Students Facilitating and Validating Peer-Learning

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Abstract

This case study describes the challenges encountered in engaging students in the facilitation and validation of peer-learning on the level-two module Religion, Culture and Gender. Peer-learning had been introduced in a previous course presentation as part of a feminist pedagogical approach which challenges hierarchical classroom structures and encourages students as knowledge creators. The project aimed to develop and test several support and training activities which are described and evaluated in this case study. Success has been mixed but the fundamental benefits of the peer-learning activities have not been challenged. The evaluation has highlighted the need for further development which involves changes to the assessment strategy and the provision of more appropriate skills training.

Of particular benefit was the participatory evaluation thanks to the involvement of a student and CEEBL staff. It has raised my awareness of this method as a tool for learning about pedagogy and for course development.

Background

Religion, Culture and Gender is an optional level-two module available to students on Theology, Religious Studies and Combined Studies degree programmes. It usually attracts about 35 students from a range of academic and personal backgrounds in terms of their age, gender (although the majority are female), religion, sexuality and attitude towards gender issues. The course aims to evaluate a century of changing attitudes towards the nature of gender identity, roles and relationships in Western societies and religious traditions. The course introduces different theoretical perspectives on gender identity, roles and relationships, e.g. social constructionism, psychology,

psychoanalysis and sociobiology, and traces the emergence of political movements focusing on gender equality over the past two-hundred years. It also identifies how Jewish and Christian religious traditions have responded to the changing experiences of women and men in society. There is also an opportunity to assess how contemporary images and representations of women and men in media, literature and popular culture reflect theoretical debates in the academy. The learning and teaching approach is based on feminist pedagogy and employs appropriate methods that emphasise the active role of the learner in knowledge construction, and the link between theory and real life situations and experiences.

Rationale

This project aimed to give students the skills and awareness they need to be able to facilitate and engage in peer-learning activities effectively without involvement from teaching staff. This includes student facilitation of group work and classroom discussions, active participation in peer-learning activities and validation of the outcomes. Previous experience has shown that students need suitable support and preparation to be able to know what is required and how to fulfil the requirements. More specifically, the majority of students in previous cohorts had no understanding of the role of the facilitator in classroom discussions and did not seem to be able to develop it over the duration of the course without training. The low quality of facilitation and the awkwardness that this created led to low participation in classroom discussions and affected the quality of peer-learning and knowledge that was generated. Finally, students did not develop effective validation mechanisms for discussion outcomes, and consequently there was very little notetaking and further reflection on the discussions in the summatively assessed Learning Journals, although this was a core element of it.

Another aim of the project, which developed over the duration, was to get a better understanding of the positive experience that some students had with peer-learning and the associated tasks in order to be able to replicate it for other students.

There were expected to be three main benefits of the project. First, those students who were engaged in classroom discussions but claimed that they did not learn anything from them would be able to identify and accept the outcomes of peer-learning as

academically valid knowledge. This relates to the second benefit which is a fundamental review of students' understanding of academic knowledge, its origins and legitimacy, and students' role in its creation. Thirdly, it was expected that students would be able to find ways of legitimating different views on complex and controversial issues.

Approach

The requirements for two introductory workshops were discussed with CEEBL staff to provide introductory training in the formulation of good questions for deep learning, the facilitation of group work and the validation of peer-learning. The workshops were to be delivered by Karen O'Rourke and two student interns, Louise Goldring and Kathy Mair. The workshops took place in the first two weeks of the semester and provided learning activities on group work processes, the value of diversity for group work, the setting and use of ground rules and the use of different types of questions for learning.

It became apparent after the first two rounds of student-led discussions that further guidance was required. A lecturer-student review of the effects of different types of questions on discussion, based on shared experience, seemed to have immediate and lasting effect and raised the quality of responses noticeably. Discussion of mechanisms to capture and validate the outcomes of discussions delivered several practical solutions, including scribing on the blackboard and making the audio recordings done for dyslexic students available to all via the virtual learning environment. Several recordings were submitted in the first few weeks and uploaded to the course web space. Scribing was provided in each session by students from the presenting/facilitating group, but the quality was very uneven and coverage of the discussions was often incomplete. It was obvious that little notetaking was going on among the participants.

Since no specific facilitation training had been provided, students struggled to get through this task, some more than others. Several sessions did not require much facilitation to get the class going because of the accessibility of the topics. On the whole, there was a clear link between the quality of facilitation and the levels of active participation and depth of discussions. Unfortunately, it was not possible to provide the necessary training later on in the semester.

Assessment

The student-led discussions were linked to several summatively assessed tasks in the form of reflective writing. Students were given a self-assessment form (Appendix 2) to be completed after their presentation/facilitation and to be submitted to the lecturer for feedback. Successful submission of the completed form was rewarded with 2.5% of the overall portfolio mark.

