Documentary Tradition’. Some of this material is similar to that in the report on the first teaching cycle (TC1), but it is important to re-iterate these limitations, and how they might affect the student experience in a different linguistic and logistical context. Past student responses to the module, and my own observations over the last five years of teaching either all or part of this module, following seemed to be true of the student engagement with the module:

1. Obscure Visual Material

As in the first teaching cycle (TC1), the viewings included in the module were challenging. End-of-term student feedback sheets regularly indicated the ‘boringness’ of these films, due in part to their length (usually around 90 minutes) and the interpretive dissonance represented by such unfamiliar, old, and often roughly-hewn material. Films such as Nanook of the North (Dir. Flaherty, 1922), Man With A Movie Camera (Dir. Vertov, 1929) or Chronicle D’un Ete (Dir. Rouch, 1960) also presented severe interpretive obstacles, as they employed a wide range of unorthodox styles and devices. As I indicated in TC1, these films were a far cry from the documentaries that students were familiar with.

2. Obscure social and political contexts / difficult conceptual terrain
As in TC1, the module covered a great deal of complex theory surrounding textual construction, ethics, public spheres and audience appreciation, and engaged directly with topical political discussions which had become obscure over time. Students were required to comprehend the formative history of factual film making, and place the genre into the global historio-political context of the twentieth century. This required a historical and contextual condensation that was not encountered in modules that dealt with fiction film, as such material was spread over several modules. This condensation was very challenging to all but the very best students, as they needed to synthesise several different forms of knowledge in order to get to grips with the subject in earnest.

3. 10 Credit Module and Strategic Students

As in TC1, 'The Documentary Tradition' was one of only two modules in their respective degree schemes that were worth 10 credits. These modules are essential for plugging gaps in students’ credit requirements, which led students to strategically select this module even when they had little or no prior knowledge of, nor inclination towards, the subject. The further irony was that due to the structure of the degree schemes in question, the majority of these strategic selectors were filling a credit gap due to an emphasis in their last year on practical courses. Therefore the students probably least interested and suited to an obscure, theoretical and politico-historical module find themselves on 'The Documentary Tradition'. Students also noted that although the essays that formed the assessment for the module were shorter than for a 20 credit module (1,500 words maximum rather than 2,500), the amount of contact time and essay preparation time were similar. Some students felt that they were caught between cutting corners on the module, or devoting a disproportionate amount of time to the module for the credits it earned them.

4. Class Size and session time

While the class sizes in TCI enabled me to experiment with close reading and translation as a way of developing a key studying skill, the class size in 'The Documentary Tradition' required a different approach. Because of the strategic selection of the module, it usually attracted between 30 and 40 students in each class, depending on the year. This meant that the seminar-style pattern of the 'y Traddodiad Dogfen' was unsuitable, and a way of managing a larger class was needed.
Given the scale of these challenges (some of them due to institutional factors such as credit weightings), for the purpose of the PGCTHE one area needed to be defined for improvement through a teaching cycle. The area that seemed to be central, and easiest to tackle, was that of students’ engagement in lectures. This seemed the best way forward, as it provided a chance to address engagement and managing a large class size at the same time. It would also complement the reflection and research I had undertaken in TC1 on seminars, and the work I was to conduct in TC3 on giving feedback to essays.

My main hypothesis was that students were not engaged in the lectures because there was no reflective cycle in place during lectures, and that students’ passivity was at the heart of a lack of engagement. I have indicated, students were also often pre-disposed towards dis-engagement in this module, through their strategic selection, and the ten credit status of the module. In addition, the module was not a natural choice for many of the students, who were disinclined towards a historio-theoretical module in any case. What was needed was a way of engaging students, a way of decreasing their passivity. However, the module could not be shifted towards a radically hands-on approach, as this would encroach on other modules, would go against the stated learning outcome of 'The Documentary Tradition' module, and would also alienate those in the class who had chosen the module due to its historio-theoretical bent.

The means of assessing these outcomes were two 1,500 word essays. There was no scope within this teaching cycle for a re-alignment of the learning outcomes and assessments to attempt a greater engagement with students. What was needed was a way of engaging students across a wide spectrum of interests and inclinations, without the bespoke attention that could be given in a smaller class.

