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TYSTYSGRIF UWCHRADDEDDIG ADDYSGU MEWN ADDYSG UWCH

POSTGRADUATE CERTIFICATE IN TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Cylch Dysgu 1 | Teaching Cycle 1

Aligning Seminars with Learning Outcomes and Assessment Tasks

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Teaching Cycle 1, February-June 2009: Aligning Seminars with Learning Outcomes and Assessment Tasks

1. An account of the issue, including reference to relevant literature

My first teaching cycle focused on the design of seminars on a second year undergraduate module that, at the time of the cycle, I had co-ordinated for the previous two years, Film Genre Study. I had taken this module over from another colleague who had originally designed the seminar sessions and, over the first two years of co-ordinating the module, I had run the seminar sessions more or less as they had originally been designed. However, I had started to become concerned that the relationship of these seminars to the learning outcomes and assessment tasks that the students have to complete for this module were not particularly clear. Furthermore, I was also concerned about the way that, in the past, I had conducted these seminars. In the previous two years, I had tended to guide the students too much (and do too much work for them) by using a particular tactic to facilitate seminar discussions - namely, providing lists of claims from required seminar reading (written in my own words) which the students then had to discuss and evaluate in groups. This is a tactic which I had employed in my seminar teaching in general over these two years and, when my mentor observed me teaching a postgraduate seminar in February 2008, he noted that this tactic was allowing students to rely on their tutor to do the work of summarising and identifying the key claims in the reading, leaving students with only one task - to evaluate the claims and summaries that I had presented them with.

For my first teaching cycle, I therefore redesigned my seminars with the following ideas and principles in mind:

John Biggs has noted that teachers need to 'specify the desired outcomes of... [their] teaching in terms not only of topic content', but also in terms of 'the level of understanding we want students to achieve'. By doing this, Biggs argues that teachers can then 'set up an environment that maximises the likelihood that students will engage in the activities designed to achieve the intended outcomes' (2005: 2). This suggested approach seemed an appropriate method for addressing the problem I had identified with the design of this module's seminars in previous years - namely that
the purpose of the seminar (in relation to the module's learning outcomes and assessment tasks) had not always been as clear as it could have been.

The two assessment tasks for this module ask the students to illustrate their ability to do the following:

1. To define key concepts and to understand the context in which such concepts have been used and employed.
2. To understand and identify the ways in which these concepts have impacted on how the horror film has been discussed and how claims about the horror film have been made.
3. To associate these concepts and theoretical claims with the positions of different theorists.
4. To be able to therefore contrast and compare the claims of, and the concepts employed by, these different theorists.
5. To be able to construct a convincing argument which draws on and utilises skills 1-4.

2. Proposed Teaching Practice, Intended Outcomes and Method of Evaluation

I therefore redesigned this module's seminars so that they didn't just serve as a way of further discussing content raised and outlined in lectures, but also served as opportunities to rehearse and practice skills that the module's students would need to employ in their module assessments. This was a development of the initial poster presentation that I completed during the PGCTHE induction (see Appendix 2 in this portfolio). Here, I had planned, in my first teaching cycle, to explore methods which could encourage more interaction and discussion amongst students in the lectures on this module, by asking students, at particular moments in the lecture, to focus on a particular task or question (in pairs). These tasks would be varied each week, to enable students to draw on and develop different skills associated with the module and its learning outcomes. However, after some thought, I decided that a redesign of the seminars was a more pressing issue, in terms of relating but also distinguishing the
module's lectures from the seminars, and aligning the aims and purposes of the seminars with the module's learning outcomes and assessment tasks.

Consequently, I tried to redesign the module's seminars in such a way that the first seminar started with and focused on one basic skill, and then each subsequent seminar would encourage students to continue to employ this skill but also develop further and more complex skills. The first seminar preparation task asked the students to produce a brief summary which should attempt to define two key concepts from the required reading in their own words, and then to explain in the seminar, also in their own words, how these concepts were linked, in the reading, to the study of film genre. I hoped that this, in itself, would enable students to practice the skills of defining concepts and then considering the relevance of these concepts to the central topic of the module as a whole (film genre study). In the seminar itself, the students were then asked to work together, and consider how these concepts might be useful (and what they might reveal) when considering the historical development of particular film genres. The key rationale for this approach was that this would allow, at this early stage of the module, for some initial formative assessment, in that, as Bransford et al argue, by encouraging students to make their understanding of the role and purpose of key concepts 'visible to themselves, their peers, and their teacher' (2000: 19), this can then allow the teacher to provide appropriate guidance and allow the students themselves to identify gaps in their own understanding.