One of the main reflective tasks was a Learning Journal which students completed after each meeting. The guidance (Appendix 3) emphasises the importance of peer-learning as a source of knowledge and as a resource for reflection. Apart from the weekly entries, the Learning Journal also contained three structured sections, namely Before and After logs (Appendix 4; note that the After log is the same as the Before log but looking back over the course) and a questionnaire to guide reflection on a lecture on epistemology (Appendix 5). The Before and After logs included questions on the student-led discussions, active participation and the contribution of peer-learning activities to students' progress. The epistemology questionnaire deepens thinking about the power relations and processes that shape knowledge construction. Successful submission of these three sections contributed 2.5% each to the overall portfolio mark.

Evaluation

The evaluation method was designed with the help of Norman Powell to be appreciative and participatory. The main aim of the evaluation was to identify what worked well for some students in order to develop this to the benefit of all students. The evaluation was conducted with the participation of one student from the current cohort, Anna Snape, who was the only student who attended the Focus Group meeting and subsequently committed to further involvement in the evaluation process.

Anna, Norman and I analysed Anna's initial Focus Group interview together with a selection of assessment documents, especially Student-led Discussion Feedback forms and After logs. These revealed that Anna was one of the few students who had enjoyed facilitating the group discussion, whereas the majority had felt very unprepared for the task. It was agreed that Anna's natural confidence and experience in public speaking

had been sufficient to help her deal with the unfamiliar task. All students, including students like Anna, would benefit from proper facilitation training.

Most sources revealed that the diversity training had had a positive impact on the way discussions were conducted in a respectful manner. However, it also came to light in numerous Learning Journal entries that potentially offending contributions had been withheld in class. This is a serious issue which requires further reflection and preparation. Although active participation was higher than in previous years, there were still too many students who remained silent for most of the time. It was agreed by the evaluation team that this was partly influenced by the quality of the facilitation. But lack of emotional competence in actively contributing to controversial discussions also seems to have played a significant role. Again, this requires further reflection before appropriate interventions can be designed and tested.

The least progress had to be recorded in the development of students' acceptance of peer-learning as equally valuable as lecturer input and scholarly texts. The majority of Learning Journals did not contain serious reflection on peer contributions to classroom discussions. In addition, reflection on peer-learning in the After logs did not show much acknowledgement of the positive impact of exposure to a diverse cohort on individual learning. The evaluation team agreed that the lack of effective scribing was to blame for a proportion of this problem. Scribing skills training would not only provide the opportunity to learn the required skills; it would also raise awareness of the purpose of scribing in the context of this course and initiate further discussion of the processes of academic knowledge construction and students' role in this process.

Further Development

The evaluation of the project has already identified ways of improving the support provision and initial training to ensure more effective facilitation and validation of the outcomes of peer-learning. The introductory workshops will be adapted to be more specifically tailored to the learning activities through facilitation and diversity training, scribing skills training and confidence building exercises. There will also be changes to the presenter/facilitator group size to avoid problems resulting from absence. Further physical changes will involve the use of name tags for all students and a more participatory seating arrangement if possible. The assessment strategy will be adapted to

recognise the negative impact of the current low, overall contribution of the mark for presenters/facilitators on motivation.

The participatory evaluation of the current project constitutes the first stage in an ongoing evaluation process which will be repeated at the beginning and end of each course presentation. Since the cohort always changes, the evaluation stage at the beginning of the project has to be conducted with the outgoing cohort and the final evaluation with the current cohort. This is a special case in participatory evaluation which generally assumes continuity of evaluation participants. It would be useful to add the experience as a case study to the research in participatory evaluation.

Further CEEBL funding has been secured to develop a particular aspect of peer-learning in the context of this course which has been identified as problematic at the evaluation stage. This involves further support of student dialogue and collaboration across faiths, genders, sexual orientations and other diversities. The controversial nature of Religion, Culture and Gender and the diversity of students often lead to destructive classroom interactions if unproblematized. The new project will develop several mechanisms for harnessing diversity for induction and knowledge creation, and for developing emotional competency. This project includes a collaboration within the subject area to develop an EBL progression route to avoid duplication of training and to build up students' EBL-related skills from level one through to level three.

Appendix 1

Student-led Discussions

Structure

The Student-led Discussions are broken down into three elements:

1. Your group prepares a short, critical presentation of your chosen course reading (5 minutes);

2. Your group formulates and presents to the class three questions that you developed out of the reading;

3. Your group facilitates the discussion of these questions (15-20 minutes).

Preparation

Things you need to consider:

*   How can we work together effectively in a small group, especially if we did not previously know each other?

