

Teaching and Learning in Higher Education Award

Unit CA393 a – Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

Reflective Commentary

Introduction

The following commentary will illustrate the ways in which learning styles research has given tutors in Higher Education the opportunity to challenge existing teaching and learning strategies. From this perspective, I shall consider the ways in which a diverse undergraduate body might benefit from a range of teaching activities and different learning modalities in line with this approach.

Evidence

I shall consider the ways in which one might design teaching and learning activities in such a way so as to accommodate a diverse body of undergraduate students in the classroom. With this in mind then, it might be useful to consider the ways in which different modes of assessment from portfolios to peer assessment and from the 'minute paper' to what has been termed the 'muddiest point' underpin all good learning and teaching practice. In this same way, it might be considered relevant to look at the ways in which computer technologies from standard presentation soft-ware to electronic discussion boards could be used to assist teaching and learning in Higher Education.¹ However, for the purposes of this assignment, I have chosen to focus my attention on the importance of learning styles research as a way of making both teaching and learning more accessible for a range of students who differ in terms of age, experience and maturity respectively.

Background

I was appointed as a lecturer in XXXXX, and after my first week at the XXXXX I was to be responsible for the learning strategies for an existing first year undergraduate option module entitled XXXXX and as such, it was my responsibility to design the seminar and lectures in line with the weekly schedule as of this time. As with all modules in the School of XXXXX the course in question was timetabled so

as to deliver one one hour lecture and one two hour seminar session each week, covering a different area of investigation concerning the social, sexual and historical context of gender in popular culture over a 12 week period.

Although the module handbook and weekly syllabus existed prior to my arrival in the School, it was my responsibility to write the forthcoming lectures and plan the subsequent seminar sessions prior to my arrival at the institution. Although my plan was prepared for the ensuing sessions in advance of my arrival, I now feel that in retrospect that I should have reconsidered the structure of these sessions. My previous experience in Higher Education was primarily with undergraduate students at in which seminar groups were relatively small and office hours available to students was somewhat limited. However, after commencing my teaching at Bath Spa, it was soon clear that the seminar sizes were much larger, the student body was more diverse and a much more relaxed open door policy for students existed compared to that at With this in mind then, I am now aware that I should try and adjust my teaching style for the forthcoming teaching sessions in such a way so as to meet the needs of a large and diverse student body in terms of equal opportunities, inclusion and support.

Whereas I, like the vast majority of teachers in Higher Education had previously relied on the traditional lecture or what has been termed the 'sequential verbal presentation'² as their primary instructional strategy, and the seminar session as a way to facilitate class discussions surrounding the weeks lecture topic, it is now clear that I should reconsider this somewhat rigid approach to teaching and learning. After all, according to Edgar Dale's research on student retention rates in the classroom, we are informed that we tend to remember 10 percent of what we read, 20 percent of what we hear, 30 percent of what we see, 50 percent of what we hear and see, 70 percent of what we say and 90 percent of what we both say and do.³ However, rather than simply take Dale's cone of experience as gospel and suggest that all students in Higher Education will remember 90% of a session if they actually take part in a debate or explain their point of view to the seminar group, it is worth considering the fact that individual students may process information in very different ways.⁴ With this in mind then, one must acknowledge that teaching and learning needs to accommodate various preferences when faced with a large and diverse student body.

Teaching and Learning: Learning Styles Research

XXXXXX makes it clear from its mission statement that it is a 'teaching-led' rather than a 'research-led' institution. The focus on teaching and the provision of high quality taught courses is made explicit as we are informed that the University 'takes the view that the distinctive feature of higher education is the involvement of teaching staff in research and scholarship; but its set is towards teaching, rather than research in and for itself.'⁵ From this estimation then, the importance of teaching excellence in and beyond the classroom is clear. More importantly however, for the sake of this assignment, such a commitment to teaching quality informs the following consideration of learning styles research.

