

Section 2: Other papers

Engaging students: Promoting mutual support and exploration

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PRENSKEY (2005) asserted that a major problem within education is not that the information being taught lacks 'relevance' to students lives, but that there is a lack of engagement with educational tasks. When attempting to engage classes, tutors are aiming to draw students into learning activities – to involve them – and thus promote active learning over and above the passive absorption of information which can dominate classes. The impact of active learning is illustrated in this issue by Lesley Ravenscroft, and also by John Radford in his autobiographical account of his learning experiences. This article will outline and discuss a number of factors that can be considered to promote engagement in class interactions.

This is particularly relevant today because over two-thirds of lecturers surveyed by the University and College Union reported increases in class sizes within their institute (University and College Union, 2008) and trends in student figures suggest an increasing student population (HESA, 2008). This increase in student numbers has yet to be met by a proportionate increase in teaching staff (Baty, 2005; Newman, 2007). In addition, the current financial situation leads to tightening budgets and recruitment freezes; meaning the requirement to teach to large groups of students is unlikely to change significantly in the near future (Newman, 2009). With the growth in student numbers and the increased diversity in students from the Widening Participation agenda comes an increase in the number of students any particular teaching method does not appeal to.

First, and in line with Ravenscroft, the issue of diversity in those we are trying to engage will be addressed, along with the role of choice in improving engagement levels within diverse audiences such as those we are likely to encounter in the current university lecture theatre or classroom. Some ideas on how to promote engagement through choice will then be explored along with the importance of engagement beyond subject content towards learning to learn. It is hoped that this section of the publication will encourage others to share their comments, experiences, and solutions, for engaging students in various activities and become an established part of *Psychology Teaching Review*.

Student diversity

Tutors may (when time allows) trawl through research literature on teaching and learning taking in, amongst other things, theories of motivation, learning styles, teaching styles and cognitive styles. From this activity we as tutors can gain an appreciation of the diverse ways students approach learning and studying. Students that pass through courses have different reasons for being there, a different way of approaching the course content and assessments, and a range of individual preferences regarding their learning environment (Coffield et al., 2004). Student groups are also diverse in their educational background and exposure to higher education (HE), their attitudes towards education, and their levels of academic and social ability, as well as their family situation, social class, and religious beliefs

and culture, and all of these facets of the student impact on their learning.

But how does this impact on the ways in which we engage with students? Tutors try to provide an optimum learning environment but still the learning situation a tutor offers may not match with all the diverse individual preferences that students may have. For example, students may prefer (Prashnig, 2001):

- visual representation of information as apposed to audio;
- to learn in the morning rather than in the afternoon;
- hotter or colder rooms;
- to work alone rather than with an authority figure;
- to study a different topic as the current one will not be assessed.

By no means are we endorsing that tutors pander to all these preferences all of the time, but when they can be reasonably met some of the time it would benefit more of the students more of the time. It is not possible to please all of the students all of the time but it should be possible to please all of the students some of the time (Stevenson, Sander & Naylor, 1995).

However, arguably too great an emphasis has been placed on the tutor to provide tailored learning solutions for students and not enough on the students to engage with being taught in a variety of formats or ways. In providing learning environments to cater for all possible learning styles are we not doing a disservice to the students' future employers, who require graduates to be independent and flexible in their working practices? After all, as tutors, we are often required to cover topics which we may not find interesting, or possibly useful, in a format we may not feel comfortable with, yet our experiences and training have taught us to adapt to the environment we are presented with. Nevertheless, the literature on learning preferences does illustrate the diversity existing within student groups. Engaging with such diversity seems a Her-

culean task, but one routinely faced by tutors.

Ellis, (2001) suggests a pragmatic stance. Whilst tutors would all prefer all students to be engaged during their carefully thought out exercise both in class and at home, it is not essential that this be the case all of the time in order to consider oneself successful as a teacher. In fact, in many cases difficulties experienced by students may reflect their competency to work independently and rise to challenges presented by new and complex information. This requires another subset of skills – skills developed through (initially) supported and repeated practice and which allow the student to function successfully regardless of their preferred mode of presentation or perhaps even their level of engagement.

Introducing choices for the masses

So, whilst it may not be possible for tutors to maintain student's interest all of the time, it seems plausible that if a range of learning options are offered to a group all of the students will be pleased some of the time. This in turn can help students to identify a preferred method for grasping new concepts and perhaps motivate them to engage with activities that lend themselves to different styles, as they develop an awareness of the teachers aim and methods of reaching out to everyone using these various approaches.

However, in practice, studies into the role of choice of learning activities in educational settings have shown mixed outcomes; for instance, Flowerday and Schraw (2004) published research which supported the positive effect of choice on student attitudes and effort in completing tasks but found that there was no effect on cognitive performance. Similarly, Schuller (2005) proposed that while offering choice should be regarded as good practice, offering too many – or too frequent – choices can lead to frustration and distract students from their original learning goals. Katz and Assor (2007) expand on this by suggesting that choice acts as a motivator only when the options are rel-

evant to the students' interests and goals and are neither too numerous nor too complex. From this we can conclude that choice on its own cannot always guarantee engagement and choice must be limited to a manageable number of activities that are likely to appeal to the interests of students. So how can a tutor know what choices should be offered? What is it about these choices that we need to incorporate to ensure students are engaging?

