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Citation: Pamplin, M. (2012). Encouraging Effective Group Work: The pedagogical challenges involved in designing a staff workshop. Learning at City Journal, 2(1), pp. 11-17.

This is the unspecified version of the paper.

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Encouraging Effective Group Work: The pedagogical challenges involved in designing a staff workshop

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Abstract

This paper discusses two main pedagogical challenges involved in designing a workshop for staff in the Schools of Arts and Social Sciences. While it may be simple to prepare a linear, teacher-driven presentation which can be delivered to an audience of any size, this misses the opportunity to design a flexible learning experience in which the participants play an active role. The design for the workshop, which is based on the pedagogical theories of facilitative teaching (Biggs 1999) and approaches to learning (Marton and Säljö 1984), is described, and several strategies for encouraging deep learning are detailed.

1 Introduction

As part of the Education Support Team, I contribute to a series of workshops for staff in Arts and Social Sciences. These include sessions on Moodle, multimedia in Moodle, iTunes U, lecture capture and encouraging effective group work. The first sessions in this list reflect the responsibilities of my current role; the last, my background in study skills and learning support – my last job was a study skills tutor in an FE college. Here, I discuss some of the pedagogical challenges that went into preparing the workshop Encouraging Effective Group Work.

This session addresses some of the common problems that teachers and lecturers often experience with group-based activities and assignments. These include students not fully engaging with tasks and having difficulty working with the rest of their group. The workshop asks participants to think about what they want students to gain from working in groups, and think over the feedback they get from students. We then look briefly at the theory of deep and surface approaches to learning (Marton and Säljö, cited in Ramsden 2003, Chapter 4) and at two phenomenographic studies (Tempone and Martin, 1999; Payne et al 2006) which investigate students' responses to group activities, to understand why students do not always respond to group work in the way lecturers hope. Finally we redesign a group-based learning activity in the light of what we have learnt about approaches to learning and working in groups.

Here, I describe some of the challenges involved in the preparation, delivery and facilitation of the workshop, and ways of overcoming them. In order to explain these challenges I will briefly describe the context of the workshops in this series.

Academic and professional staff can book onto any workshop in the series and can also request one-to-one appointments. The number of participants in any session is therefore quite unpredictable and can range from one to more than ten. Although it would be simple to write a presentation which could be delivered to any number of people, this would not ensure a meaningful and useful learning experience for the participants. It should also be borne in mind that the workshops are opt-in and are held at lunchtimes. Working in HE, we attend what training and workshops we can, but fit them in around busy schedules. We weigh up the time commitment against what we hope to learn from the session, and therefore we are likely come along with specific, quite schematic things we want to learn and this affects our

approach to the training we undertake. However, as discussed below, learning is about quality as well as quantity. Without ignoring the fact that the purpose of any teaching event is for learners to learn what they need, then, the main challenge in delivering this workshop is to use a teaching style which gives each learner the opportunity to really learn – not simply to grab a couple of pieces of information which seem directly relevant. In pedagogical terms, the challenge is to use the **facilitative model of teaching** to accommodate different **approaches to learning** and foster **deep learning**. The section below describes the theory on which this approach is based.

2. Facilitative teaching

2.1. Theoretical background

In the pedagogical literature, facilitative teaching is seen as the counterpart to transmissive teaching, which is often defined as the lowest of a hierarchy of levels or attitudes to teaching among educators. For Biggs (1999), transmissive teaching is at the base of a three-level model. Such teaching focuses on the didactic transfer of information from the teacher to the learners. Learning in this context is seen as collecting information, which means that students' cognition remains very low on Bloom's taxonomy of learning (Krathwohl 2002). Further, it makes the assumption that students could learn better if only they tried harder or came with more prior knowledge. Against this attitude, Biggs posits a more facilitative approach to teaching which is less concerned with what the teacher does, or with the students' shortcomings, and is built around what the students do. In this model, learning is seen as a qualitative change in students' understanding, not as a quantitative increase in factual knowledge, and learning activities and assessments are created with this in mind (Biggs 1999: Chapter 2). Ramsden (2003) uses a very similar model which progresses from "what the teacher does to students" to "making student learning possible" (2003: 111).

The facilitative model of teaching also overlaps to a degree with Knowles' theory of andragogy (1970). Knowles suggests that andragogy and pedagogy should be thought of as covering parts of the same spectrum rather than as "dichotomous" (1970: 43), although andragogy, as the science of teaching adults, is normally contrasted with pedagogy. Briefly, andragogy posits four main ways in which adults learn differently to children: having a sense of self-direction; acquiring a growing body of experience and knowledge; developing a desire to apply knowledge to adopted social roles; and shifting from a "subject-centred" to a "performance-centred" approach to learning (45).