It has been suggested that learning styles research has given teachers in Higher Education 'new directions for making changes in their classrooms,'⁶ suggesting that those weekly sessions on the timetable should alternate between various methods and activities that make classrooms more responsive to multiple student learning styles in a way that incorporates a range of teaching and learning experiences. For authors such as McCarthy (1987), Kolb (1984), Jung (1992) and Lawrence (1993), the learning styles approach to teaching emphasizes the fact that individual students 'perceive and process information in very different ways.'⁷ Whether an auditory learner or a private learner, a concrete perceiver or a reflective processor, the learning styles theory implies that a student's ability to take on and engage with information has more to do with the teacher's ability to engage with a particular student's learning style than it does with their innate level of intelligence or ability to understand the topic at hand, be it a theoretical debate or a contextual example from Hollywood filmmaking.⁸ From this perspective then, it is my responsibility to design sessions that enable a diverse range of students to make meaning during the module. According to Terry O'Connor at the Centre for Teaching and Learning at Indiana State University:

The single most widespread change has been to open classrooms to more than one approach to intellectual work. Different social groupings, alternative activities, more complex projects have all been introduced as efforts to create opportunities for students to use their various strengths in dealing with course material.⁹

We are told that there are three distinct ways in which curricular plans can be successfully challenged through a response to learning styles research. We are told that teachers in higher education should be able to adjust educational environments to make them more efficient and successful places for students in three distinct, yet related ways which are termed 'adding alternatives, learning cycles or complex projects' respectively.¹⁰

Therefore, if one considers that students are most likely to comprehend basic information, and engage with theoretical debates if they have been taught through a range of activities beyond the lecture format, then it is imperative that my future teaching and learning sessions teach students through meaningful and challenging methods and activities.¹¹ Therefore, whilst adhering to good lecture practice in general, from motivating students to pitching the material at the right level, and from the organisation of the module as a whole to the rapport between my students and myself, it is necessary to structure a sequence of different learning activities throughout each of my future undergraduate, and potential postgraduate taught modules. With this in mind then, I will design my future teaching sessions to alternate between a variety of forms of learning from lectures to discussions to small group work to private writing sessions in order to support a wide body of students through different kinds of teaching goals and learning styles. From this estimation then, I will take on board Dee Fink's ideas concerning the ways in which teachers in higher education can create modules that will provide significant learning experiences for students. Dee Fink urges teachers to shift from a content-centred approach to a learning-centred approach that asks us to consider what kinds of learning will be significant for students, and the ways in which we as teachers can create a course that will result in that kind of learning. With this in mind then, I will suggest that the module as a whole needs to be designed in such a way that allows for these 'various learning activities to be structured in a sequence so that earlier classes lay the foundation for complex and higher level learning tasks in later sessions.'¹²

Bibliography

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Timms, David. (2003). "Quality and Standards: Mission, Size and Student Base." <http://www.bathspa.ac.uk/quality-and-standards/public/institutional-audit/sed/sed-sections/sed-01.htm> (accessed 20/06/2003)

Notes

¹ Computer technology allows teachers the opportunity to create learning challenges that are sufficiently complex to engage a full range of learning styles. See: O'Connor, Terry. (1997). "Indiana State University Centre for Teaching and Learning – Applying Computer Technology." <http://web.indstate.edu/ctl/styles/learning.html#TECH> (accessed 20/06/2003)

² O'Connor, Terry. (1997). "Indiana State University Centre for Teaching and Learning – Learning Styles in Higher Education." <http://web.indstate.edu/ctl/styles/learning.html#LSHE> (accessed 20/06/2003)

³ Dale, Edgar. (2002). "Edgar Dale's Cone of Experience." <http://www.fsu.edu/~ids/fac2002/Edgar%20Dale.htm> (accessed 20/06/2003)

⁴ William Perry demonstrated how college students developed through different intellectual maturation levels as they went through college. Mary Belenky illustrated how women preferred different strategies than those recognised and rewarded in typical universities. More recently, Marcia Baxter Magolda has described how epistemological strategies used by students varies by gender and by maturity and is responsive to the teaching context the student finds him/herself in. See: O'Connor, Terry. (1997). "Indiana State University Centre for Teaching and Learning – Types of Learning Styles." <http://web.indstate.edu/ctl/styles/learning.html#STYLES>. (accessed 20/06/2003)

⁵ Timms, David. (2003). "Quality and Standards: Mission, Size and Student Base." <http://www.bathspa.ac.uk/quality-and-standards/public/institutional-audit/sed/sed-sections/sed-01.htm> (accessed 20/06/2003)

⁶ O'Connor, Terry. (1997). "Indiana State University Centre for Teaching and Learning – Learning Styles in Higher Education." <http://web.indstate.edu/ctl/styles/learning.html#LSHE> (accessed 20/06/2003)