The module's other seminars were then redesigned in order to create opportunities for the students to practice other, more complex skills which they would need to employ in the module's assessments. The second seminar asked students, in advance, to read and identify what, for them, the key claims made in the required reading were and then, in the seminar itself, to screen a relevant film clip of their choice and explain how this clip illustrated some of the claims they had identified in the reading. The fourth seminar then asked students to identify what, for them, were the key claims in two pieces of required reading (with the aim being to encourage them to summarise the main arguments of the required reading in a less guided way than in seminars one and three), and then to compare and contrast the claims in this reading in the seminar itself. Finally, the fifth seminar asked the students to make their own case for why a
particular film could be conceived of as 'contemporary', using the required reading, their knowledge about the historical contexts which inform the development of the horror film (acquired from the lectures) and textual evidence from one particular film to support this. The intention here was that this task would allow the students to practice expressing themselves clearly and persuasively (as in seminar two), but this time by drawing on arguments from a wider range of reading (as they would be asked to do this in their second assessment for the module).

In addition to this 'stepping stone' approach to practising key skills required for assessments, all five seminars were redesigned in order to reflect the following principles:

1. In all five seminars, students would be able to further test their understanding of the reading, as well as being given opportunities to critically evaluate key claims, by applying key concepts and claims to particular films screened on the module. The key rationale for this approach was not only that it would help to illustrate to students the way in which the reading can and should be used in assessments (and encourage what Bransford et al. term 'deep learning' by illustrating the usability of knowledge), but that it would also encourage knowledge transfer (by encouraging students to apply concepts and claims to different film examples from different historical contexts, and thus evaluate the strength and flexibility of these concepts and claims).

2. Related to this, by linking concepts, theories and topics to different key skills in each seminar, the seminar redesign aimed to test Bransford et al.’s claim that 'students' abilities to acquire organised sets of... skills are... enhanced when they are connected to meaningful problem-solving activities, and when students are helped to understand why, when and how those... skills are relevant' (2000: 23). Consequently, I aimed, throughout the module, to make it clear to students that the seminars would serve as an opportunity for them to develop skills that they would need to continue to employ throughout their undergraduate degree, but that the seminars would also serve to illustrate how these skills could be employed effectively in this particular module's
assessments and when they should be employed (e.g. in which part of an essay argument and in response to what kind of assessment task).

3. Throughout the time in which I have been teaching seminars, a perennial problem has been that students often fail to read the required reading and complete the required preparation task. This is an important issue, in that the success and productiveness of each seminar depends on the students' willingness to complete such tasks. This problem has led me in the past to rely on 'fail-safe' measures, such as completing and circulating a list of claims from reading for students to discuss in the seminar. This has meant that an important opportunity for students to practice key skills of summarising and constructing arguments (which can aid understanding and allow them and the tutor to monitor their ability to understand the claims and concepts within reading) has been lost. During this teaching cycle, my aim was not to employ my usual 'fail-safe' strategy and to instead present seminar preparation tasks, to students, as important and valuable opportunities to practice important skills necessary for the assessments. By emphasising this, and the fact that their learning and understanding would develop more effectively if they engaged with reading themselves (before discussing this reading with the tutor), I aimed, through this teaching cycle, to test the extent to which my approaches and strategies might impact on the students' willingness to complete the required seminar preparation independently of the tutor and outside of the seminar context.

I planned to use one central method to evaluate the effectiveness of my teaching cycle project - namely, the employment of Angel0 and Cross's strategy (1993) of the 'one minute paper' at the end of each seminar session (which involves asking each student to note down, on a piece of paper, the most important thing they had learned or gained from that particular seminar, and then handing this to me). By doing this, I aimed to acquire focused feedback which wouldn't ask students to assess how successful or effective I was as a seminar tutor but would instead ask them to consider what the seminar had achieved, for them, in terms of their learning and understanding. In addition to this, I also aimed to assess the impact of my seminar redesign on the student's learning experience on the module in a more indirect way, by considering
how frequently the seminar design was mentioned in the module feedback forms that the students were required to complete at the end of the module.