2. 2. Benefits of using the facilitative model

2.2.1. Practical benefits

There are several functional or pragmatic reasons for avoiding a transmissive mode of teaching. In a previous job, I taught upwards of ten classes a week and quickly learnt that it was difficult to maintain the energy needed to prepare, let alone deliver, ten hours' worth of content every week. Before ever studying the theory of teaching and learning, I broadly conceptualised this as a development from "What am I going to say?" to "What are they going to do?" It can be taxing and stressful to stand up and perform in front of students, as well as being uninspiring for the students themselves. There is some evidence, also, that students are deterred from lectures before they even have any experience of them; a study of students' expectations of university found that that formal lecture (distinct from the interactive lecture) was the second-to-last preference among entering students (Sander et al 2000: 317; for an earlier study see Sherman et al 1987: 70). Finally, there are external pressures on educators to provide skills-based and practical teaching. University courses have for some time been expected to prepare students for professional careers, providing opportunities to learn skills and experience that will be useful in work (see Bourner et al 2001: 20, already ten years old), and this is clearly of especial relevance to us at City.

2.2.2. Pedagogical benefits

The paramount reason for avoiding the transmissive style of teaching is that such an unreflective and inflexible practice pays more attention to what the teacher is doing than to what the students are doing, prioritising delivery over learning. Moreover, we can see that my situation requires a more flexible approach as I am faced with an indeterminate group size and the potential for a very mixed learning group. I may be as likely to end up leading a small group discussion or running a one-to-one session, as leading a whole group session, and therefore the material needs to be as suitable for this context as for a class-sized group. Some years ago Sherman et al (1987) suggested that students value flexibility over rigid, linear teaching. In a small group, especially for one-off sessions such as mine in which people attend voluntarily out of interest, this seems entirely fitting. Not only would it seem overly formal to lecture to a handful of people, but this would be to miss the opportunity offered by a small group to concentrate on what the participants are interested in and to tailor the session to their needs. It is perhaps more difficult to see how this total flexibility would apply to large groups or to taught programmes with a set curriculum. However, the same points apply to both situations: it is better to prioritise depth over breadth and understanding over knowledge (Biggs 1999: Chapter 1; Ramsden 2003: Chapter 6; Exley and Dennick 2004: 52), and so a well-designed teaching session should be able to accommodate students' questions and diversions without the fear of going off track or getting behind on time. I can count on my group for this session having a great deal of experience in teaching university students, and take this into account when planning, rather than assuming the group are starting from nothing and are coming to learn everything from me. They should also have enough in common with each other to be able to share their experience and learn from each other.

In this session, therefore, after a short introduction I ask the participants to share their ideas on why group work can fail, but why they also try to use it, i.e. its potential benefits. I minimise the amount of time I spend talking and transmitting information. It is more important for the participants to have time to discuss their own experience, think about how it fits into the minimal amounts of theory I will use, and consider ways of changing their practice. Depending on the number of participants, the group can also be split into teams, to demonstrate some ideas for group work activities. With enough participants, for example, I can use brainstorming and the Delphi model of collecting ideas (Jacques and Salmon 2007: Chapter 6). The Delphi activity asks participants to write ideas on post-its or on paper, before sticking them to a board or a wall to share them, and then arranging, rearranging, and discussing them as a whole group. It is, therefore, a good example of an active task which is equally suited to all learning styles (Fry et al 2009: 18), and is doubly useful in this context.

A further benefit of using this group-based approach is that it encourages the participants to make links between their own professional experience, the experiences of others, and theory. The workshop follows the experiential learning model described by Gibbs, who advocates a cyclical model of experience, reflection, conceptualisation and experimentation: "It is not enough just to do, and neither is it enough just to think. Nor is it enough simply to do and think. Learning from experience must involve links between the doing and the thinking" (1988: Section 2). Facilitative teaching builds on previous experience and helps learners to make links between new and old knowledge. It is therefore the only way to ensure the "links between the doing and the thinking". Given more time, my workshop could make more use of the suggestions Gibbs has for learning by doing, such as learner-initiated action plans or checklists. Gibbs writes that others' experience can be as useful as one's own, if one knows what to look for, and suggests that the teacher can provide a checklist of important points which learners can use to identify important points in others' experience, as if it were their own (1988: Section 4.1).

3. Approaches to learning

3.1. Theoretical background

As noted, this workshop may be attended by a wide variety of people who will come to the session with different needs and attitudes. Learning theory recognises different approaches to learning which can be broadly categorised as surface learning and deep learning (Marton and Säljö 1984, cited in Tempone and Martin 1999: 178). Surface learning is characterised by rote learning of information, a failure to make connections between areas of knowledge (Biggs 1999: Chapter 3), and generally doing only what is perceived necessary in the situation. Deep learning engages with ideas and concepts more fully. Experiencing a change in mindset or learning to employ abstract models in unfamiliar situations are examples of deep learning.

