The benefits of negotiating student versus staff control over learning

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Abstract

The value of increasing student input to learning opportunity design issues was explored through an action research project. In response to student-identified learning needs, a learning session on a first-year undergraduate research methods module was re-designed. The learning outcomes of two parallel student groups (one experiencing the original session, the other receiving the re-designed session) were compared by quantitative analysis. A significant improvement in assessment grades was found for the group receiving the re-designed session. Brief qualitative analysis of student feedback revealed this group's increased positive course perceptions. The action research project outcomes are discussed within the context of student versus staff control over learning, highlighting the mutual benefits of reflective practice for newer learning facilitators.

Encouraging effective learning

Encouraging students to learn in the manner that theoreticians and practitioners wish them to learn involves a consideration of many factors. Ramsden (1992) and Marsh (1987) suggest that these include a variety of teaching methods and environments, making clear links between aims, objectives and assessments, selecting content for a course/session and integrating it within the programme of study as a whole. These all have one thing in common. They are largely under the control of the staff of the institution and virtually pre-determined prior to the student's arrival. In contrast, Gibbs (1992) argues enhancing student input on matters of content and design can facilitate effective deep learning. This rationale underpins the use of small group and discussion work.

Such learning environments commonly feature tasks intended to encourage students to generate their own material. Ross and Sicoly (1979) have shown that self-generated material is better remembered. Remembering is the first step to understanding and relating material. This activity is essential if students are eventually to critically evaluate and discuss – common instructions in many forms of assessment.

Combining group work and discussion forums clearly linked to objectives and assessments can foster what Amabile (1985) calls *intrinsic motivation*. Such motivation, founded upon identifying the relevance of the material to the assessment and learning objectives, can enhance creativity and general performance on assessed tasks. Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier and Ryan (1991) illustrate how *extrinsic motivation*, arising from students learning only what they are told to learn to gain an assessment, can result in significantly poorer performance. Intrinsic motivation can be further enhanced by increasing student control over session content. Obviously it is not possible to take this concept of student control to the extreme. There are, quite rightly, certain constraints (professional and practical) upon what must be covered in any programme for any discipline.

Obviously there is conflict. Whilst a programme of study must, to a certain extent, be pre-determined prior to students commencing their studies, students fare better when they have some say in their learning. This conflict contains the elusive yet main concern of this article: how much control can a 'newer' lecturer afford to turn over to students without fear of failing as a teacher? This question is explored through an action research process as defined by Cohen and Banion (1980) within the context of a Level 1 Applied Psychology research methods module.

The teaching and learning context of the action research project

To successfully complete the LJMU BSc (Hons) Applied Psychology programme, students must develop a variety of research skills, to which a large proportion of study is allocated. The particular module in question requires students to design, implement and analyse the results of three small research projects. A small number of students learn in a workshop environment. Honey and Mumford (1986) consider this a supportive and focused learning environment The division between 'lecture' elements and practical work are blurred in an attempt to keep students engaged, whatever their preferred learning styles. There is also work to be conducted outside of the classroom (e.g. reading, data collection, analysis and write-up). The module covers the whole research process from design to analysis on SPSS. As illustrated by Schmeck (1983), this necessitates use of all four of the major learning styles highlighted in Kolb's learning cycle at various stages of the research process. These four styles include a preference for either active learning, reflective assimilation of information, an emphasis on theoretical exploration or a preference for learning which is of practical value. The learning cycle involves passing through stages, each of which relies predominantly on one of these approaches to learning. All four styles continue to feature throughout the remainder of a student's academic career and beyond. Thus the module can build a sound knowledge base for their future. Such a foundation is essential if students are to feel comfortable in moving from passive learner – one who does not actively engage in their own learning – to Heath's (1964) *reasonable adventurer*. Furthermore, within a Level 1 module there is the potential to shape students' understandings of what HE entails and the personal learning skills it aims to develop over their future academic career.

Teaching material with such subtle complexities requires flexibility on the part of the staff involved by way of making necessary a variety of teaching methods. This issue of flexibility has caused me concern over my time at LJMU. Would students learn what they needed to learn if I relaxed my control and allowed myself to respond to their needs as they arose rather than concentrating on 'getting through' the pre-determined required material? In my early days I was perhaps too focused upon

the notion of 'getting through' rather than being selective and concentrating on covering a reduced amount in a more effective way. Ramsden (1992) sees this latter approach as facilitating effective learning as it allows more opportunity for *understanding* rather than straight forward *learning*. Rowntree (1977) suggests that understanding is what assessment should be about. Adopting such a view of assessment will avoid promoting the 'nuts and bolts' view of the relationship between theory and practice evident in Beard and Hartley (1984). This is particularly pertinent to a module requiring theoretical aspects of research to be put into practice.

