Student-centred Teaching and Learning: not always what it says on the tin?

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Abstract

In the context of policy initiatives aimed at widening participation and an increasingly diverse student population, the notion of student academic engagement and how to achieve it have become important topics in academic and practitioner debates. Drawing on Biggs and Tang's (2007) concept of Levels One, Two and Three teaching, the paper presents the findings of a qualitative study designed to explore different teaching and learning approaches in terms of the level and nature of student engagement. Through an in-depth ethnographic approach, differences in student engagement were observed in the three categories of teaching. It is suggested that genuine student-centred learning and teaching, based upon constructivist learning theory, is highly effective in engaging students and facilitating a deep approach to learning.

Keywords: student-centred, student engagement, approaches to learning, constructivist learning, widening participation

Introduction

I shall begin this paper with a paradox. When I started out on my teaching career some years ago, I was encouraged to observe teaching sessions taught by colleagues, especially those deemed highly capable. I observed a particular teacher recommended to me because of his apparent ability to engage students and the consistently high rates he obtained in student evaluations.

I was at once impressed with and intimidated by his teaching style. He seemed extremely confident, speaking freely, putting across in a light-hearted way what was a complex and quite abstract topic in international business management. He was very funny, getting lots of laughs from the students, who all seemed to listen attentively. The session was seemingly interactive, with the tutor throwing questions at the audience, and students enjoying having a go at answering them.

It was much to my surprise then, when I came to do my share of the marking, that the quality of the student assignments in this module was very low. Most students had answered the same two questions. The answers were all very similar, and they appeared to be lifted out straight from the textbook, reflecting an instrumentalist, rote-learning approach. It seemed to me that most students had not gained their own understanding of the material.

It was this experience that, when it came to preparing my portfolio as part of a teaching in Higher Education (HE) training programme, led me to focus on student-centred teaching and learning and student engagement. The training programme was aimed at teaching staff to develop their professional skills through 'reflective practice' (Schön, 1983), critically evaluating their approach to the planning, delivery and assessment of teaching and learning in the light of relevant theories, with the aim of applying the outcomes of this evaluation to their future practice. As part of the programme, staff-students were required to investigate a particular aspect of classroom activity through observations of other tutors. This paper will discuss the initial findings of a qualitative study that I carried out at a post-92 university for the purposes of that HE training programme.

It will be argued that student-centred approaches, taken seriously, can be highly effective in engaging all students in diverse student environments. The findings also suggest that some teaching styles, which may be thought of as student-centred, are instead much more about the teacher's delivery of the content, leading to the encouragement of surface rather than deep learning approaches.

The paper is structured as follows: In the next section, I will develop the conceptual framework of my research by discussing some of the key literature in the field. This is

followed by an outline of the research focus and the methodology of data collection and analysis, before the findings are presented and conclusions drawn.

Student-centred teaching and learning and engagement

In the context of policy initiatives aimed at widening participation and an increasingly diverse student population, the notion of student academic engagement and how to achieve it have become important topics in academic and practitioner debates (for example, Roberts, 2011; Biggs & Tang, 2007). In an era of mass education, HE students no longer come from only a small elite of the population, but are increasingly divergent, not only in terms of gender, age, social class and ethnicity but also nationality, culture and religion (Cunningham, 2013; Reay, David & Ball, 2005; Carroll & Ryan, 2005). Commentators have pointed out the need to accommodate increasing numbers of students who may have educational backgrounds, learner dispositions and expectations that differ from those of traditional students. To this end, a growing body of research suggests the benefits of student-centred teaching and learning, taking student understanding as its core, as opposed to a teacher-centred approach, focusing on what is delivered (for example, Elen, Carebout, Léonard & Lowyck, 2007; Blackie, Case & Jawitz, 2010; Dickie, Pick & Issa, 2013; Ní Raghallaigh & Cunniffe, 2013).

The educationalist Alan Pritchard (2009: 29) defines engagement as:

…learners getting as close to the material content of what is hoped they will learn as possible…By undertaking actions and activities, mental or physical, which centre on the facts, the concepts or the skills in question, learners are in the position to move forward in their learning.

The level of engagement may be conceptualised in terms of 'surface' and 'deep' approaches to learning (Marton & Säljö, 1976; McCombs & Whistler, 1997; Biggs & Tang, 2007). Biggs and Tang (2007) describe them as useful concepts for improving teaching. In a deep learning approach, motivated students develop their own understanding of the material based on intrinsic interest. They relate information to existing knowledge, while looking for patterns and meaning (McCombs & Whisler, 1997; Gibbs, 1992). This contrasts with a surface approach to learning whereby students focus on learning 'facts', which are often unrelated and disconnected from any

overarching structural knowledge. A surface approach to learning is commonly aimed at passing exams.