*   How can we design an effective presentation of the reading?

*   How can we formulate 'good' questions that stimulate discussion?

*   How can we understand our roles as effective facilitators?

*   How can we validate the outcomes of the discussion?

*   How can we design an effective OHP transparency?

    *   It should only contain the main points of your presentation.

    *   It should contain your three questions.

    *   It should be typed in Times New Roman 18pt bold to make it legible for everybody. Your text box should not be larger than 21cm x 21cm.

- It should be posted to WebCT by emailing it to your lecturer **the day before the seminar at the latest**. This is to ensure that any students who find it hard to read during the seminar can get hold of it in advance.

Assessment: 2.5% of overall portfolio mark

You will self-assess how the task went by filling in the 'SLD feedback' form which can be downloaded via WebCT. You should then email the form to your lecturer who will return it with written comments on your self-assessment. The completed form with your own and the lecturer's comments should then be submitted through WebCT as part of your portfolio no later than **14 Dec 2007**.

Appendix 2

Student-led Discussions

Self-assessment and Tutor Feedback

Student name:

Reading:

1. How well do I feel I understand the presented text? Did I encounter any specific difficulties?

2. How well do I feel I communicated my understanding in my presentation? What went particularly well? What was difficult?

3. How well do I feel I structured the presentation? (Think about timing, logical order and focus on key points.)

4. How well did I/we design the OHP transparencies? Did the audience find them easy to read? Did they spend a long time copying information?

5. How appropriate were our chosen questions to the text? Did they help the group to explore key issues? Did they stimulate discussion?

6. How did I/we facilitate the discussion? How did we get the audience started?

7. How did we respond to unexpected discussion contributions?

8. Did the activity go as expected? Did I encounter any encouraging and/or challenging surprises?

9. How could I improve the activity?

10. How did we work together as a group? What went well and what was difficult?

11. How could it be improved?

12. Any other comments?

Appendix 3

The Learning Journal

What is a Learning Journal?

A Learning Journal is a **reflective weekly diary** in which you record your thoughts and questions on the topics, theories and examples which have been discussed in the lectures and seminars, and cross-reference it to the Reading Log. You should draw on a wide range of sources for your reflection. The **core sources** are lecturer and student presentations on this course, discussions inside the classroom, and course readings; these should be used for every entry. You might find it unusual that student presentations and classroom discussions are treated as core sources. You need to take notes of these in the same way that you take notes of what the lecturer says. You will lose points if you do not include student presentations and classroom discussions in your Learning Journal entries. You can also draw on discussions outside the classroom as well as your own readings including newspapers, magazines, films etc as **additional sources**.

Reflection is a form of mental processing with the purpose of reorganising **ideas and creating new meaning**. Reflection involves relating ideas to each other, experimenting, exploring, reinterpreting from different points of view, theorising and linking theory and practice. Effective reflection enables you to work with unstructured material that you will encounter on this course. It helps you to step back from a situation and consider alternative interpretations. Reflective writing also makes you aware of your achievements of learning when you formulate your results and frame new questions for yourself.

Why is the Learning Journal very suitable for *Religion, Culture and Gender?*

The Learning Journal provides an ideal opportunity for you to **relate experience to theory** and engage in **critical and systematic reflection on experience** which is very important on this course. Journal writing helps you to **focus and order your thoughts** in a way that is impossible to achieve while you are listening to a lecture and taking

notes. It encourages **independent and self-directed learning** in preparation for your third-year project and lets you expand on topics that are of special interest to you. Religion, Culture and Gender has so many facets that cannot all be covered in lectures and seminars, but the Learning Journal gives you extra space to explore them further. It further helps you to **develop a questioning attitude** which is required for academic excellence. Learning journal writing also helps you to deal with **situations that are not straightforward** like social problems and ethical issues that you will encounter on the course. Finally, the writing of a Learning Journal makes you **aware of the learning process** itself and how you learn. This helps you to identify strengths and weaknesses in your approach to learning.

What am I trying to achieve?

The general aim in your reflection is not to find 'right answers', but to **construct and defend reasonable approaches** to issues around religion, culture and gender. Your proposals might be provisional and based on the best facts and theories available to you at the time. But you should be prepared to re-evaluate earlier thoughts in later journal entries in order to demonstrate the development of your insights.

More specifically, **three areas of focus** have been identified in the context of this course which you should try to address in your weekly entries. Under each heading is a list of possible **Guiding Questions** that you should draw up in the first week and use to focus all your entries. You are also encouraged to formulate your own questions under the three headings. You should regularly review your Guiding Questions and record any additions and changes in your Learning Journal. This assumes that your thinking moves on as you progress through the course and your Guiding Questions should reflect the development of your understanding.