Both approaches must always be seen in the context of a particular learning activity and a particular context. There is no such thing, that is, a surface learner or a deep learner. An individual adopts a surface approach or a deep approach at different times, depending on the nature of the task at hand and the situation they are in: whether they feel a sense of ownership over the task and control over their situation. It is not just that students (or people in general) engage deeply in subjects they are interested in or are good at: factors such as workload, perceived relevance of the content, and the manner of assessment also determine the approach an individual takes in any given situation (Biggs 1999; Ramsden 2003). Assessment is central to the theory of approaches to learning, and while not directly relevant here, Biggs' concept of constructive alignment - ensuring clear links between learning activities and assessment tasks to encourage deep learning - is prominent in learning theory today.

3.2. Accommodating approaches to learning

Although it is tempting to associate approaches to learning with learning styles, they are distinct. It may be appropriate to accommodate different learning styles, but in most cases it would be inexcusable to accommodate different approaches to learning. Instead, teachers should aim to foster deep learning over surface learning, in accordance with the assumption that all learners have the potential to learn deeply in the right setting and with the right support.

Without careful planning, there is the potential for my workshop to result in surface learning. Both the content and the mode of teaching are important in fostering deep learning. In my situation, surface learning might result from the participants coming into the workshop feeling overworked and stressed. This mindset is not conducive to abstract thinking and theoretical or reflective discussion. It is much more likely to result in a temptation to let the workshop leader do the work, and to look for quick fixes or easy answers to take away. Attendance at the workshop is voluntary and people attend because they want to learn; the attitude they bring with them affects the way they will expect to learn, not the desire to do so. Surface learning in my workshop might consist of expecting to be given a list of group work activities which could be taken away and used "out of the box". The challenge is to show that many different group work activities are available in any situation, and that an understanding of students' motivations in approaching group work is more important than simply giving out a list of suggested tools.

Here, then, we can see the final benefit of the facilitative teaching model. Only by bringing in participants' own experience, addressing the questions they want to ask, and by sharing ideas among the group, will I be able to transfer ownership of the workshop from me to the participants. In this way I will be able to create the conditions for deep learning to take place.

One slight complication to this model is the fact that approaches to learning are hierarchical (Marton and Säljö's model actually uses five levels). This means that, much like in Bloom's taxonomy, deep learning actually requires a certain amount of surface learning - but it then goes much further to process and construct meaning out of this knowledge. In the example I give above, then, the actual challenge is in giving access to the information (i.e. an understanding of the phenomenographic research into group work, and some ideas for group work activities) while encouraging the reflection and discussion necessary to understand how such activities can be employed effectively. To this end, I reverse the

process and give out a handout of recommended group activities, together with further reading suggestions, at the end of the workshop. Combined with the practical demonstrations of group work mentioned in section 2. 2. 2. above, this should encourage deep learning by placing an understanding of group work dynamics over a straightforward list of group activity types.

3.3. Facilitative teaching and deep learning

I showed in section 2.2 that facilitative teaching emphasises learners' activity over the teacher's didactic message. This raises the question of how the deep approach, the desired approach to learning, can actually be instilled in learners. Surely one's teaching or facilitating style can only go so far; it is important in fostering deep learning, but the decision (whether conscious or subconscious) to engage deeply rather than on the surface must be made by the learner. In my opinion there is no easy answer to this question and to suggest one would contradict the argument of this essay. I cannot suggest, that is, that I will employ technique *x* if a participant is reluctant to engage in the workshop fully. My approach to such reluctance will depend on many factors and while it will always rest on the same basis - that learners' own experience with group work must be combined with others' experience, empirical research and learning theory to form a flexible understanding of the factors which influence the effectiveness of group work - it may take many forms depending on the situation. It cannot be guaranteed to succeed: perhaps the handouts can be seen as the safety net for this. My situation in this workshop is perhaps slightly privileged: it is a one-off session for staff requiring no assessment. While "failure" in this sense may seem less serious than the failure of a cohort of students to pass an exam, it is still a possibility and one I wish to avoid. Yet, in siting learning in the activity of the students rather than the teacher, theories of facilitative teaching and deep learning must recognise that the responsibility for meaningful learning ultimately rests on the learner.

4. Summary

My workshop on Encouraging Effective Group Work presents a number of challenges which will have to be overcome to ensure meaningful learning for my participants. First, I must prepare learning materials and use a teaching style which is suitable for a varying group size, as the nature of the workshop means I cannot be sure of the group size in advance. I avoid a transmissive presentation style, using instead a facilitative teaching approach which will place fewer demands on me as a teacher, and is more suitable for a small group and will encourage discussion and group work.

The facilitative model benefits participants by ensuring that their prior knowledge is brought to bear. It encourages them to make links between their own experience and the theoretical literature, thereby enabling reflection on their own teaching practice. The facilitative model also provides a means to foster deeper learning among the group, by ensuring that the workshop really addresses their needs and questions. A didactic presentation would be unsuitable because it would prevent the participants from taking ownership of the session and would, at best, result in some information passing from me to them. Instead, I aim to run a session which encourages the kind of deep learning which can change people's viewpoints and help them interpret their knowledge and experience differently. I recognise that this involves relinquishing some control, but this approach also offers the potential for qualitatively better learning.

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