Related Studies

When looking for literature on student engagement, and the development of an efficient learning environment and structure, one obvious starting point was Kolb. Kolb’s ‘experiential learning theory’ maintained that the best learning experience took place when a virtuous cycle of activity was
created in which students had a chance to approach a learning experience from a number of angles. Kolb's cycle worked as follows:

![Diagram of Kolb's cycle](image)

Figure 1: Adapted from Kolb and Fry, 1967

Kolb later (1984) outlined four learning styles that operated within this cycle. Students preferred to learn in different ways, and that their 'learning style' was the product of two pairs of choices made by the student when they were faced with a learning experience. Kolb presented these choices as lines of axis, with polar modes at each end (Figure 2):

![Diagram of learning styles](image)

Figure 2: Adapted from Kolb, 1984

These horizontal axis were called the 'Processing Continuum' (i.e., how a student approached a task), and the horizontal axis was the 'Perception Continuum' (i.e., a student's emotional response, or how they thought or felt about it). Kolb maintained that students, when faced by a learning experience made the stark choice of whether to do or watch, and to think or feel, the results of
which formed specific learning styles. Kolb asserted that a learning style was derived from the product of these two decisions, as shown in the matrix below with the resultant learning styles in bold (Figure 3):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concrete Experience (CE) (feeling)</th>
<th>Reflective Observation (RO) (watching)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active Experimentation (AE) (doing)</td>
<td>Abstract Conceptualization (AC) (thinking)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From this matrix Kolb then posited four different learning styles and gave them a learning profile, detailing how each style learns best. The idea behind Kolb's model was that different educational approaches would suit different individuals better than others, and that practicing the styles that were not natural to them would be beneficial. In 1986, Honey and Mumford adapted Kolb's model, and mapped Kolb's learning styles to stages in the learning cycle. Honey and Mumford then came up with four types of learner; the activist, reflector, theorist and pragmatist (Figure 4).

The notion could be here therefore, that different students might be inclined to different stage in the learning cycle. Some might prefer an experiential approach, some might prefer to reflect, and so on. But the crucial aspect was that they should be doing so in a specific order, to tie in with Kolb's learning cycle. Therefore, whatever an individual student's preferred learning style/activity may be, it should be exercised in a cycle of other activities in order that the learning experience be as efficient as possible.

Although Kolb has been criticised for being too deterministic and simplistic, even a stern critic such as Tennant pointed out that, "the model provides an excellent framework for..."
planning teaching and learning activities and it can be usefully employed as a guide for understanding learning difficulties, vocational counselling, academic advising and so on" (1997: 92). In particular in the case of 'The Documentary Tradition', and the attempt to engage with students, the Honey and Mumford model provided a structure through which a lecture/viewing session could be designed that offered something for all learning styles, and which also provided variation of approach.

![Honey and Mumford Learning Styles Model]

Figure 4: Adapted from Honey and Mumford, 1986

also felt that there was little empirical evidence to back the model (Tennant 1997: 92). Anderson (cited in Tennant, 1988) felt that Kolb's learning styles and cycle were limited in application to other cultures. Jarvis (1987) criticised Kolb's discussion of knowledge.
Method

Once Honey and Mumford’s learning styles and learning cycle was identified as a possible means of structuring the lecture/viewing session, the next task was to see what kind of class activities could fit in the Honey and Mumford stages/style, whilst still keeping the module within its intended learning outcomes, and within the resource allocation given to the module.

Activists. It took some time to consider what could work under the ‘activist’ category in the lecture/viewing session, but finally it seemed that watching a film would be the best. Previously the films had drawn some of the most negative student feedback, as in these typical examples:

The documentaries viewed were very hard to sit through, especially *Man of Aran*...

Unfortunately the screenings can be dull - can’t be helped though...

Sometimes the films were hard to watch and stay focused on, due to their length, and sometimes dull content...

Some of the films were quite tedious, but then again that isn’t a problem with the module itself...

The early films were long and dull... I know this was not the modules fault, but could an alternative be offered

The only thing that I had a problem with was that some of the viewings dragged on a bit due to the pace of some of the films shown. I have no problems with the film selection, but it could be a bit of a chore to watch some of them namely *Triumph of the Will* and *Nanook of the North*.

(Taken from student feedback questionnaires, 2007 and 2008)

Curtailing the viewings was not an option, as there were films that pedagogically simply had to be viewed, such was their significance to subsequent documentary film development. Similarly, showing excerpts from films would not do, as an important aspect of these early films was the experience of watching them in one sitting, as would have happened when they were originally shown and viewed.
After taking advice from a colleague, John Burgan, I decided to take a new tack with screenings. Previously they had followed the lecture. The rationale was that in order to understand such dense and obscure films, students would need some priming. However, it seemed logical that the 'activist' student, described by Honey & Mumford as "gregarious, seek challenge and immediate experience, open-minded, bored with implementation", might best be engaged by an 'innocent' viewing of the filmic text.

**Reflectors** This was one of the simpler decisions. This was a space in which, to quote Honey & Mumford, would appeal to those who liked to "stand back", gather data, ponder and analyse, delay reaching conclusions, listen before speaking, thoughtful". This would be the part of the session in which the background information concerning the film, the content that was usually placed before the film.