You should:

- reflect on each topic

    What have I learned from this topic?

    Do I understand? Are there areas that I don't understand? Does this matter?

How does my learning relate to other areas of the course/other knowledge and experience I have?

Why is information presented in this way? Is this helpful? What are the limitations?

What other sources of information are available?

Anything that I want to follow up?

- reflect on the impact of your own standpoint on your learning

    Why did I find this topic particularly interesting/difficult/infuriating/etc.?

    Has my response been affected by my background, experience, and personal and academic interests?

    What other responses might people have to this topic from different standpoints?

    What are the strengths and weaknesses?

- subject anecdotal evidence to critical and systematic analysis

    How can I put a real-life example of this issue into its wider context?

    Does this example highlight general trends and underlying issues?

    Which theories (especially ones used on this course, but also other theories that I know) can help me to make sense of this example?

What do I need to write an effective Learning Journal?

First of all, you need clear **Guiding Questions** which you review and update regularly as discussed above.

You need to give yourself **time** to do your writing every week, ideally as soon after the class as possible. The Learning Journal should show clearly how you have sustained and developed your thinking over the duration of the course. There is no point in writing your entries at the end of the course!

You also need to make **notes** of your own and other students' contributions to lecture and seminar discussions. They are considered as important for your reflection as conventional sources like the course readings and lecturer presentations. This might be new to you and you can use the Learning Journal to think about the value of other students' comments and opinions to your learning.

Finally, you need to give yourself the **space** to experiment with ideas. Your Learning Journal needs to demonstrate that you have understood the theories and issues discussed on the course, that you can make links between sources and across topics, and that you can raise your own questions and suggest further ways of exploration.

How should I structure the Learning Journal?

The Learning Journal should be structured into separate and clearly marked entries for each topic. You should make it clear whether you are writing about a topic after having attended the lecture or seminar, or whether you have not been there but you still want to record your thoughts.

How much you write mainly depends on how good you are at expressing and ordering your thoughts concisely. Remember that you should edit your Learning Journal before submitting it as part of the Portfolio. This gives you the opportunity to shorten any entries that seem too rambling at a later stage.

The Learning Journal should be written like a dialogue with yourself, using terminology correctly and appropriately, but allowing you to make your statements, questions and ideas personal. The resulting product of a series of entries involves ideas being moved on in the form of questions and statements about areas for further reflection that you return to later.

The Learning Journal can be as personal or general as you like. However, before submitting it as part of the Portfolio you should consider carefully whether you want all of your thoughts to be read by the assessors. Any information that you think is too personal should be taken out or summarised in such a way that you feel comfortable.

Appendix 4

'Before the Course' Log

Your programme of study

Department:

Programme:

Year:

My academic interest in religion, culture and gender

Why did I choose this course? What do I want to get out of it?

I have studied gender theory before. If yes, please give details. (Don't worry if you haven't. No previous knowledge required.)

Which questions do I hope to address on the course?

Does this fit in with other courses of my programme? How?

Are there any topics in the Course Outline that I might find difficult? Why?

What academic strengths do I have that I could draw on throughout this course and how could I improve them further on this course?

What academic weaknesses do I have that might have an impact on my studies on this course and how could I improve them?

Your personal interest in religion, culture and gender

What do I bring to the course in terms of personal background, interest and experience that relate to questions of religion, culture and gender?

Are they strengths or weaknesses? Do they set areas of tension in relation to the course themes? If yes, which areas?

How can I use them to contribute positively to my learning about religion, culture and gender?

My interaction in the classroom

In what ways do I expect the students and the lecturer on this course to differ from myself and from each other?

Are these differences opportunities or threats to my learning?

Do these differences set areas of tension in our interaction? If yes, which areas?

How could the other people on the course benefit from my academic and personal background and interests?

My handling of the learning tasks

My previous experiences of:

- writing exams;

- giving presentations;

- leading classroom discussions;

- making notes from course readings;

- keeping a Learning Journal.

How do I feel about these tasks on this course? What are my expectations of the benefits and results for me?

 If I have any worries about any of these tasks, what can I do to get the most out of them?

PLEASE USE ADDITIONAL SHEETS IF YOU RUN OUT OF SPACE

Appendix 5

Constructivist Models of Knowledge

1. What are the advantages and disadvantages of constructivist models of knowledge as opposed to a belief in universal truths?

2. Constructivist scholarly writing usually opens with a biographical, self-reflective account as to the personal reasons for the inquiry ('why I find this interesting') and the impact of personal background on presuppositions, angle and approach ('where I am coming from and where I am going'). Does this analysis of the subjectivity of the scholar help to make the research more scientific and objective? Or is this a contradiction?

3. Do constructivist models of knowledge pose a particular challenge for the study of religions?