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Teaching Cycle 1:

"Clearing the muddiest point" - podcasts as interactive feedback

Module overview and account of issue

TP21420 Applied Theatre (formally DR25910 Applied Theatre and Theatre in Education) is a second year 20-credit mixed-model module intended to introduce students to the broad practice of Applied Theatre.

Upon appointment to Aberystwyth University, I was tasked with revising and updating the existing module to reflect the diverse range of practice and practitioners active within the domain of applied theatre - a shift signalled, at least in part, by the transition of title from 'theatre-in-education' to the more broadly inclusive and perhaps problematic 'applied theatre'.

The revised module was designed to provide students with a knowledge and understanding of the principles, practice and variety of Applied Theatre forms, and its relationship to theatre, education and theatre studies. Through combining practical workshops with theoretical readings and case studies of practitioners, the module was intended to expand students' knowledge of contemporary theatre practice, and enhance their ability to analyse the complex relationships between theory and practice. Accordingly, the module proceeds through an analysis of the concepts and practice inherent in the work of British and international practitioners (both past and present), with the intention of developing in students a practical understanding of the skills and process involved in the creation of Applied Theatre. The module would be assessed through a written essay component (2500 words) and the presentation of a 'fragment' of applied theatre performance (effectively, a 15-minute extended pitch for a larger performance work).

The term mixed-mode refers to a combination of practice and theory-oriented teaching - in this module, a mixture of lecture seminars and practical workshops.
Though conscious of the problematic tendency identified by Cousins (2006, pA) as ‘a tendency among academic teachers ... to stuff their curriculum with content, burdening themselves with the task of transmitting vast amounts of knowledge bulk’, the module had been broadened to include a much wider range of performance modes, issues and theories - partly to seek parity with the level of study in comparative modules at other institutions but primarily to reflect the developments within the professional field of practice.

As such, the following issues were of primary concern in designing my first teaching cycle:

though the scope of the module had increased, the timetabling of teaching space / contact hours had remained static at one of lecture and one hour of workshop per week.

The number of students on the module was reasonably large (50+) and I would act as primary / sole instructor.

structurally, the module was seen as the natural pre-requisite for more independent, student-led and practice-based applied theatre projects in the final year of the degree.

the ‘survey’ structure of the module (moving relatively swiftly from topic to topic) might encourage students to adopt a ‘surface’ approach to learning.²

Accordingly, I was conscious that

I would have limited time to return to earlier elements of the module (either to clarify challenging concepts or provide further detail practitioner case-studies).

The relative popularity of the module and concurrently high ratio of student-to-staff would demand that I devised a strategy that was not primarily predicated on one-to-one interaction.

the independent nature of more advanced modules in the third year of study meant that key concepts (and misconceptions about the same) needed to be addressed at this stage, not least because staff presence in the later modules would take a more supervisory role.

See John Biggs (1999) for discussion of insufficient time to engage with tasks as a possible factor influencing student approaches to learning.
A plan highlighting proposed teaching practice, intended outcomes and methods of evaluation

In response to this situation, I planned to create a series of podcasts based on student queries which would supplement the contact hours of lectures and workshops. The contents of these podcasts would be based on a 'muddiest point' exercise, derived from the work of Frederick Mosteller, with the intention of assessing what students were having trouble understanding and aggregating feedback on items that proved confusing (Mosteller 1989). Following Angelo and Cross, data analysis of the muddiest feedback would be kept relatively simple, based in the sorting of response into related groups (1993, p. 156-7) The podcasts – recorded and edited using open-source software, Audacity - would be delivered using the institutional VLE (virtual learning environment), Blackboard, and uptake would be tracked using in-built statistics tools. Further feedback on student use and opinion would be obtained at the end of module using a discursive survey.

Though informed by the decision taken by HE institutions (including University College London, the Open University and Trinity College Dublin) to make lecture material available the non-charging 'iTunes University,' a free education area within the iTunes online music and video store, this plan also recognized criticism of what has been termed 'the ipodification of education'. Amongst others, Tara Brabazon has strongly criticised the rationales sometimes offered for the provision of pre-recorded lecture material - challenging in particular what she characterises as the rhetoric of 'flexible learning' which might be achieved via the internet. Brabazon argues:

Good teachers-who are not satisfied with students learning 'by themselves' or being permitted/encouraged/facilitated to miss lectures-must transgress and transform this digital diatribe to stretch ourselves and aim for higher standards. Learning is not 'done' via the internet. Learning is not 'done' through iPod earphones. Learning is not 'done' in a classroom. All learning is conducted in a context that constructs a scholarly and structured relationship between data, information and knowledge.
(Brabazon 2006)

See ‘UK university lectures on iTunes,’ BBC News, 3 June 2008.
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/7431918.stm
In response, Brabazon emphasizes the value of a 'network' of modes of engagement (analogue and digital, sound, vision and corporeality) which might summon 'a textured landscape of scholarship.'

Accordingly, this teaching cycle sought to locate podcasting within a varied teaching practice - where the digital does not replace other modes, but instead supports, extends and complements learning made possible in the lecture room and workshop. As such, this intervention's teaching practice sought to resemble (at least in part) Gardner Campbell’s more utopian image of the student 'preparing both emotionally and intellectually for class by listening to a podcast on the drive to school, then reinforcing the day’s learning by listening to another podcast, or perhaps the same podcast, on the drive back home' (Campbell 2005).

