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POSTGRADUATE CERTIFICATE IN TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Cylch Dygu 1 | Teaching Cycle 1

Research Dissertation Conference Report

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Teaching Cycle 1
Research Dissertation Conference Report

1. Introduction and Needs assessment:
1.1. Brief Overview of Situation:
This report will introduce, describe and evaluate a teaching intervention carried out as part of a taught undergraduate module. The module 'Research Methods and Statistics' was a 20 credit first year undergraduate course running over two semesters. There were approximately 90 students enrolled on the module. The module format involves a 50 minute lecture and a 50 minute seminar per week. A new mode of assessment was required for the research methods section of the module and I was asked to consider a potential option for the assessment. I had taught on the module for two years prior to the cycle and therefore had a good grasp of the material covered and the typical level of knowledge demonstrated by students at this stage of the undergraduate degree. In addition to this, teaching across the undergraduate degree enabled me to identify areas for development and how to appropriately focus an assessment. Assessment of the module was split into three with this assessment contributing to 33% of the overall grade.

1.2. Needs Assessment - what needs developing?
With a new assessment warranted for the module this was the driving force behind the teaching cycle. The knowledge I had built up from teaching across the degree scheme and on that module in particular for two years previously provided me with potential avenues to explore as possible options for an assessment ensuring they met the existing assessment criteria for the module and level of study.

Whilst teaching on the module in the previous years, it had become evident that by this stage of the degree the majority of students showed limited knowledge of the components of research (e.g. how research is conducted) and the importance of research methodology in producing high calibre research. Additionally, first year students had very little if any prior experience of research and this presented the students with an opportunity to do so providing some experience of the research process with real life examples.
1.3. Previous Literature

The link between research and teaching has been a debate producing varied views and opinions. It has been suggested that "university research often detracts from the quality of the teaching" (Pocklington & Tupper, 2002, p. 7), whereas others suggest that the highest quality of teaching will be apparent in those who are at the cutting edge of research and not those who may demonstrate good delivery and style reporting the findings of others (Lee, 2004). There are links between research and teaching in that research findings are integrated into teaching and can be used to teach research methods (Healey, 2005). Research is a key element of University teaching and learning, such as the completion of research projects and dissertations.

Figure 1 demonstrates how the curriculum design can be linked with the research-teaching nexus, and how teaching may take different forms depending on the emphasis of teaching. In the top half of the quadrant teaching becomes more student-focused. For example, Ashwin (2003) mentions the Oxbridge tutorial system that allows students to engage in discussion with tutors with the goal of producing three research papers or essays per fortnight. Teaching encompasses a range of techniques and classes to facilitate learning. Designing appropriate teaching is of critical importance. Trigwell and Ashwin (2003) report that students are more likely to take a surface learning approach as opposed to a deep learning approach, when tutorials or small group classes are not used to discuss the subject matter but are used to teach, explain and check student knowledge. Teaching may fit into the different quadrants of the teaching-research nexus with activities more common in certain disciplines, but the majority of University teaching falls into the bottom left quadrant where there is a greater emphasis on research content and learning is teacher focused (Healey, 2005).
The emphasis of teaching-focused approaches is to transmit research knowledge to student audiences, whereas the emphasis of student-focused approaches is to allow the development and construction of knowledge through active participation (Healey, 2005), concurring with the earlier suggestion that students learn by doing and that this can be an effective way for students to benefit from staff research (Gibbs, 1998). Biggs (2003) suggests that active learning approaches allow students to engage in deep learning, whereas transmission approaches promote surface learning. In my Department teaching fits into the different quadrants depending on the discipline and type of class. Problem-based teaching is commonly used in seminars and practical sessions; this is a form of inquiry based learning and therefore fits into the top right hand quadrant, whereas lectures tend to be structured and subject driven, falling into the bottom left quadrant. This teaching cycle fits into the research based quadrant as it was student focused, the emphasis is on research processes and problems, and it was inquiry-based.

Previous research (e.g. Dillenbourg et al., 1996) has examined learning in education and the effects of co-learners. The Cognitive Theorist Lev Vygotsky (1978) focused his attention on
how the environment affects learning suggests that the proximity of co-learners can affect development. He defined the Zones of Proximal Development as "...the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). The importance was placed on potential as opposed to actual development and how that potential may be enhanced through guidance, the coaching of others and teamwork. Collaborative learning refers to "an instruction method in which students at various performance levels work together in small groups toward a common goal" (Gokhalle, 1995, p. 22). In this case there is a students are more responsible for others success and the success of one student may help other students to become successful. Collaborative learning may take a variety of forms and are affected by situation (e.g. the different status of the individuals), the interactions (e.g. negotiations between members) and mechanisms, for example, intrinsic collaborations are likely to be stronger than extrinsic collaborations (Dillenbourg et al., 1999).

