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TYSTYSGRIF UWCHRADDEGID ADDYSGU MEWN ADDYSU UWCH

POSTGRADUATE CERTIFICATE IN TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Cylch Dygu 2 | Teaching Cycle 2

Small Group Tasks in the Context of Large Group Teaching

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2nd Teaching Cycle

Small Group Tasks in the context of Large Group Teaching

1. Overview of the Module

DR30200 'Production Analysis' is a core module on the Drama and Theatre Studies degree scheme. The module aims to examine semiotic and phenomenological methods for analysing productions of plays in performance, to apply these methods to selected productions, to examine the 'performance history' of selected texts and previous production choices made, to deepen students' understanding of the challenges and difficulties of presenting two of the texts studied for modern theatre audiences, and to develop students' ability to write critically and effectively about theatrical events. Taught as a 'thin' module over two semesters, students attend a weekly two-hour lecture
complemented by a three day trip visit to London in the second semester. A shorter descriptive piece of writing in the first semester and a performance analysis essay early in the second semester contribute 40% of the final module mark, with a written examination contributing 60%.

Appointed as module co-ordinator at the start of the 2008 academic year I had already made a range of changes to the content of the module, including changes to the learning outcomes before undertaking this teaching cycle. Seeking to address what I perceived as a lack of theoretically informed methods for performance analysis, in the 2008 academic year I had sought to increase the teaching time by adding in weekly seminar groups. My rationale was that students would need additional time in which to engage with the more rigorous methods being introduced. The resource implications of this request, along with an impending review of departmental curriculum meant that I was offered an alternative: a second hour of large-group teaching, in addition to - and immediately following - the existing lecture, which could be used for discussion and reflection involving some small group learning activities.

2. Rationale for change, including reference to appropriate literature on teaching and learning in HE.

In the 2009 academic year an increase in student enrolment on the module required a different, and more rigorously structured, approach to be taken to the management of the 'seminar' hour. In 2008 only sixty-five students were enrolled, allowing for a reasonably informal approach to discussion and small group activities. In 2009 enrolments almost doubled to a hundred and eight. Gibbs and Jenkins (1997) have noted that increased class sizes create 'practical problems' for both staff and students; for students, increased class size can encourage more passive and surface approaches to learning, coupled with greater anonymity and increased competitiveness. Outlining possible means by which such impacts might be counteracted, Gibbs suggests that, 'If you can find ways of binding students together in co-operative action this will tend to be more motivating than leaving them to compete in isolation'. (Gibbs in Gibbs and Jenkins 1997: 55) Similarly, John
Biggs (2003) suggests that peer interaction can lead to valuable outcomes because, 'Students also like learning from peers.' (111)

Taking these suggestions as a guide for my intervention, I decided to utilise the strategies of 'learning partners' outlined by Biggs, as well as that of 'peer teaching' (See Biggs 2003: 112-113), and to combine it with more traditional features of small-group teaching: group-work and presentations. (See Davies 2001) My overall aim was to provide opportunities for more active learning within a large class context that counteracted the negative influences of anonymity and competitiveness.

3. A plan highlighting proposed teaching practice, intended outcomes and methods of evaluation.

Assigning the students on the module into twenty-one groups of between five and six in number, my plan was to have students work in these groups for each of the seminar classes. Between the nominal 'lecture' and 'seminar' hours there would be a ten minute break, during which I would ask students to rearrange themselves so as to be sitting with the members of their group. Each week I would provide either a structured small group learning activity for these groups, or I would ask a number of groups to make a presentation on a topic assigned during the previous class. During the course of the first semester every group would be required to do one presentation. Neither the small-group activities nor the presentations would be formally assessed, but instead would operate primarily as a means of providing opportunities for peer interaction and discussion.

My intended outcomes for this intervention took the conditions of large group teaching as a point of departure and were as follows:

1. That students’ learning would be enhanced through the provision of learning activities that they found helpful and challenging.
2. That students would feel more comfortable voicing opinions and asking questions despite the large group size.
3. That students would be provided with greater opportunities for feedback by teaching staff despite the large group size.

My primary means of evaluation was to be a questionnaire administered in the final class of the first semester. This would combine both quantitative and qualitative measures. The questionnaire listed a series of statements against which the students could indicate their level of agreement or disagreement, and this was followed by three open questions in which the students were asked to note the most positive and negative aspects of the seminars as well as one suggestion for how the seminars could be improved (See Figure 4.1 overleaf).
Figure 4.1 Seminar Presentation Feedback Questionnaire

DR30200 Seminar Presentation Feedback Questionnaire

For the seminars this semester I allocated you into small groups to work on exercises and to give presentations. While these weren’t assessed they were intended to help you start to apply the key theories and skills of performance analysis. In this questionnaire I would like you to provide me with feedback on your experience of these seminar sessions.

1. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your experience of the seminar sessions this semester?

   1=Strongly Agree  5=Strongly Disagree

   (Please circle your response)

   The seminar exercises were helpful
   The seminar exercises were challenging
   The group seminar presentations were helpful
   Listening to other groups’ presentations was helpful
   The experience of making a presentation was helpful
   I felt comfortable voicing my opinion and asking questions in my small group
   The instructions for the seminar exercises and presentation tasks were clearly worded
   I found the feedback provided by staff in seminars was helpful

2. What for you was the most positive aspect of the seminars?

3. What for you was the least positive aspect of the seminars?

4. Can you suggest at least one way in which the seminars can be improved?
4. **Progress notes on teaching practice and any interim modifications.**

There were no significant interim modifications carried out during the semester, although the need to design meaningful small-group learning activities and presentation topics on a week to week basis required a great deal of administrative time; more than I had anticipated.

Before the first class of the semester I made sure that the students were well aware of the way in which the seminars would be run and the makeup of the groups. Groups were assigned by me, with each group arranged so as to include students with a range of abilities. The first seminar task - an exercise reviewing theatre reviews - was supplied via email in advance of the first class. (See Figure 4.2) During this first class I was surprised by how few of their classmates the students actually knew, and it was apparent that time was needed in the first seminar for group members to become acquainted with one another.

Facilitating the seminar sessions did place a degree of pressure placed on me to (a) provide clear feedback to students, (b) ensure that students' insights gained during the activities were clearly communicated to the whole class, and (c) ensure that an appropriate sense of closure was achieved at the end of each session. With the small group activities I used the practice of 'snowballing', getting groups to engage with the activity and then share their insights, findings, and queries with another group. I would then ask a spokesperson from this larger group to briefly report back to the class as a whole. The seminar presentations (See Figure 4.3) offered a different challenge largely because the standard of presentation varied greatly. Students were often reluctant to ask questions of each other in the large-group context, and this frequently placed me in an uncomfortable position as the primary interlocutor. Here the need to balance encouragement with critique was a difficult one to strike, especially in one or two instances when
Figure 4.2 A sample seminar activity: 'Reviewing a review'

DR30200 Production Analysis Seminar 1: 'Reviewing a review'

In this exercise I want you to think further about one of the ways in which we commonly discuss theatre. Attached to this sheet you will find three theatre reviews. Spend time answering the questions individually before discussing them in your group.

1. Which elements of the productions (narrative, actors, set) do the reviewers describe in detail?

2. Which elements of the productions (narrative, actors, set) do the reviewers not describe/ignore?

3. What sort of language do the reviewers use? What features of language stand out?

4. What (implicit or explicit) value judgements do the reviewers make about the productions? What reasons do they provide to justify their judgements?

5. Why do you think these reviews have been written? What purpose might they serve?

6. Which review is the most analytical? Why?

7. What do you think are the differences between a ‘review’ and an ‘analysis’?
groups had misunderstood the topic. Having up to six members in each group meant that not all students could be expected to actively contribute to the making of a presentation, and it was apparent that some groups had rather arbitrarily divided up the task amongst themselves. In some cases it was clear that only one or two students were the active contributors, with other group members either offering very little, or failing to attend the presentations at all. Finally, repetition was also an issue when - as was frequently the case - two groups were asked to address the same question.

### Figure 4.3 Seminar presentation topics for week 3

**Seminar Presentations for Week 3**

*Length*: 5 minutes per group.

*Planning*: Please arrange to meet sometime during the week to plan your presentation. Don’t leave it till the last minute!

*Purpose*: The purpose of these seminar presentations is for you to present your ideas to your classmates and for you to help your classmates better understand some of the key concepts in the module. So, while you won’t be marked for this presentation, please plan it carefully and engage generously with your classmates.

**Group 1**, your task is:

Choose a performance you have seen and list (1) the various kinds of framing that occurred before you attended the event, and (2) those occurring at the venue, including any that were part of the performance itself. Consider how these guided or inflected your experience. How would a different kind of venue, or a different author, more or less famous, have altered your expectations or reading? If the piece had been staged in an unconventional space, with none of the usual keys to indicate the nature of the event, how would you have responded?

**Group 6 and Group 11**, your task is:

Place before the class 3 objects that you have chosen: one which is not usually considered to have an aesthetic dimension (ie: a chair), one which is (ie: a vase), and one which you have seen used as a stage prop in a performance (you may have to imagine this one, or bring in something similar).

Using your own responses as a starting point, discuss how different types of frames, or the lack of them, determine the way you see the objects. Would you read the painting or vase differently if it were on a stage? How would your perception of the chair change if it were recognizably antique, or known to be the work of an esteemed craftsman? If it were placed on a plinth in a museum, would you look for different qualities in it? Indeed, would you find them, and if so, why?