Student-centred teaching and learning is underpinned by constructivist and social constructivist theory (Piaget, 1950; Vygotsky, 1987). This stresses students' construction of their own knowledge based on what they already know, through dialogue with the teacher and with each other (Pritchard, 2009). Student-centred teaching is therefore about developing teaching and learning activities that engage students in active learning, facilitating the students' construction of their own understanding and encouraging them to reflect on prior experience. It is promoted through using authentic tasks in contexts that are relevant to the student. This also relates to andragogy, which posits that adult learners need to see the relevance of learning to their own experience (Knowles, 1973).

A useful conception of different teaching and learning approaches is provided by Biggs and Tang (2007), who distinguish between Level One, Two and Three Teaching. Level One refers to the 'directive transmission' of content, Level Two focuses on the teacher's techniques to 'get the material across', and Level Three emphasises teaching to support learning. Levels One and Two are essentially 'teacher-centred', focussing on what is delivered and how, while Level Three is 'student-centred', concerned with student understanding. It is argued that only Level Three teaching is effective in promoting a deep approach to learning in the context of an increasingly diverse student population, where students from different cultural and class backgrounds come with different learner dispositions and learning styles (ibid). The close link between engagement and effective teaching is highlighted by Harper and Quaye (2009: 52) who refer to engagement as 'participation in educationally effective practices'.

There is a growing body of research suggesting that a student-centred approach is more effective than a traditional teacher-centred one in terms of inducing a deep approach to learning (for example, Elen, Carebout, Léonard & Lowyck, 2007; Blackie, Case & Jawitz, 2010; Gray, Stein, Osborne & Aitken, 2013). For example, Gray, Stein, Osborne and Aitken (2013) observed how a more creative approach based on experiential learning techniques, including a case study representing an authentic scenario, encouraged collaborative learning and the co-construction of new business

knowledge amongst students on a marketing course. In the same vein, it has been argued that traditional teacher-centred approaches are effective only for academically highly motivated students (Hockings, Cooke & Bowl, 2007: 723).

However, the evidence also suggests that those approaches that have been shown to be successful for students from divergent backgrounds, have elaborate designs and follow the constructivist logic of student-centred learning as conceptualised in the learning theories literature. Learning is situated and centres on activities in authentic situations, designed to engage students by requiring them to take responsibility for their learning, build on their prior experiences and generate their own knowledge through participation and interaction.

Importantly, such approaches do not entail a reduction of teachers' preparation time, as has been suggested (see Elen, Carebout, Léonard & Lowyck, 2007). Rather, aiming to support and facilitate student learning, they require careful designing of interventions so as to facilitate independent learning. Once implemented, the activities need to be reviewed and re-adjusted in the light of student responses (ibid.).

Blackie, Case and Jawitz (2010: 638) problematize the notion of student-centred learning and teaching as a 'threshold concept', which has implications for academic staff development. They argue that:

'student-centred teaching is not just a different style of teaching. It requires that the academic really understands and appreciates the need to pay attention to the students and their learning. It involves a shift from measuring one's success as a teacher by how much of the syllabus is successfully covered to measuring one's success by how much the students actually learn and with what depth of understanding. This requires the academic to be invested in the learning of the students, rather than the transfer of information, and to be concerned about the actual process of learning happening in students.'

Thus, for example, Ní Raghallaigh and Cunniffe (2013) applied Fink's (2003) 'active learning' model to achieve a high level of student engagement in their social work seminars. Through a combination of 'doing', 'observing' and 'reflecting', involving case studies and role plays, students were able to learn and put into practice social work

interviewing skills and to achieve what Fink (2003) refers to as 'significant learning'. The learning in these seminars was 'situated', with students being able to apply their skills in situations close to their actual work environment, thus making it relevant to them.

A further recent example of effective student-centred learning is Zeeman and Lotriet's (2013) case study of a classical Greek drama course. The constructivist learning and teaching approach was based on Heathcote's model of the 'mantle of the expert' (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995), which affords a high level of autonomy to the learner in terms of how that learning is organised. The classes were essentially student-led, with learners having to create and perform their own adaptations of Greek plays and a panel of students leading the discussion.

On the other hand, Hockings and colleagues (Hockings, Cooke & Bowl, 2007; Hockings, 2009) suggest that student-centred approaches may not work for students from non-traditional backgrounds, who may have different expectations and dispositions towards knowledge (for example, that this be transmitted by the expert teacher). Indeed, based on her review of the literature, Hockings (2009) argues that student-centred teaching and learning may not be effective for about 30% of students, who continue to adopt a surface approach to learning. Drawing on Mann's (2001) concepts of engagement and alienation, one reason suggested is that some students may not identify with the higher education environment and instead construct an alternative identity.

