

Seminar and tutorial sessions: the impact on students' learning

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Background

This research was conducted with level 2 students from the Early Childhood Studies (ECS) degree programme (specialist and combined award).

This ECS degree programme is comparatively new. It was validated in May 2000 and the first cohort of students started the course in September 2000. As the validation took place in May, the course was too late to be included in the UCAS handbook. Consequently, the majority of this cohort of students was recruited from late applicants to UCAS and the 'clearing' system. 40 full-time students and 11 part-time students were recruited from a variety of educational backgrounds to the specialist programme:

- 'A' levels but these were predominantly 'E' grades
- BTEC National Diploma in Childcare/ Nursery Nursing
- GNVQ Advanced in Health and Social Care
- NNEB Qualification
- NVQ Level 3 in Childcare
- Other qualifications

There are three core modules throughout the programme i.e. one for each year of the degree. The first year core module is Child Development and all students on this programme are required to take and pass this module. The assessment is in two parts: a timed assignment based on material given to the students the week before and a coursework assignment at the end of the module. The results for this cohort for the academic year 2000/01 are as follows:

B13	B12	B11	C10	C9	C8	D7	D6	D5	E4	E3	F2	F0
1	3	5	7	6	8	7	3	4	3	0	0	3

Table 1 (51 students)

The results for the students who took part in the research are as follows:

A14	B13	B12	B11	C10	C9	C8	D7	D6	D5	E4	E3	F0
0	1	3	2	1	1	3	1	0	3	0	0	0

Table 2 (15 students)

Many of the students (table 1) demonstrated basic literacy errors, many were unable to construct an essay and only 16 (B13- C10) were able to demonstrate any critical thinking. The Early Childhood Studies team thought that the low entry qualifications of some of the students contributed to these results. This academic year, 2001-02, 85 full-time students and 56 part-time students were recruited; the majority of full-time students came through UCAS applications and 28% came through the clearing system. The results for the same module and a similar assignment task are as follows:

A14	B13	B12	B11	C10	C9	C8	D7	D6	D5	E4	E3	F0
3	3	11	14	16	23	31	15	5	1	15	4	0

Table 3 (141 students)

If the C8 grade is taken as the median for the academic year 2000-01, 59% gained C8 and above. For the academic year 2001-02, 72% gained C8 and above. However, the entry qualifications for both cohorts of students may or may not be a contributory factor for the results, as this research is inconclusive in determining the significance of entry qualifications and specific module success.

For level 2, there is a core module and all Early Childhood Studies students must take and pass this module. The results for the cohort of students for the academic year intake 2000/01 are as follows:

A14	B13	B12	B11	C10	C9	C8	D7	D6	D5	E4	E3	F0
1	7	8	11	10	7	4	7	2	1	6	1	0

Table 4 (65 level 2 students. NB. This includes additional students who joined the programme in October 2001 as direct entry students)

The results for the students participating in the research project are as follows:

A14	B13	B12	B11	C10	C9	C8	D7	D6	D5	E4	E3	F0
1	5	1	3	3	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0

Table 5 (15 students)

From the participating students, it can be seen that 7 students in their level 1 module gained C8 or below. In the second level core module, only 1 student gained a C8, which is the lowest grade for this small group of students. All students, in the research study, have improved their grades but there are too many variables involved to attribute this improvement on any one specific factor.

Aims of the project

This research project focuses on full-time students who entered their academic programme of study in the year 2000 and who are now in their second year of study. They have just completed the second core module.

- To provide additional seminar support for the core module of the programme

- To enable students to reflect on the additional support and to ascertain their perceptions of this support in relation to their learning

Methodology

Only full-time students were asked to participate in the research because of time constraints for additional seminars. Informed consent (Bell, 2000) was sought from the students in the form of a letter and a short questionnaire asking for the students' willingness to participate in the research and to determine the entry qualifications for each student. Students were given a week to consider so that they were able to think carefully about their involvement and also their time commitment.

The original intention of the research was to offer subject specific 1:1 tutorials. However, as the offer was open to all students on a self-select basis, the research was altered slightly from tutorials on an individual basis, to small group seminars of no more than 5 people in each seminar. 15 students elected to take part in the research and agreed to attend one additional seminar of one hour and to take part in a focus group interview at the end of the module.