⁷ Funderstanding Editorial Committee. (1998). "Learning Styles." http://www.funderstanding.com/learning_styles.cfm (accessed 20/03/2003)

⁸ For further details of learning styles, see O'Connor, Terry. (1997). "Indiana State University Centre for Teaching and Learning – Learning Styles in Higher Education." <http://web.indstate.edu/ctl/styles/learning.html#LSHE> (accessed 20/06/2003)

⁹ O'Connor, Terry. (1997). "Indiana State University Centre for Teaching and Learning – Using Learning Styles to Teach." <http://web.indstate.edu/ctl/styles/learning.html#LSTEACH>. (accessed 20/06/2003)

¹⁰ Terry O'Connor refers to 'adding alternatives' as a way to encourage the teacher to think of multiple ways to approach a subject and to find ways to create modules that allow different students to find the one most appropriate. We are told that: 'having a student write a poem or act out a scenario allows students who respond well to global learning styles to utilize their sensitive, holistic abilities. Creating hands-on materials that can be used outside the lecture hall give active experimenters the chance to confirm abstractions.' See: O'Connor, Terry. (1997). "Indiana State University Centre for Teaching and Learning – Learning Styles in Higher Education." <http://web.indstate.edu/ctl/styles/learning.html#LSHE> (accessed 20/06/2003)

In this same way, O'Connor refers to a 'learning cycle' for those educators who want to challenge students to develop their learning skills in other learning style preferences. We are told here that this programme-oriented approach asks the teacher to go beyond content, and that he or she needs to: 'organize the course around a model of learning styles that recommends different types of learning activities at each stage of the learning process. Course material becomes organized around themes or problems with the emphasis on how students develop skills using the content. This model allows each student to contribute using his or her preferred style while experiencing other styles' See O'Connor, Terry. (1997). "Indiana State University Centre for Teaching and Learning – Learning Styles in Higher Education." <http://web.indstate.edu/ctl/styles/learning.html#LSHE> (accessed 20/06/2003)

Finally, O'Connor believes that 'complex projects' brings together different student preferences in a cooperative effort, which 'inevitably demands that students approach a topic with multiple skills.' See O'Connor, Terry. (1997). "Indiana State University Centre for Teaching and Learning – Learning Styles in Higher Education." <http://web.indstate.edu/ctl/styles/learning.html#LSHE> (accessed 20/06/2003). If one considers what have been termed the Seven Principles for Good Practice, it is clear that 'learning is enhanced when it is more like a team effort than a solo race. Good learning, like good work, is collaborative and social, not competitive and isolated. Working with others can increase the involvement in learning. After all, sharing one's own ideas and responding to others' reactions sharpens thinking and deepens understanding.' See: Chickering, Arthur. W. and Gamson, Zelda. F. (2003) "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Higher Education." <http://www.hcc.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/7princip.htm> (accessed 20/06/2003)

¹¹ According to Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy for categorizing the level of abstraction of questions that commonly occur in educational settings, we are informed that teachers tend to ask questions in the 'knowledge' category 80 percent to 90 percent of the time, and that while these questions are not in themselves bad, using them all the time is problematic. We are then told that educators should utilise higher order level of questions which are seen to involve more 'brain power' and a more extensive and elaborate answers through categories such as knowledge (remembering, memorizing, recognizing, recalling identification, recalling information etc), comprehension (interpreting, translating from one medium to another, describing in one's own words, organization and selection of facts and ideas etc), application (problem solving, applying information to produce some result, use of facts, rules and principles etc), analysis (subdividing something to show how it is put together, finding the underlying structure of a communication, identifying motives, separation of a whole into component parts etc), synthesis (creating a unique, original product that may be in verbal form or may be a physical object, combination of ideas to form a new whole etc), evaluation (making value decisions about issues, resolving controversies or differences of opinion, development of opinions, judgements or decisions etc). See Bloom, Benjamin. (2003). "Types of Questions Based on Bloom's Taxonomy." <http://www.hcc.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/m-files/m-questy.htm>

¹² Dee Fink, L. (1999). "Fink's Five Principles of Good Course Design - Reprinted with permission of the University of Oklahoma Instructional Development Program." <http://www.hcc.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/m-files/m-finks5.htm>. (accessed 20/06/2003)