**Theorists** This section also seemed to fit into the lecture mode, but with a task associated, so that the student who liked to “think things through in logical steps, assimilate disparate facts into coherent theories” had the opportunity to do so. Therefore this became a lecture section in which key concepts were identified and introduced in a lecture format, at the end of which a theoretical group task was assigned. Then the class split into groups and were given an excerpt to read during a 15 minute break. Then the group would present their answer to the theoretical challenge.

**Pragmatists** This section was then the last of the lecture/viewing, in which another group task was assigned. This time it made use of the practice-oriented students in the classroom (50% of whom were also doing a documentary production module that term). The task asked the students to place themselves in the position of the film maker of the week, and solve a logistical, methodological or ethical question. This was a much quicker, less informal task, but in my feedback to group reports, I encouraged students to think back through the other stages we had gone through that session. This suited the quick decision makers that Honey and Mumford identified as those who were "bored with long discussions".

There was therefore a four part model for the lecture/viewings. However, there were problems to iron out with implementation. The first session was undertaken in the usual way, with a lecture, and

4 John Burgan, a highly experienced documentary tutor, is a recent appointee at Aberystwyth university and has taught previously at the Berlin University of the Arts, and the European Film College in Ebeltoft, Denmark.
then a viewing following it. In the second week, the experiment began. To begin with the structure might have been strange to some of the students, and they might not have known why different sections were being arranged in this particular way. I therefore took the opportunity during the first session to give a brief introduction, and also to distribute a handout so that the students could read Honey and Mumford's descriptions of each learning style. I asked the students to self-diagnose, and found that according to this rough method, the class were 31% 'Activists', 43% 'Reflectors', 9% 'Theorists', 17% 'Pragmatists'. Although this lacked the rigour of Honey & Mumford's own online questionnaires, the exercise had two main functions beyond giving me an idea of what type of learners might be in the class. Firstly it made the students think about their learning, and to some extent begin to take charge of their own management of it. Secondly, it also introduced and explained the session structure that I was to use for the rest of the semester.

To emphasise this structure of the lecture/viewing, I also used different coloured PowerPoint slides for each section. This was in order to associate the learning style already introduced through the questionnaire with specific sections of the lecture, so that students could in turn 'switch' into the learning style being concentrated in anyone section. The colours also had the intention of creating easily identifiable 'learning strands' within each section, that while they created variation within a session, would be constant over the period of the semester. The session structure, including colours, are summarised below (Figure 5).

The lecture was using a 3-hour slot reserved due to the usual length of a lecture (50 minutes) and the possibility of having 2 hour viewings. I used the same slot, but broke the session into two. The viewing began the session; Man With a Movie Camera (Dir. Vertov, 1929, 68 minutes). Then there was a mini-lecture on the historical background to Vertov's film. Then there followed a 20 minute break in which students were given a brief extract to read in advance of the theory section. The theory section began with a mini-lecture, and then the class divided into three groups of about 10, and were given the task of defining constructivism, based on their reading of the article and the viewing of the film, in 20 words or less. These words were to be written on an OHP acetate sheet, in order to display to the rest of the group. Each group had about 20 minutes to discuss this, and then elected a spokesperson to display the acetate sheet and talk through their findings.

5 The possibility of the students each filling in a Honey & Mumford questionnaire was explored, but the costs, at £10 a head, were too great for this exercise. 6 According to this rough self-diagnosis, the class were 31% 'Activists', 43% 'Reflectors', 9% 'Theorists', 17% 'Pragmatists'. 7 See appendices for the lecture slides in detail.
The following on quickly was the fourth section, in which the same groups grappled with a production issue: in this case how would they take a familiar contemporary documentary of their choice and instil it with constructivist principles. There was 10 minutes given for group work, which then led to an more informal open-class 'pitching' session.

**Evaluation**

There were three main ways in which the teaching cycle was evaluated; through my own observation, through a student questionnaire distributed at the end of the lecture prior to the assignment week, and through my mentor as discussed above.

I observed a number of differences in the class room with the new lecture structure, compared to how lectures had once worked. The viewing was watched intently, with people laughing and reacting in appropriate ways, rather than merely at anachronous incongruities as had been the case in previous years. Perhaps this was a sign that an 'innocent' viewing was efficient enough at picking up
a basic understanding of narrative and significance, and that a priming with academic discourse and historical background might have been impairing the students' own powers of interpretation.

There was a moment of tension after the viewing and before the mini lecture, which was never resolved. It felt like students might want to give immediate responses, but equally it wasn't clear how such responses could be structured without impairing the delivery of the rest of the session. This issue was not resolved. The theory tasks were successful. In some ways the most perilous strand of the session. But the timing of the theory activity, after a viewing and a mini-lecture on historical background, did seem to give the theory test some material to work with. The acetate device worked well, as speakers took their brief seriously, and often called for further explanation from their group.