Practice and interim modification

At the end of the first, introductory lecture, I carried out a version of Mostellor's muddiest point exercise: coloured Post-It notes were distributed to the students, who were asked to write down the point of the lecture which had been least clear. At the end of the session, I collected the Post-Its, and collated the results (see figure 1). I observed that

though a small number of queries recurred with some frequency, the breadth of queries indicated that the first session may have sought to cover too wide a subject area.

the selection of queries to respond to required active criteria: certain questions would be addressed directly and in greater detail in the following lectures, while others had the status of threshold concepts or 'conceptual gateways' (Meyer and Land, 2005, p.273) to more advanced thinking, and needed to be addressed immediately.

A selection of these queries - primarily those which would not be addressed directly in later sessions - were used as the basis for a podcast, which was recorded and uploaded to Blackboard.  

Please see Appendix C for a CD containing sample podcasts from the teaching cycle.
Through that process, I became conscious that different students were responding to the same task in different ways. Though prompted by the same instruction to write down what they perceived to be the muddiest point, responses appeared to describe different needs within the learning process. The primary distinction was between appeals for clarification (e.g. 'what’s the difference between applied theatre and TIE?') and appeals for further information (e.g. 'more into didactic theatre').

In response, I undertook two measures when repeating the muddiest point exercise later that semester:

in the podcast, I followed responses to muddiest point enquiries with indications as to where students might pursue further research or background reading
in the classroom, I began to ask two explicit questions: both 'what was the muddiest point?' and 'what would you like to hear more about?'

Relevant data and feedback

a) An attempt was made to capture data for three original podcasts during autumn of 2008. Unfortunately, due to an error in setting up the original podcast within the Blackboard environment, only partial statistics were available. A repeated exercise in autumn 2009 - for which tracking was enabled - produced a fuller picture of student's use of the podcast, and is discussed below.

In a cohort of 56 students, the first and second podcasts received 66 and 51 hits respectively: the vast majority of students accessed the podcast once, while a small number (3-5) accessed the podcast more than once. The audience for the third episode was much smaller, with only 7 students accessing the podcast. This data - excerpted below - also suggested that students were most likely to listen to the podcast on a Monday (the day on which workshops were scheduled), or on a Thursday (the day which lectures were timetabled).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Access / Day of Week</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Day of Week</td>
<td>Hits</td>
<td>Percent</td>
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<td>SUN</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15.15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>MON</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>22.73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TUE</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9.09%</td>
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<tr>
<td>WED</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.03%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THU</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRI</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12.12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAT</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Figure 2: Access / day of week data for podcast 1, autumn 2009.
b) Feedback was also sought through a pro-forma departmental end-of-module questionnaire (see appendix B). Response to the presence of the podcast on the module was uniformly positive.

Indicative sample responses to question 3, ‘What for you was the most positive aspect of this module?’

I loved the podcast & would have liked to have that more often.

Podcasts and links for research proved useful

Podcasts were very useful.

Podcasts on Blackboard!

Podcasts / PowerPoints online were very useful.

The podcasts [were] very useful.

Podcasts and info on blackboard.

It is also relevant to note that responses to question 4 ('What for you was the least positive aspect of this module?') and 5 ('Can you suggest at least one way in which this module can be improved?') made frequent mention of the limited contact hours on the module.

Indicative responses to questions 4 and 5

More practical time

More lectures

Seminars to accompany the lectures

More time

Evaluation of student learning experience

The patterns of use revealed by the podcast data suggest three primary implications for the student learning experience. First, the podcast was used as a point of clarity and continuity within the module itself, in direct relationship to the weekly lecture and workshop material. It had only minimal secondary use as a longer-term reference aid. I would speculate that the
third podcast, which was posted on Blackboard at the end of the module, had a much smaller audience precisely because it appeared to operate outside of the trajectory of weekly sessions.

Secondly, I would suggest, that the specific patterns of access in relationship to the timetabled sessions provides (albeit indirect) evidence that the podcast had been used in the manner imagined by Campbell- to either prepare 'emotionally and intellectually' before class, or to reinforce material afterwards.

Third, the podcast - though seemingly popular and well-received – was not perceived as replacement for contact hours in the form of either lectures or practical teaching. Similarly, the form of feedback offered by the podcast was not seen as a possible replacement for the more engaged model of seminar discussion.

There was also more informal evidence from that student cohort’s written submissions (an assessed essay of 2,500 words which required students to nominate and focus upon a particular area of applied performance practice) that inspiration had been taken from the companies and practitioners mentioned in the podcasts. In the second year of the module during which the podcasting took place, I also found fewer errors relating to threshold concepts - notably the conceptual distinction between applied theatre and theatre-in-education.

Implications for development of teaching practice

1. Though producing some useful observations and data, further research is warranted to investigate some of the conclusions and speculation presented above. While the data capture made possible through Blackboard offers a picture of web-based usage, it does not reveal how students might be using the podcast independently i.e. as a downloadable resource which might be listened to on a personal computer, or an mp3 player. As such, a focussed questionnaire or focus group may prove more productive in revealing detailed patterns of use: not only how many times (or indeed, if) a student has used the resource, but the ways in which the student has drawn on that resource to support study.

2. The different kinds of responses to the initial muddiest point query might further serve to remind that students on the edge of a threshold concept may seek further knowledge to confirm understanding. If, following Meyer and Land (2003), threshold concepts are characterized as integrative (exposing the hidden relatedness of a phenomenon) and bounded
(having frontiers) then further case studies and examples may be of particular value in assisting a student to locate and secure knowledge of a particular concept.

3. The ways in which students made self-motivated use of the muddiest point exercise might also been seen to support the conclusions reached by Anthony Chan and Mark l.W. Lee in characterising podcasting as the means through which students might both address misconceptions about material, and address their own anxieties about knowledge and understanding (Chan and Lee, 2005). Accordingly, the feedback loop enabled by the (anonymous) responses of the muddiest point exercise might particularly assist less confident students to raise queries and advance their own learning.