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Teaching Cycle Two

Module Overview: PS10120 - Introduction to Psychology

For this teaching cycle, psychology was in its second year, but first as an official department. This module had our first cohort of students that had applied through UCAS and this module was also made available as an option module for other students that were searching for further credits. As such, the number of students enrolled on this module was far higher than the previous year. In general the module aimed to provide an introduction to psychology, covering a large number of disciplines. Since an A-level in psychology is not required, all topics were taught under the assumption that students did not have prior knowledge of the subject. The module covered topics such as, the evolution of psychology as a discipline, sub-disciplines within psychology (social, developmental and individual differences), and psychological theories used in a variety of contexts such as health, education, forensic, and cross-cultural psychology. The learning outcomes were as follows:

1. Demonstrate an understanding of the key distinctions and relationships between sub-disciplines in psychology.
2. Critically assess the contribution of different psychological perspectives to the understanding of human behaviour.
3. Examine and evaluate the application of basic concepts to a range of applied areas of psychology.
4. Critically evaluate the controversies of psychological research and practice and the contribution of psychology to contemporary society.
5. Demonstrate how your understanding of psychology can support your development as a self-directed learner.

As the module in the previous teaching cycle, the module was a one semester module meeting twice a week via two 50 minute lectures and fortnightly seminars that lasted 2 hours. The same assessments methods were also used, one essay plan (10%), one essay (30%), and an end of semester exam (60%).

Focus of Teaching Cycle:

In line with the main theme of the teaching cycles, the main intended outcomes for this cycle's activity were to promote independent and peer teaching and learning. In addition,
a third outcome was to enhance student's ability to engage with psychology literature to achieve outcome 1 and 2. In this teaching cycle the focus is on implementing Web 2.0 applications to encourage peer teaching and learning, specifically the use of Wikis. The idea for using a Wiki was based on a demonstration by Information Services highlighting the a new software package that integrated Web 2.0 applications into Blackboard Virtual Learning Environment. As such, a 4\textsuperscript{th} intended outcome from this teaching cycle was to raise students' awareness of Web 2.0 applications as learning tools; increasing their transferable skills through using technology. Again, as in the previous teaching cycle I feel that students will be learning new skills at an early stage that they continue using through their degree and into employment. In addition, as an undergraduate I was given an activity that promoted independent learning where students were given a booklet that consisted of key terms and mini glossary about a certain psychological topic. Students then had to go away and do their own research on the key terms and develop their own learning log and glossary. This was a great task since for me as an undergraduate; it was the best way to learn. However, this activity alone did not promote peer learning and teaching. As such, to combine independent study and peer learning and teaching I decided to elaborate upon it with an activity that was presented during the PGCTHE residential course, namely the 'Muddiest Points' activity (Mosteller, 1989). This task was a feedback device activity where students presented issues for clarification which were to be discussed at the beginning of the next class. I integrated my previous undergraduate activity with the muddiest point activity and the implementation of these two activities is described in the next section.

Planning, Structuring, and Implementation

To prepare students for the activity, students were given a description of the activity and the intended outcomes for the activity were relayed to them at the beginning of the semester during seminars. Students were shown how to edit and post onto the Wikis and were given the opportunity to ask questions. To supplement the demonstration, the ‘How To’ guides available from Information Services and the Blackboard Team were distributed. Students were then told that they were in charge of maintaining their seminar groups Wiki, and there were a total of five seminar groups. The Wikis had already been established by the lecturer and all students were required to do was access their seminar groups Wiki to contribute. The students were told to maintain the sight throughout the semester on a week by week basis. This was because muddiest points were collected in twice a week. Students were e-mailed weekly and informed to hand in their muddiest points to each lecturer who would in turn pass them to me. Once all the muddiest points had been collected, I would
post them onto each seminar group’s Wiki for them to clarify using psychological literature. It was hoped that student’s could then self-correct each other (within each seminar group). Once the semester was complete, each seminar group’s Wiki would be made available to the course so that all students could benefit from different groups’ contributions. Students were left free to be creative with their Wikis and no restrictions were implemented.

Results and Evaluation of Teaching Cycle Two

At the end of the module, students were asked to complete in their last lecture a Wiki specific evaluation form. The evaluation form was in the form of a short Likert scale based on ideas and recommendations from staff development workshop one: evaluating student learning. Questions were written based around the learning outcomes and the overall intended outcomes from my teaching cycles; being increasing independent and peer learning and teaching. An example of the evaluation form and raw data can be found in the appendices (appendix IX).

To preface my limited results, the overall teaching cycle was disappointing and unsuccessful, however there are positive outcomes. From a class of 96, not one student participated in the class activity, despite their initial interests and willingness to submit muddy points after lectures. More odd, was that during the evaluations, some students indicated that the Wikis only moderately helped them clarify topics. Although this is likely that some students are demonstrating acquiescence, some students agreed that the Wiki helped them and that their peers’ contributions were helpful. This type of contradictory behaviour in light of the fact that nobody used them also shows students engaging in demand characteristics, where they report what they think the demonstrator wants them to report. Furthermore, other students disagreed that the Wiki helped them, which makes more sense as nobody used them, but why they did not fully disagree, which would have been more realistic of the situation, is not known. As such, I have a dataset of 49 responses that are unlikely to be valid for the teaching cycle. I then looked at some of the qualitative responses, and although there were only a few, these comments showed that students did not understand why they didn’t engage in the Wiki activity even though they felt it would have been useful. Consequently, it would be most unwise to use this data but the whole experience has provided me an opportunity to engage with ways to improve the implementation as I still believe that this activity could be a valuable one for students.

As in the previous teaching cycle, students provided generic feedback about the module using the same feedback form. Again, this module received high scores for overall satisfaction, where 12% strongly agreed, 68% agreed, 18% partly agreed, and 1% disagreed
that they were satisfied with the course. Again, this is a very pleasing response from students despite the unsuccessful Wiki activity.

Conclusions and reflection

Overall, the use of the activity was embarrassingly disappointing given the time I had put into developing the activity and setting up the groups. This is despite weekly e-mails to students to remind them about submitting muddiest points and to contribute to the Wiki. To a certain extent, students appeared to be waiting for someone to make the first post in each seminar. However, the overall module remained unaffected and had this been a formative assessment could have potentially damaged student’s module mark. Upon reflection, I am encouraged that a few students saw the potential of such an application in their education and learning strategies, but critically, I believe that students are also strategists in that they will only engage with academic activities that facilitate their grades. For example, they are more likely to engage with formative assessments and reading before exam periods. To be blunt, students are likely to be asking themselves why they should do the task if they are not being assessed, especially when they have other coursework to do that is assessed.

With the conclusions I have drawn above, it has given me a clear direction to pursue for my third teaching cycle. In order to address the student as a strategist, I will have to include the Wiki activity as a formative assessment. In doing so, students will have to engage with the activity to obtain marks that contribute to their final module mark. I feel that perhaps it was poor judgement from me to have asked students to commit to an additional task without the same benefits of other formative assessment. As such, any work carried out for their learning especially when requested by the lecturer should be rewarded, too. In contrast with this teaching cycle, however, the previous teaching cycle was successful even though the activity was not assessed. As previously discussed in teaching cycle one, given the few students in teaching cycle one made it harder to diffuse responsibility as they were highly visible. The online nature of the task in this teaching cycle is likely to have exacerbated the diffusion of responsibility and deindividuation, which in turn decreases group coordination.