Ramsden (1992) describes teaching as a speculative and reflexive (i.e. flexible) process. Honey and Mumford (1986) argue that to achieve our goal in HE we must be flexible in matching our teaching methods to the variety of learning styles our students employ. Taking up the challenge of flexible, responsive teaching not only offers a means of promoting effective learning for students, but it can also promote self-development for newer lecturing staff who may be unsure of their skills and just how much risk they can take with their carefully planned learning programme. There may be much to be gained by taking the risk.

Using flexible teaching as a response to student-identified needs

In my first year of teaching, students on the module were quiet in class and appeared unwilling to concentrate or contribute ideas to the sessions. As student participation is the core dynamic of these sessions they became tiring and laborious. The next year the new student group showed similar behaviour in the first semester and looked set to continue this in their second semester. As I had attempted to adhere to the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) principles in my planning I was confused about why this should be so.

These principles, outlined in Beaty (1997), provide a recognised framework for good practice in developing effective learning opportunities through using a variety of teaching methods appropriate to the various learning styles and materials to be covered.

Compared with parallel groups my group seemed to be performing at a lower standard. I considered the possibility that the cause was not poorer standards of work, but over strict marking on my part. This was not supported by using the cross-marking policy of the Centre. Next I considered my teaching methods. Feedback from peer observations indicated little requiring immediate and drastic attention. Both of these standard checks could be criticised but this is beyond the scope of this article.

Through informal discussion I discovered the students' concerns about the module and their performance. This discussion was prompted by two of Ramsden's (1992) principles of good teaching – indication of interest in and respect for the students' learning. In essence students requested more say in the content and timing of the module delivery. Two quotes highlight this:

'We get to design the projects and that, but it's still all worked out in advance, you know…when we've got to do something by.'
'…the timing of the exams and stuff – it makes sense they're at the end of term…But sometimes it would be nice to be able to say can we do a bit more on this or a bit on that?'

Through this discussion a need for more focused practice on using SPSS was identified. I agreed to re-design the following week's intended session, tailoring it to meet their specific, self-identified learning needs. The thought of deviating from my initial plan was daunting, not least because it challenged my level of control over the teaching of this module. Would it be a wasted week? There was also the problem of securing a computer suite at short notice and the consequent reduction in time allocated to

the next project. However, Ramsden's 'speculative and reflexive' view of teaching theoretically grounded my intention.

The new session drew together, in eight hypothetical studies, various previously covered elements of the research process in an attempt to highlight the connectivity of the material. This decision was informed by Ramsden's (1992) argument that real learning involves 'several passes through the same material' and a focus on 'critical barriers' to learning. Students were required to construct hypotheses, select appropriate tests and input and analyse a range of 'dummy' data using SPSS. Moreover they needed to relate disparate elements of the module. This is identified as an important learning skill by Ramsden (1992). The exercise encouraged students to use various learning styles and their level of engagement was satisfying. In addition I was able to extend my monitoring of their work, task effectiveness and offer immediate feedback – adding to the good practice elements of this session. Whilst to a certain extent this exercise may offer little more than that which should already be part of any session it is the risk-taking and relinquishing of control in direct response to student needs that is the central issue; the challenge of responsive, flexible teaching within resource, time and professional constraints.

Assessing the intervention

Toward the end of the module a second informal discussion explored the students' perceptions of the intervention. The response is best illustrated in the following quote:

'It was good. It helped to have you tell us where we were going wrong when we did it instead of waiting for two weeks and starting our next project before we know what we did on the first one.'

I asked if they felt that I did not do this anyway and a second student replied:

'Yes, but sometimes we don't take enough time to put it together…like here.'

The opportunity to 'put it together' had arisen from a direct response to the students' requests and they had identified benefits. Students accepted the difficulty of balancing content and time but pointed out that what some find difficult others find easy. This opened up the issue of listening to students and adjusting the teaching to their needs. It then became apparent that they felt marginally more at ease with the computer/analysis aspects of the course after this intervention. Whilst no-one claimed complete expertise with SPSS analysis, their motivation for independent learning noticeably improved between the intervention and the end of the module. No one directly expressed improved course-perception. What was expressed was surprise that the whole exercise had been carried out in response to their initial comments.