Students were asked about their entry criteria, which is as follows:

'A' levels	1 student
GNVQ Advanced	4 students
BTec Diploma	3 students
NNEB	2 students
NVQ Level 3	3 students
Other	2 students (1 student registered general nurse, 1 student with OU credits)

10 students are Early Childhood Specialists and 5 students are combining ECS with another subject. However, all students completed the core level 1 module.

The seminars were conducted during week 11 of Semester 1. Each seminar group had five students and each student was given an article: *Some Thoughts About Togetherness: an introduction* (Van Oers, B and Hannikanen, M. International Journal of Early Years Education. Vol.9.No, 2001) which relates to children's emotional development. The article did not relate directly to the coursework assignment but was linked to the timed assignment, which students had already completed. This article was selected to encourage critical thinking from the students but also so that, as far as possible, equity was maintained as the students had not completed the second assignment for the level 2, core module. The article did not relate to the theme for the second assignment but there were some references cited which could have enabled the students to research further and which therefore, could have aided the students in their writing.

The purpose of the seminars was to encourage discussion and to encourage the students' critical thinking in order to enhance their learning and possibly to improve their grades for future assignments. 'Discussion is a valuable and inspiring means for revealing the diversity of opinion that lies just below the surface of almost any complex issue.' (Brookfield and Preskill, p.3, 1999) However, in large teaching groups students may feel under-confident about engaging in a discussion or feel that they do not have sufficient knowledge of a topic to take part in a discussion. (Brookfield and Preskill, 1999)

Three focus group interviews took place during week 13 of semester 1 and were conducted by another member of the Early Childhood Studies Team. This was to try to ensure that objectivity was maintained as far as possible. Nevertheless, there is always uncertainty about the validity of interviews. (Walford, 2001; Bell 1999)

Each focus group interview was 30 minutes in length and was semi-structured in format.

The seminar format

Discussion centred on interpreting the article through selecting key points and through open questions. Students were asked to read the article prior to attending the seminar. All students had read the article and had highlighted areas of interest to them. The highlighting of the text was especially rewarding as they had undertaken this independently of each other and it was not part of the instructions given to the students regarding the article. During the seminar, students also linked some of the points in the article to their own experiences and used a 'storytelling' mode of interpreting the article. Satler, cited in (Brookfield and Preskill 1999) suggests that this is a '*feminist way of teaching to de-centre the classroom*' but the authors themselves perceive this type of teaching to be at the heart of good practice and '*is central to enhancing learning*' (p.125, op.cit.)

In the first seminar, all five students contributed equally and gave critical views alongside the anecdotal comments. The lecturer's role for this seminar was to pose the questions and move students on to the next issue.

The second seminar also had equal contributions from all members but this was more anecdotal. The lecturer's role for this group was to ask more probing questions and to be more directive in encouraging students to relate the anecdotes to the research.

In the third seminar, two students tended to dominate the group and the lecturer's role was to actively encourage comments from the other three students. Brookfield and Preskill (1999) suggests that there are five reasons why students may talk too much but these are not considered in this research which focuses on students' perceptions of seminar work and the effect on their learning.

The attitude and motivation of participants is crucial to the success of this type of teaching and learning as participants were expected to do some preparatory reading and come to the seminar ready to discuss the issues. A small group may be an advantage for less confident speakers but it is also a situation that exposes the students' level of critical thinking.

Limitations of the research project

Firstly, a group of 15 students is only a small sample of the student cohort and may or may not be representative of the whole group. Secondly, the time-scale for the research is only for one semester and only considers one module. Thirdly, if grades are improved, the research does not take into account students' own development of learning therefore the validity of this research could be questionable. However, the comments from the focus groups give an indication of the perceptions that students have in relation to this type of teaching and learning and whether it has had or will have any impact on their own learning.

A focus group interview is a type of assessment, which may, in this case, reveal students' perceptions on this kind of learning activity. (Martinez-Pons, 2001)

Ethically, there may be less objectivity than desired because the lecturer facilitating the seminar is also the students' personal tutor and a relationship has developed over the last eighteen months between the lecturer and the students. Clearly, this may have an effect on the focus group discussions even when conducted by another member of staff. Conducting research with participants who are well known to the researcher presents difficulties in terms of objectivity. (Walford 2001)

Focus group interviews

The focus group interviews revealed an insight into the students' perceptions regarding the small group ethos and also in using discussion as a means of teaching and learning. The focus groups were scheduled for 30 minutes each. Another member of the Early Childhood Team facilitated the questions whilst the author scribed the responses on the flip chart.