3. **Summary of feedback on, and evaluation of, student learning**

(N.B. The one minute papers that are directly quoted and referred to in the rest of the report are included in this portfolio, as Appendix 3)

As a result of this cycle, I discovered that using the 'one minute paper' approach to assess the impact of a seminar redesign on student learning was absolutely invaluable, in a number of ways. Firstly, I discovered that this approach was extremely effective in relation to Bransford's et al’s idea of encouraging students to make their understanding of the role and purpose of key concepts 'visible to themselves... and their teacher'. The one-minute papers written at the end of the first seminar (on concepts) not only allowed me to check the degree to which the students had understood these concepts and their relevance to film genre, but also there was a clear sense that students benefited from doing this - that it actually allowed them a moment, at the end of the seminar, to assess what they had learnt and to test themselves, by attempting to write down what they now understood about these concepts, their meaning and their relevance. I had been concerned that students would become irritated with having to complete this paper at the end of each seminar, but they seemed extremely willing to do so in every case, because it seemed to allow them the space to be meta-cognitive and think about what they had learnt and how their understanding had progressed during the course of that particular seminar session. There was also some evidence, in responses particularly to the first seminar, that focusing on just one or two concepts, and then applying these to different genres and different films, had encouraged students to think about what Bransford et al call 'the usability' of the knowledge they had acquired from the required reading and the seminar. For instance, in response to the question 'what is the most important thing you have learned or gained from this seminar', the following answers were given in two of the one minute papers written at the end of the first seminar:
• 'by going through semantic and thematic elements it helped to distinguish how each relates to each other, forming a deeper understanding of a range of genres' (seminar 1)

• 'not to immediately isolate one genre from the next, but rather think about more deeply the possible links/relationships both thematically and formally between genres' (seminar 1).

Secondly, I deliberately decided to not ask the students, in the text at the top of the one minute paper, about the most important skill they had learnt during each seminar session, but instead to just ask what was the most important thing that they had learnt or gained. By doing this, it enabled me to assess the degree to which the design of the seminars (and their focus on developing learning skills as much as learning about film genre) impacted on the learning experience of students in these seminars. I was therefore pleased to see that many students focused, particularly in the later seminars where they were asked to summarise or compare particular pieces of academic reading, on the skills they had practised during these seminars rather than (or as well as) specific content-based issues relating to film genre, and, in some cases, on how the development of these skills would carry across to their assessed work for the module. For instance, in response to the question 'what is the most important thing you have learned or gained from this seminar', the following answers were given in four of the one minute papers written at the end of the third and fourth seminars:

• 'The ability to look at the similarities and differences between different arguments and use each to test the strengths and limitations of the other' (seminar 4)

• 'How to relate and use claims in relation to a specific film and how to look for evidence which will help with the next essay' (seminar 4)

• 'How to go about readings and relating them to a film text in order to create a viewpoint from different angles' (seminar 4)

• 'To always weigh up the pros and cons of academic writing when doing the essays' (seminar 3)
Thirdly, and again going back to Bransford et al’s idea of making the development of students’ understanding and learning visible to their teacher, some of the comments written on the one minute papers also allowed me to clarify certain issues and points which students had misunderstood, as a result of the seminars. For instance, a number of students wrote comments, on some of their one-minute papers, which related to the idea of ‘the truth’. One student stated that they had learnt ‘to not take scholar opinion as absolute truth. To dissect all opinion until truth can be found’ (seminar 3), while another stated that they had learnt to ‘challenge everything, every theory by using films as evidence’ (seminar 4). These comments allowed me to email the students on the module, and provide clarification on how they were expected to engage with academic arguments in their essay (i.e. that essays should not be primarily about looking for the ‘true’ argument or just challenging every academic argument for the sake of it, but instead about weighing up the applicability and persuasiveness of different arguments by applying them to specific film examples). The one-minute papers therefore allowed me to assess the level of understanding of each student who had present at a particular seminar, and to provide further guidance to those who specifically needed it, in relation to what was required of them for their assessed essays.

There were also unintended outcomes, in relation to these one-minute papers. I know that, in the past, I have always approached seminars by thinking solely about my relationship with the students (how they will respond to me, whether they will engage in discussion with me, whether they will have confidence in me as a teacher and so on). However, one comment from a student made me think about seminars from a different perspective. In the first seminar, I asked students to pick one genre of their choice, join up with others who had also picked this genre, and then consider the significance of the key concepts in relation to that chosen genre. In response to this one student noted, in their one minute paper for this session, that ‘I am also less scared of the other students in the group (as stupid as this sounds - this was a good ice breaker!’ (seminar 1). What this highlighted for me was the fact that students are often just as concerned (if not more concerned) about their relationship with other students in the room than their individual relationship with the tutor. This response therefore enabled me to think about and acknowledge the need to be more sensitive about students’ relationships with each other. For instance, it made me think further
about how this issue could be addressed by encouraging students to move around the room and sit with other students in the group to discuss certain issues, which, potentially, could allow students to feel more comfortable speaking out and discussing issues in this particular seminar group environment with these particular students.