A significant difference in overall performance was found when assessment grades for this group, across the two semesters, were compared with those of a parallel group not receiving the intervention. Instead of receiving an opportunity to consolidate their learning, the other group continued with preparation of their next project. Table 1 shows the mean assessment percentages for each group in each semester.

A 2x2 mixed ANOVA (repeated measures on semester, independent measures on intervention/no intervention) indicated no effect of intervention (p> .05), nor semester (p> .05). However, there was a significant semester by group interaction (F = 6.10; df 1; p = .018). This suggests the data in Table 1 shows a successful outcome in terms of improved student performance across semesters for students receiving the intervention. Students not receiving the intervention showed much the same performance across the semesters.

Marking the reports that followed the intervention I noticed an improvement in discussion and analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of their projects and an

Table 1. Showing the mean grades (%) for semester 1 and semester 2 for groups receiving and not receiving the intervention.

GROUP		SEMESTER 1	SEMESTER 2
NOT RECEIVING INTERVENTION n = 21	mean	52	51
	SD	17	17
RECEIVING INTERVENTION n = 21	mean	55	60
	SD	7	8

improved understanding of several elements of research design. There was a noticeable move away from reciting chunks of handouts (nuts-and-bolts) to an indication of emergent understanding of the material; e.g., why particular methods were chosen and the relative merits of alternative designs, what could have been improved in terms of design and analysis, how informative aspects of the data were such as standard deviations, etc. Rowntree (1977) argues that such a shift toward understanding, rather than straightforward learning, is desirable at a higher education level of learning.

Reflections upon the action

As a relatively new lecturer, flexibility in my teaching has been of personal concern. Research methods often require time-consuming practical work which can require careful planning of course timetables and yet potentially demand an emphasis on flexible and immediately responsive teaching in order to make the fear-provoking, student friendly. After all, research methods classes involve statistics…numbers…maths…

Almost any attempt to achieve flexibility in pursuit of satisfying student need is justified by the increased likelihood of effective learning. Listening to students can nurture a sense of a co-worker relationship between staff and student. Ramsden (1992) argues that this itself promotes the desired HE style of learning. This intervention attempted to

draw attention to such a relationship. Students expressed a positive view of the intervention. Van Rossum and Schenk (1984) suggest that positive perceptions of a course can aid the development of appropriate approaches to learning. The intervention contained several established elements of good practice in addition to the elements of good practice reported earlier.

Analysis of the effects of an intervention motivated by such responsive flexibility has shown both subjective and objective benefits. It would seem important to build in some spare time wherever possible so that it can be allocated to areas where students may be able to identify a particular need. However, to effectively achieve this lecturers may have to take risks with their own insecurities. It would seem in this case that taking such a risk has helped improve the immediate learning experience of a small number of students and shown transferable strategies for future groups.

Ramsden (1992) calls for the following features of good practice: interest, explanation, concern and respect for students and student learning, independence, control and active engagement and finally, learning from students. Ramsden's (1992) 'Level 3' theory of teaching is one in which the process of teaching is a 'speculative and reflexive activity' in which students problems with learning material are bound up with the subject content and style of teaching. Black, Bliss, Hodgson, Ogborn and Unsworth (1977) suggest that having

concern for these factors can provide an environment for deeper learning. This learning may not just be for the students' benefit, but also for the staff involved – especially where the staff member is relatively new. I now feel more comfortable relinquishing some of my previously precious control in many other sessions I take. Additionally I realised that students really do learn differently from how I imagined they learn, in terms of both content and time taken to learn. As an individual student one is not aware of the differences between students and their various approaches to learning. It is only when one becomes a teacher and through taking time and calculated risks that we become aware of these differences.

On a cautionary note it must be acknowledged that the improvement seen in this exercise may be subject to researcher bias. However, cross-marking with colleagues suggests that there had indeed been an improvement in the students' written work. Furthermore, it is possible that rather than the intervention itself being responsible for the observed improvement, simple awareness of my intention to address their specific learning needs favourably altered the learning behaviour of the students (the Hawthorne effect). This, however, should not overshadow the fact that the aim of the intervention was achieved and verified by an independent assessor.

Concluding remarks

There are no guarantees that teaching will work as intended. This is evident in the previous planning for this particular module and the measures of student achievement recorded. The speculative nature of teaching brings with it an alternative, personal measure of teaching quality; one's attitude to one's teaching. An attitude, hopefully, of constant reflection upon one's methods and responsiveness to the need for flexibility – despite the daunting thought of relinquishing that safety harness, control.

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