The first questions related to how the students perceived working in considerably smaller groups than they were used to. All students commented unanimously on the positive aspects of small group working. Comments such as *'it encouraged (me) to really think about what other people were saying'*; *'...one student talked more that day than I have ever her speak before'*; *'... in a small group, you have to make more of an effort or else you feel that you're letting the others down.'* One student who does not have English as her first language, thought that this way of learning and teaching would be of particular benefit to students who have English as an additional language as she had time, before the seminar, to look up unfamiliar words and was able to participate in the seminar with more confidence. Students felt that they were taking more responsibility for their learning although it was agreed that this depended on individual learning styles. However, two students commented that small group work *'might not be everyone's cup of tea'* and that successful small group work *'depended on a person's motivation'* (to do the preparatory work.)

In relation to discussion as a means of learning and teaching, the comments were again positive and constructive. *'...clarification of ideas'*; *'...better understanding of the article...'* *'able to remember better'*. This affirms studies by Biggs concerning students' learning and memory. (Biggs1999) Students commented that it would be useful to have materials before attending lectures so that they had time to read the salient points beforehand and would therefore be able to process the information given during a lecture more efficiently. The other most revealing comment was that as it was a discussion there could be *'...no right or wrong'* as everybody would have a *'perception and interpretation'* of the material.

The disadvantage to small group seminars was that *'...people might feel (put) on the spot and not bother to do the work'*.

The facilitator asked an additional question regarding whether the students would want more of this type of learning as a teaching method. The responses were pragmatic; students felt that although they thought they had benefited from the small group work, they also appreciated the information given in lectures and thought that at the beginning of a module, there would still be a demand for tutor-led information. This may indicate that, although all students who took part in the research have improved their grades from the first year, they are still under-confident about taking responsibility for their own learning. Some students were quite specific about when small seminar groups could be used during the module sessions. For example, it was suggested that a small seminar would be appropriate 3/4 weeks into the teaching period, then again about mid way through the module.

Conclusion

Although this is only a very small –scale research project, there is a significant difference in the grades obtained in Semester 1, year 1 and those obtained for the core module in Semester 2 year 2. However, this research does not claim that the additional seminar work accounts for this increase. Students' motivation and an increased development in understanding the conceptual issues for Early Childhood Studies modules, together with their own strategies used for 'deep learning', have contributed to this improvement in their grades. Nevertheless, the responses from the focus group interviews indicate that students value the luxury of small group work and that they perceived that it had enhanced their learning. During the seminar activity, it was extremely gratifying to observe the

interactions between the students and also rewarding that they all wished to actively participate. It was an opportunity for the under-confident students to flourish, contribute and make visible progress in their understanding of the concepts presented in the article.

It can be argued that the students appreciate prepared seminar work but at the same time, recognise that this is only one facet of the processes used in learning and teaching. There are some disadvantages with this learning practice insofar as it places responsibility for learning on the students themselves. Perhaps this is an area that is neglected in the teaching and learning but if higher education is to produce graduates who are independent self-motivated thinkers, then clearly enabling students to manage their own learning experiences, is critical. Nevertheless, different learning styles and motivational factors must still be taken into consideration to encourage and enhance the learning of all students.

The constructive comments regarding preparatory material and the timing of similar activities is especially welcomed as adjustments can be made to the learning and teaching in ECS modules.

I would like to thank those level 2 ECS students who willingly took part in this research study.

Future developments

The Early Childhood Studies team will investigate different approaches to learning and teaching to take into account the comments and perceptions that have arisen as a result of this research project. Further consideration will be given to ways of empowering students to enhance their learning through encouraging additional discussion, giving materials prior to the lectures and assisting group learning and support to take place.

As progress and critical thinking have improved from year 1 to year 2, the first year modules will be closely examined in terms of learning and teaching styles and assessment processes to encourage students to develop critical thinking.

Bibliography

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