Middlecamp (2005) stresses the need for content hooks in activities; to draw students in. Content hooks are aspects of the topic you are delivering which serve to pull students attention into the topic being discussed. She identifies three forms these hooks can take:

1. Intriguing questions; which teachers may want to use at the start of lessons to integrate a range of relevant theories e.g. Why would you say 'a' is the longest line when it is clearly 'c'?
2. Current issues/concerns e.g. using newspaper clippings to illustrate the use of discourse analysis;
3. Topics that speak to our common human condition, such as life, death, sex, and food, such techniques can be seen within many textbooks for example Andy Field's *Discovering Statistics Using SPSS* (2009) or Davidson and Layder's (1994), *Methods Sex and Madness*.

These ideas are supported by a number of researchers; Cialdini (2005) discusses the role of curiosity and how proposing a mystery to be solved through the gathering of information helps learners to engage with course content that can otherwise seem irrelevant. Pintrich (2003) stressed the importance of meaning and the need to provide opportunities for personal identification in which students see how issues link in with their own experiences, which can often be achieved through group discussion. Likewise, Egan and Judson (2008) promote the discovery of stories and images within the subject content that can speak to students as

individuals, helping them bring content to life in context. Egan and Judson use the example of asking students to imagine or experience how just one symptom of a disorder may impact their daily functioning, for example hearing voices while trying to hold a conversation.

Such strategies induce emotional responses which increase student's awareness of connections between not just the course materials themselves, but also between these materials and the students' own experiences, thus introducing a personal relevance to the material. Perhaps then Prenskey (2005) was too hasty in dismissing the importance of 'relevance' in academic settings over the need for engagement, as this research suggests that communicating relevance can have positive effects on student's engagement levels.

Engaging students beyond exciting activities

Whilst varied and interesting activities may well promote intrinsic motivation to explore a topic further or perhaps just to focus on what the tutor is saying at the particular moment, this is not the only ingredient, nor even necessarily the most important ingredient, for producing successful students and thus quality graduates.

In effect, engagement in the learning process must go beyond the classroom and even beyond the subject matter to encourage engagement with 'learning to learn' (Hughes, 2007). This would require the provision, at every stage, of information on the success of an individual's learning as well as opportunities to further develop and reflect on new, developing skills. By encouraging engagement with learning to learn, tutors would need to move away from the view of students as blank slates or 'tabula rasa', but challenge them rather to be active participants through engaging with learning (Johnson, 2006). By emphasising the importance of learning to learn and providing opportunities and support for students wishing to reflect on their success and approach to

learning, educators can look beyond the short-term effects of engagement in class activities, towards a focus on teaching students to engage themselves. This self motivated engagement can then be used to further their own learning as an ongoing (indeed life-long) process (Cornford, 2002; Westhaver, 2003), not just within the formal education system but also during informal learning experiences presented at work, and during recreational and voluntary activities.

In terms of incorporating learning to learn into current courses, some possibilities may be to feature exploration of personal learning styles within individual difference or study skills modules. This activity would then allow for critical discussions of methodology, the usefulness of this information, or the nature of learning. Similarly opportunities may be found by including reflection on the learning process within assessments, integrating discussions around learning within tutorial sessions, or making use of more problem based learning tasks (which offer tutors the opportunity to explore the process students take to solve real life problems), and may open this area up for discussion.

Moving away from a face-to-face environment, technology offers increasing possibilities. Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) have continued to receive attention in educational circles. VLEs such as Moodle, WebCT and Blackboard, offer environments for students to explore; allowing them to adapt their independent learning to meet their own needs and providing them with opportunities to enhance their own experi-

ence – assisting individuals in the task of taking ownership of their studies. As such this may also be a beneficial place to invite discussions of learning to learn. With an increase in mature and part/full-time-employed students (HESA, 2008) VLEs address growing constraints on student/tutor contact time and have been shown to lend themselves to many styles of learning (Heaton-Shresthaet al., 2007).

Student engagement then is a large area with a number of issues and debates that the reader may wish to explore further (not least the methods by which to gauge the outcomes of attempts at encouraging engagement). We would not doubt that the importance and value of many of the issues raised here have been challenged, tested and considered critically by the readers of *Psychology Teaching Review*. It is, nevertheless, our view that there are many teachers who are uncertain of how best to develop their practices to address these issues, or who would welcome opportunities to share solutions they have found to be effective. It is hoped that the development of this section will further encourage a culture of mutual support and exploration within the Division, collecting and discussing approaches that individuals have found successful in engaging students. We hope that you will find it of interest and use.

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