Research focus and methodology

The previous section revealed some ambiguity in the literature as to the extent to which student-centred teaching and learning approaches are effective and for what type of students. If students from non-traditional backgrounds are found not to respond to these approaches, this would mean that student-centred teaching and learning is failing the very group of learners it is designed to reach.

I carried out my research at a post-1992 university with a highly diverse student body comprising a large intake of international students (particularly from Asian and African countries) and those from non-traditional (including less academic) backgrounds. In its

mission statement, the university professes to 'serve the needs of diverse communities', and its Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategy is committed to 'promote student-centred, active learning' and to 'meet the diverse learning needs of the student group'.

It therefore seemed pertinent to focus my investigation on how student-centred teaching and learning is put into practice by lecturers at this university and to what extent it is effective, that is, whether student engagement of all students is achieved.

My study was guided by the research question: How do different lecturers achieve genuine student engagement in seminars in an inclusive way? 'Genuine engagement' was defined in terms of students' independent learning, thereby constructing their own meaning and understanding of the material, while 'in an inclusive way' refers to the way in which lecturers engage students from diverse backgrounds.

For the purpose of the study I developed a conceptual framework, broadly based on Biggs and Tang (2007), which encompasses some key elements of effective teaching and learning to promote engagement and deep learning approaches, and which helped me to explore the tutor's approach as well as the students' responses. Aspects of the tutor's approach include: Levels One, Two and Three teaching, bringing out the structure of knowledge, eliciting an active response from the students (for example, through the use of divergent questions), and the relevance of the material. The student responses refer to *inter alia* using higher-order cognitive activities (for example, arguing, explaining, applying and reflecting), meaningful engagement, and working conceptually rather than with unconnected detail (Biggs & Tang, 2007: 24-25, 27)

For the study I conducted observations of four seminars related to four different Master's modules in Business Studies for about 1 ½ hours each. In the subsequent discussion, I shall refer to them as seminars A, B, C and D. The lecturers had been recommended to me for their innovative ways of teaching by my professional tutor. I subsequently contacted the lecturers who all agreed to participate in my research and each agreed a particular session for me to observe.

As can been seen from Table 1, the student groups were remarkably similar in terms of age range, and the number of students in each seminar was around 20. All groups were ethnically diverse, with about half of the students of African or Asian origin.

The groups of students were also similar in terms of an even split between male and female students.

Table 1.   The student seminars of the study

Seminar	Age range	Number of students in seminar
A	20s and 30s	18
B	20s and 30s	20
C	Late 20s/early 30s	24
D	Late 20s/early 30s	20

Given that the task was to observe other tutors, I adopted an ethnographic design which commonly includes observation of the research participants in their natural environment (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). It is an approach that offers rich information, illuminating social processes that may go unnoticed by less in-depth research (ibid.). In a further step I will conduct interviews with the four tutors and obtaining the students' assessment results, so as to triangulate the data. It is important to note that this paper is based on the observations only, and as such the paper has clear limitations.

My role as researcher could best be described as 'observer-as-participant' (Gold, 1958) as I was not a complete participant but neither was I a complete observer, given that I was present in the classroom and students to some extent interacted with me (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). During each observation I took field notes to capture the evidence (Foster, 1996), that is, I noted down as much as possible of the structure and content of the session and the unfolding interactions of tutor and students.

My enquiry (the observation and subsequent analysis) was informed by the conceptual framework discussed in the previous section. I had prepared the framework in advance to focus on my particular research question and have broadly comparable data for each observation, while still being open to unexpected themes. Thus, I focused my observations on *inter alia*: the extent of tutor-led and student-led activities and the degree to which these facilitated student engagement and interaction which each other; the degree to which the teacher dominated discussion following group work; the extent

to which the tutor built on students' prior knowledge; and whether students worked conceptually rather than with unrelated detail.

Analysis and presentation of findings

I analysed the observation notes based on principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Informed by my conceptual framework, I identified and coded emergent themes, which were then confirmed or rejected through further readings of the observation notes and the process of constant comparison of coded material. At the end of the process I had identified a total of 15 themes, including: Level One, Two and Three teaching; building on prior knowledge; making everyone participate; and independent learning. The most powerful analytical categories that emerged were 'Level One, Two and Three teaching' and 'student engagement'. For the purpose of presenting the findings I have mapped the seminars onto a matrix (Table 2).

Table 2. The Four Seminars in Terms of Level One, Two or Three Teaching and Student Engagement

Level One, Two or Three teaching	One	Two	Three
Student engagement	Low	Low	High
Seminar	C	A	B, D

A note of caution: While all seminars contained examples of Level One, Two and Three teaching, the categorisation is based on the teaching approaches that *prevailed* in the particular sessions I observed. It also needs to be acknowledged that the sessions and the particular modules they formed part of, each had different contents, aims and learning outcomes that may have privileged certain approaches over others. The examples presented in the next section were selected to illustrate Level One, Two and Three teaching and the effect these had on student engagement. For the purpose of this paper, only the data from Seminars A, B and C will be presented.