Finally, I should note one failure on my part (in relation to the original aims of this teaching cycle). Old habits die hard, and, over the weeks, I found myself still producing my own lists of claims from reading to give out to students as a back-up, in case they didn’t complete the reading and preparation tasks themselves. However, I altered this in one key way - I didn’t summarise claims from reading in my own words, but instead gave out a series of quotations from the reading for students to consider and discuss. This meant that I wasn’t doing any interpreting for the students but, instead, was encouraging them to look at the quotes and make sense of them, using their own notes on the reading to help them. Consequently, these sheets seemed to help keep discussion focused, but also helped them to tackle some of these quotes, break down what could be seen as intimidating and complex reading and theory, and feel confident (a key word that came up in the feedback) discussing and evaluating academic concepts and academic jargon. For instance, in response to the question 'what is the most important thing you have learned or gained from this seminar', the following answers were given in four of the one minute papers written at the end of the first, third and fourth seminars:

- 'Sometimes I find it hard to summarise academic reading in an essay and this seminar has taught me to break down claims and work through them one by one' (seminar 4)
- 'Helped to understand terms, which I wasn't completely sure about' (seminar 1)
- 'I have managed to clarify exactly what is meant by the term "semantic", which was something I was unsure of after reading the set text preparation for the seminar' (seminar 1)
- 'I gained a stronger understanding of Repression, especially within Horror films. The sheet with quotes on helped me to understand the specific ideas and links to repression... ' (seminar 3)
Consequently, while I haven’t broken my bad habit, this cycle has helped me to adjust my previous teaching approach in a way that, on the basis of these and many of the other one minute papers, appears to have encouraged more active learning from the students, but without intimidating or overwhelming them.

4. Conclusions, and comments on the implications for the professional development of my teaching practice

While the one-minute paper was employed as my feedback strategy in this particular teaching cycle (rather than an issue or strategy which centrally informed the design of this cycle), it has proved to be absolutely central in terms of the teaching cycle's aims and in terms of the general development of my teaching strategies and methods. The one-minute paper not only allowed me to evaluate the effectiveness of my seminar redesign, but also to clarify issues and points that remained unclear to students as the module went on, to consider perceptions of seminars from the student perspective, and, in itself and as an exercise, to encourage students, on a week by week basis, to reflect independently on the development of their learning skills, their levels of confidence with certain issues and tasks, and on their own understanding of what a seminar is for and what can be gained from it.

At the time of writing, I am now in the third year of running these seminars in this way on the film genre study module. The 2009 redesign of the film genre study seminars, conducted for this first teaching cycle, is still in place in 2010, and it has had a number of positive long-term effects on the development of my teaching practice. Importantly, this redesign has enabled me to make this module (which I had inherited from previous colleagues) my own and to run it in a way that suits my teaching style and enables me to articulate to the students, clearly and effectively, the role of the seminars in relation to the learning outcomes of the module, the module's lectures and the module's assessment tasks. The 2009 cohort singled out the seminars (as a vehicle for exploring the reading and developing the skills needed for the module assignments) in some of the module evaluation forms I received at the end of the module, with comments made by students including:

- 'the seminars were a great forum for exploring the material'
• 'the seminars were great, because they made me feel comfortable and relaxed about discussing those topics'
• 'The way the seminars were structured allowed us to bring our critical assessment of each topic and discuss, with different practical examples to help illustrate peoples ideas in each seminar. This technique was very helpful in writing the essays'
• 'The seminars really helped to grasp a better understanding of themes'

The 2009 redesign of the seminars has also helped me to clarify in my own mind, as the module's coordinator and seminar tutor, what the purpose and function of these seminars are and to articulate this to students. For instance, I often now note to students, at the beginning of particular seminars on this module, that, if they want to critique academic arguments in an essay, that they need to do this by applying and testing these academic claims on film examples, and that this seminar is a forum for practising these skills and processes. Finally, it has also been notable that, over the last two years that the module has run, the number of queries I’ve received from students who are confused or unclear about the requirements of the module assignments has decreased significantly. While other factors may have informed this decrease in queries (for instance, the commitment and work ethic of each student cohort), it remains an encouraging indication that the module's content and teaching sessions are now more effectively aligned with the module's learning outcomes and assessment tasks.