1.4. The key aims of the teaching cycle were:

(i) Provide students with the opportunity to gain knowledge of research being conducted in the Department.

(ii) Provide students with an opportunity to experience a conference.

(iii) Provide students an opportunity to engage in critical thinking.

(iv) Provide an early opportunity for students to develop their understanding of research methods from the different disciplines of the degree and develop some early research ideas.

(v) Provide an opportunity for students to collect the appropriate data.

2. Planning and justifying an intervention:

2.1. Summary of design of the teaching cycle:

This teaching cycle was to develop an assessment for the research methods module, which would provide students with the opportunity to engage in critical thinking whilst collecting data for their assignments. A research conference was scheduled where third year students presented their research dissertations to the entire sport and exercise community at Aberystwyth University. First year research methods students were required to attend, collect and report information as part of an assessment for the module. Research based teaching was employed for a number of reasons, primarily to provide students with a greater experience
and understanding of research prior to conducting their own research dissertations. This allowed students the opportunity to gather key information about projects from across the disciplines in sport and exercise science and report them through summative assessment. Feedback on the assessment (Appendix 1) and materials provided to aid students understanding was also gathered.

3. Log of Intervention:
A new form of assessment was required for the first year research methods module to support the understanding of research design, research process and key research components involved in Positivist and Interpretivist research. There are a few opportunities to collect data throughout the degree that contribute towards assessment. Therefore developing this underpinning knowledge from an early point of the degree would be beneficial across a range of areas and assessments and in general encouraging a critical approach to research from an early stage. Additionally, unless students attend a conference though their own initiative, there are no opportunities to have this experience, and this provides a different method for students to attain information (knowledge transfer). A conference was therefore organised including of a keynote speaker: Dr Polly McGuigan of Bath University and then streams of presentations from third year students on their dissertations. The conference was organised to be as similar to an academic conference as possible with 10 minute presentations and 5 minutes allocated for questions, with sessions chaired by a member of staff.

Tutor-Led Preparation for Activities
The cycle consisted of a lecture prior to the conference where students were informed about the assessment, what was required of them and provided an opportunity to use the worksheet (designed to direct students on what was the essential information), in a practice presentation. This also provided students with the opportunity to ask me questions about the assessment and to ensure all students were clear on the objectives of the assignment.

Student Focused Activity
Students attended the conference and were allowed to choose which of the presentations they wished to observe. They were required to complete a minimum of six worksheets (Appendix 2) based on presentations from the disciplines of sport and exercise science and to include them in their final report. The report was based on two of the presentations observed and was 1000 words in length. The worksheet provided to all students asked for key information from
the presentations that students were required to obtain from the conference and include in the final report (Appendix 2).

_Tutor-Led Follow up Activities_

After the conference students were asked to organise information collected from the conference and attend a workshop to discuss findings, clarify the components of research appropriate to the presentations observed and complete worksheets through group discussion (Appendix 3). Finally a seminar was designed to allow students to discuss their findings with me ensuring all information was obtained and the requirements of the assessment were clear (Appendix 4). Students were required to submit a 1000 word report in paper format and on blackboard, which included the completed worksheets from the conference. Students were then asked to complete a feedback sheet reflecting on how useful and appropriate they found the worksheet and the conference experience (Appendix 5).

4. Evaluation and Reflection:

4.1. Student Feedback Received:

An evaluation sheet was designed to gather student feedback about the dissertation conference activity comprising of six questions:

1. How useful was the dissertation conference?
2. How useful was the worksheet?
3. Did the worksheet help to facilitate your understanding of the different studies?
4. How much did the worksheet help you to complete your assignment?
5. Do you think the worksheet would be useful in future?
6. If anything, is there anything you would change about the worksheet?