Level One, Two and Three Teaching

The activities in Seminar C presented here serve as examples of Level One teaching. The topic was 'balance sheets'. There was a slide with a spreadsheet and all students had their books open in front of them. The tutor did most of the talking and only asked questions that required short answers, such as 'what's the main danger of high gearing?' The answer to this question is 'interest rate rises' which the student group responded. The teacher then took forward a lengthy explanation. This was a traditional set-up with a directive transmission of knowledge, and it seemed to me that some students may well have been left behind. In any case, the great majority of students did not make any verbal contributions but passively noted down what the tutor said.

Seminar A, by contrast, involved predominantly Level Two teaching. Tutor A introduced an NHS case study, including an activity in the form of a debate on the pros and cons of the release of a new but expensive drug for Alzheimer's disease. Students were split into three groups, representing the drug manufacturers, the patients, and the regulatory body. A debate can be a very effective means for promoting student engagement, ensuring that students address each other rather than the teacher (Rumpus, 2003). On the face of it, this was an opportunity for students to engage in active learning, based on an authentic task.

However, it seemed to me that Tutor A, rather than using this as a student-centred activity to encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning, took on a much more dominant teaching role. He treated the students as 'empty vessels' (di Napoli, 2004) with no prior knowledge. During the discussion phase, when each group was required to prepare their position in the subsequent debate, he joined each group, briefing them what their position should be and what they should be arguing. During the debate most students seemed restricted by that brief, which implied that there was only one possible answer. Also, Tutor A took on the role of the Minister chairing the debate, even though it was indicated in the case study brief that it should be chaired by a volunteer from the class. Only a few students of each group contributed, addressing Tutor A as the chair.

As Tutor A attempted to bring out the structure, the seminar became increasingly teacher-led. Tutor A explicated issues of power and ethics, asking leading questions until the students 'got it'. He made it a very entertaining session, and all students were attentive, but, mostly, passive. Following Biggs and Tang (2007), this was an example of Level Two teaching, which is essentially teacher-centred, and which focuses on the performance of the teacher rather than on student learning.

By contrast, Seminar D was a powerful example of Level Three teaching, using activities designed to support student learning. The activity was also based on a case study. The scenario was that a director of a company was under pressure to review the management development policy and to that end had commissioned three consultancy firms. The students divided into three groups representing the firms. They certainly did not need encouragement but quickly organised into different groups, which suggested to me that they were used to this kind of activity. The groups were each given a brief. They were given half an hour to prepare a presentation on the management development problems and a proposal for an action plan. When Tutor D joined the various groups he did not give any directive input. Indeed, when one group asked him about the structure, he replied that that was up to them but that he imagined they would be sketching out the general philosophy.

The activity also included an element of informal peer assessment which is said to promote a deep approach to learning and student engagement (McCombs & Whisler, 1997). Tutor D appointed two students to represent the company. The three groups were to present to these 'company representatives', who had to decide which consultancy firm would get the 'contract'.

It was a good example of self-directed, collaborative learning, echoing the findings of Gray et al 2013) and the use of a 'live' case study referred to earlier. It was up to the students to organise their learning and the presentation. The students seemed highly motivated. Each group assigned different roles to group members and they each spoke during the presentations. Importantly, they did not speak to the tutor but to the 'company representatives', who in turn commented on each presentation and asked the teams to expand on this or that aspect. It was an authentic situation, which students took extremely seriously. All students seemed highly engaged in independent learning, and the tutor intervened minimally.

Conclusions

The initial findings of the study as presented in the preceding section would indicate that Level Three teaching had the greatest impact in terms of genuinely engaging students. They took responsibility for their learning and developed their own understanding of the material through interaction with each other.

The study seems to suggest, therefore, that a genuinely student-centred approach is effective in engaging students in the sense of facilitating a deep approach to learning, confirming existing research. Where students resist this, as suggested by some commentators (Hockings, 2009; Mann, 2001), reasons may include a lack of opportunity for students to play an active part in their learning, possibly as a result of the tutor assuming a dominant or controlling role, concerned with conveying a body of knowledge, albeit through a variety of techniques (Level Two teaching, as illustrated in the examples of Seminar C) (Biggs & Tang, 2007)).

Interestingly, therefore, much of teaching and learning today may go under the label of 'student-centred', when it is merely conventional directive teaching, transmitting knowledge to passive students (Level One teaching in Biggs and Tang's (2007) terms). This will clearly need further research. There is no doubt that engaging a diverse student population in higher education has been presenting a challenge to teaching staff, especially where students come with different expectations and learner dispositions.

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