The pragmatic task at the end of the session was often high spirited, and often emotional. Groups tended either to devise outlandish or severely angst-ridden ideas. However, with a little guidance it was possible in this strand to see a synthesis of the activities seen in the other strands of the session. There was one such section, in the Jennings lecture, which produced a number of interesting suggestions for propaganda in the Jennings vein. This showed that the students had understood Jennings so well that they were able to both copy and critique his approach to documentary making in their group work.

This lecture was also observed by my mentor, Or Jamie Medhurst, who was overall in favour of the structure. He also had some suggestions for improvements. In particular, he noted that the session slightly overloaded, and asked a lot of the students. I will therefore sought to make the sections tighter and quicker, and to include shorter excerpts of reading for use in the theory test. He also noted that it could be beneficial to distribute the reading before the session. I decided not to do this, as the aim of this element of the session was to get students to think critically, and this seemed better done through reading critically in groups at the time. Experience also suggested that few students would read the article beforehand in any case. The shortening of extracts sufficed in making this task more manageable.

The observer also mentioned allowing time, between the 'Activist' viewing and the 'Reflector' lecture section, to let students give initial responses to the film. Although I had felt a tension at this point in the atmosphere of the session, I decided not to act on this suggestion, as it would have cut across the use of Honey & Mumford's learning styles/cycle to structure the session. Their structure required a moment of reflection after activity, before then starting to think theoretically, and finally
pragmatically about the experience of viewing the film. Therefore the instant feedback the observer mentioned, although it might have felt like the usual way to go, could sabotage the learning cycle in process by releasing the students’ reactions before they have reflected upon them. However the need for verbal feedback from students immediately after the screening was an issue I kept in mind.

The observer also suggested using film clip or stills when discussing theory, in order that students could be reminded of visual cues from the viewing. This was a good suggestion, but the process of preparing film clips was laborious, and was not supported by the department technically. Secondly, the pausing during the theory section of the lecture slowed down the process of reinforcement implicit in the Honey & Mumford model. This suggestion was also held back for further consideration during the semester. With these changes in place, this format was then used to deliver lecture 3 (on John Grierson), 4 (on Humphrey Jennings), and 5 (on Free Cinema).

The main results of the student questionnaires indicated that the structure was successful, in that 13 out of 16 respondents either thought that the lecture/viewing structure was 'some use' or 'very useful' in comparison to the traditional format. Only 2 said 'no difference' and nobody thought the structure was worse than the traditional. In terms of engagement, most students said they were between 3-5 on a scale where '1' was 'not at all' engaged and '5' was 'very' engaged. However, only one said that they were 'very' engaged. On the same scale, most students said they were '1-2' in terms of confusion, although there four that said they were '4' on an upward scale of confusion. In terms of boredom, most students occupied a central position, with no-one claiming to be 'very' and most at the 'not at all end'.

In terms of strands, the 'Activist' strand seemed the favourite part of the session, with 12 voting it either 'Very good' (7) or 'Excellent' (5). The 'Reflectors' strand came second, but with only 2 voting it excellent. The 'Theory' section came third, with two 'disappointing' votes, but with 10 votes for 'Very Good'. 'Pragmatic' was fourth, and was the only strand voted 'poor' (2). On the same 1-5 as before, students were asked about tasks associated with the strands. Most students said they had enjoyed the film texts, with five voting '3', seven voting '4' and two voting '5'. Most students had also found the historical background relevant, with five voting '3', eight voting '4' and one voting '5'. A similar breakdown of students though the theory strand was comprehensible. However, the helpfulness of the pragmatic exercise was not given the same vote of confidence, with two voting '1' (i.e., not at all helpful), and two voting '2'.
In general terms then, the sessions seem to have been considered an improvement by students. Most students were engaged, few were confused, and none were very bored. In terms of the strands, the 'Activist' viewing strand was the most popular, and also rated highly as being enjoyable. This was a definite turn-around from the previous feedback on these films, where the viewing of these filmic texts was seen as a chore. Both the 'Reflector' and 'Theorist' strands did well, being rated as relevant and comprehensible respectively. However, the 'Pragmatic' strand had more mixed results. This might have been due to the mixed nature of the class, in which half were also doing a documentary practice course at the same time. Judging by the comments at the foot of a number of the questionnaires, this strand seemed irrelevant to those not taking both courses.

Conclusions

Adopting the learning styles and cycle of Honey and Mumford gave me a framework through which I could target an increase in engagement for a group of strategic students studying obscure material. Most successfully the new structure seems to lend the visual texts more relevance and appeal, and infused what had been a rather passive module with energy and enthusiasm. However, it was difficult to identify exactly which components were successful. Additionally the confident and enthusiastic cohort on whom the new structure was tested made it difficult to predict whether this method would work with another cohort, or on another module.

Bibliography