Note: With this task please ensure you don’t bring in the same objects as the other group.
5. Summary of relevant data and feedback on student learning.

Despite the concerns outlined above, and the difficulties and pressures encountered, the results of the questionnaire were overwhelmingly (and surprisingly) positive. Only twenty-five questionnaires were returned; a disappointingly small number, largely due to the poor turnout at the final lecture of the semester. These are provided in Appendix C.

In Figure 4.4 the results of the quantitative section of the questionnaire are outlined and, as is clear, students 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' with almost all the statements listed. Two notable deviations from this trend relate to the seminar exercises and presentations. Firstly, there was a distinct degree of ambivalence as to how 'challenging' the seminar exercises were. Secondly, a small number of students were ambivalent about the 'helpfulness' of the seminar presentations. Arguably this relates more to students' experience of listening to other groups' presentations than making their own group presentation.

Figure 4.4 Quantitative results from the feedback questionnaire

(1 = Strongly Agree 5= Strongly Disagree)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The seminar exercises were helpful</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The seminar exercises were challenging</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The group seminar presentations were helpful</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening to other groups' presentations was helpful</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The experience of making a presentation was helpful</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt comfortable voicing my opinion and asking questions in my small group</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The instructions for the seminar exercises and presentation tasks were clearly worded</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I found the feedback provided by staff in seminars was helpful</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What was encouraging in the questionnaires was the range of responses to the three more qualitatively oriented questions asking students what they found most positive and negative about the seminars and how they thought they could be improved. The positive responses frequently highlighted student's experiences of discussion and interaction with members of their group as well as comments about how preparing for a presentation led to helpful dialogue. Some responses were as follows:

- 'I enjoyed working in smaller groups. The different opinions helped create an idea.'
- 'I was able to ask questions to my group without feeling embarrassed'
- 'It helped me to better understand some of the jargon and things we were learning that I didn't quite understand. I also found talking about the performances we'd seen helpful as it made me think about aspects of the performance I hadn't thought about.'
- 'Being put into the position of having to prepare a presentation made us work more productively.'

The negative responses highlighted problems of repetition and quality related to other groups' presentations, as well as lack of attendance amongst some students. Some responses were as follows:

- 'Some presentations were unclear.'
- 'Some of the presentations were too similar and repetitive.'
- 'I was the only person in my group!'
- ‘Sometimes my group were unfriendly and not enthusiastic, so working as a team with some people was difficult.’

Suggestions for how to improve the seminar sessions expressed a desire for more seminar activities (instead of presentations), a different room, more teaching staff involved in the seminars and a more proactive approach to attendance monitoring. Some responses were as follows:
• 'Having more concrete seminar group tasks to do': 'Reviewing a review', 'Choices in staging a fragment' and 'Advertisements.'
• 'More work in groups - such as the analysis of an advertisement.'
• 'Having clearer seminar tasks. Weren't always sure what we were meant to be discussing.'
• 'Making them like normal seminars - in smaller individual classes.'
• 'Another tutor might allow more of an open debate among students. Get more involved.'


Based on the results of the questionnaire it was clear from the students' responses that they felt their own learning was enhanced through the provision of the small group learning activities and the seminar presentations. It was also clear that the students who filled in the questionnaire also felt more comfortable voicing their own opinions and asking questions in the smaller groups and that they did benefit from greater opportunities for feedback by teaching staff. To this end the intervention was successful in ameliorating some of the possible impacts of the larger group.

Despite this, issues relating to the management of students in the large group context remained problematic. The lack of attendance and/or the adoption of surface approaches within groups was perhaps a function of the anonymity students perceived within the large group context. That the assessment remained focussed on individual work meant that there was also a lack of alignment within the module. This perhaps underpinned some of the variation in quality of group presentations. While there was a degree of peer pressure operating, there was little at stake if a presentation was of a poor quality.
7. Comments on implications for professional development of teaching practice.

This teaching cycle, like the first, was tactical in the sense that it largely operated within the framework of a pre-existing module. Ideally small group seminars, if run well, would provide a better learning environment for students, and in a subsequent curriculum review this module has been redesigned so as to provide this. However, given that this was not an option for me at the time this teaching cycle was undertaken, my experience has highlighted that (a) students enjoy the opportunity of working in smaller more self-directed groups, and (b) that small group teaching activities can still work well within large group contexts, thereby ameliorating some of the possible ill effects of that large group context. Furthermore, I also realised that group work that isn’t directly tied to assessment is still viewed favourably by students, especially if it creates a forum for reflection on key concepts.

Building on this, the key implication of this teaching cycle for my own continuing professional development is to consider how opportunities for group work and other small group learning activities that facilitate student interaction and reflection might be provided within and outside the classroom. The use of Virtual Learning Environments, including Blackboard, and social networking sites like Facebook, might offer opportunities for asynchronous interaction and feedback as an adjunct to regular contact time.