As this was a new assignment for the module, I was keen to gauge student perceptions of the dissertation conference and the worksheet designed to help students identify the most important information from the studies and how useful that was to completing the assignment. The first five questions were designed to gather quantitative feedback using a Likert-type response scale (1 = low and 10 high). Question 6 was included to gather more detailed qualitative response using an open ended question specifically about the worksheet, with the potential of altering the worksheet for future use.
The feedback responses were good overall; however, it is apparent that there is room for improvement (figure 1). Students perceived the dissertation conference as useful (M = 7.93), with the most frequent response 8 out of 10 (48.3%). Response to the usefulness of the worksheet was good (M = 6.69) with the most frequent responses 7/8 out of 10 (54%). A similar response was observed for whether the worksheet facilitated the students understanding of the different studies presented, with 58.6% of students responding with a 7/8 out of 10. The mean score for how much the worksheet aided the write up of the assignment was 6.79, with the highest frequency of scores 8 out of 10 and finally for how useful the worksheet would be in the future (M = 6.69), with 54.9% of responses between 7 and 9 out of 10.

Figure 1: Student feedback on the dissertation conference and worksheet

Feedback about what students would change about the worksheet provided some useful information mainly about the structure. A number of responses were to provide "more room, space for extra notes". In reflection more room should have been provided for students to gain as much information as possible for each of the key elements identified on the worksheet. Responses indicated that the worksheet designed to direct student focus towards specific elements of the presentations was useful and the only issue was the structure, for example "Do have the same questions but just have a blank sheet to write info down as this way you can get more information".
4.2. Student Attainment:
The average mark for the assignment was 51.5% with a standard deviation of 18.2. This mark was higher than the class average for the overall module of 49% and within 5% of the other two pieces of assessment for the module. I therefore believe that this was an appropriate assessment given the proximity of the three assessment averages. The average mark for this module does tend to be lower than other modules, which I feel is because much of the information is new and can be challenging for students.

4.3. Personal Reflections:
The research dissertation conference report was a good assessment and provided opportunities for students to gain knowledge of research in the Department and to critically evaluate Positivist and Interpretivist research. I believe this teaching cycle also allowed students to develop their applied understanding, put theory into practice, learn from others experiences of research, learn about real life examples and provide an opportunity for critical analysis of research. The dissertation conference worked very well, allowing students opportunities to collect data in a different way to what is generally used in the Department and provided the opportunity to experience a conference, which many undergraduate students do not get the chance to do.

Students engaged with the assessment and the activities designed for the teaching sessions. Students were provided with the opportunity for choice, in deciding which research talks to use as part of their assignments and to engage in active learning which Biggs (2003) suggests promotes deep learning. Autonomy is one of the three basic psychological needs of the Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 1985), which suggests that we need to have the freedom to determine our own behaviour and whether autonomy is experienced affects internal motivation, which is likely to influence student engagement with a task.

As part of the teaching cycle, students had opportunities to engage in collaborative learning, by working as groups to discuss the studies they had observed. I felt that the students demonstrated critical thinking both in class and also in their reports; supporting previous research (e.g. Gokhalle, 1995; Totten et al., 1991) suggesting that the discussions, clarification of ideas and evaluation of ideas that occur as a result of collaborative learning foster the development of critical thinking. In addition to peer learning, this process allowed the 1st year students to have a tangible example of what will be expected of them in two
years. Vygotsky’s (1978) suggests that it is the experiences and interactions with others that help someone to learn and although this does not mean that any interaction will result in learning, I believe that many of the students learnt from this experience.

I believe that these experiences are useful for student learning and this teaching cycle provided an opportunity for students to develop different skills such as their critical thinking. Experiential Learning Theory states six propositions that are shared by notable scholars such as Jean Piaget and Carl Rogers. One of the propositions is that the primary goal of improving learning in Higher Education should be on engaging students in a process that best enhances their learning which also allows students to receive feedback on their efforts (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). I feel that the experiences students gained from this teaching cycle went some way to achieving this, for example, students had opportunities to acquire feedback from myself throughout the cycle and from peers.

5. Implications
Overall, the dissertation conference report proved to be a useful assessment. The rationale for the dissertation conference report was that a new research methods assessment was required for the module. The results obtained suggest that this assessment would be useful to implement in the future as an assessment in this module, though some alterations to the worksheet need to be made. I also believe that the use of research as a tool for teaching can be used more effectively; for example, students’ knowledge of good research methodology and the characteristics of Positivist and Interpretivist paradigms was reinforced by learning about research studies (critical, research in action), and therefore I believe this would be a useful addition to the conventional teaching experience of a lecture. In future years I intend to keep this assessment as part of the module, given the positive learning experiences I believe students had and I intend to develop certain elements identified on the evaluation sheets to improve the learning experience.