

REFLECTIONS OF A NEW LECTURER: TEACHING INNOVATIONS AND THE ROLE OF PEER SUPPORT

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Introduction

Due to on-going turbulence in UK higher education, including the forthcoming rise in tuition fees, reduced financial support from the state, changes to the research excellence framework, rapid advances in teaching technology, increased work demands, a cultural shift towards managerialism, and the perceived deterioration of collegiality in academic life (Higher Education Management and Policy, 2004; Hodkinson & Taylor, 2002), lecturing staff are under more pressure now than ever before. In this short paper, I will describe how I adjusted to my new role as a lecturer at Aston Business School (ABS) and outline the key innovations that I introduced to a module for which I was responsible. Based on an ethnographical narrative of my own experiences, I will also discuss the crucial role that peer support, mentoring, and participation in the PGCert has played throughout this transition.

Module Background

In January 2010, I began my first post as a lecturer at ABS and immediately took over as module leader of BH2286 Effective Teamwork. Prior to 2010, this was a second year module attended by approximately 30 students, all from BSc Human Resource Management. However, when I took over the module, it was also opened up to final year students from other programmes, predominantly those studying BSc Computing for Business. The new learning cohort therefore consisted of 55 second and final year students from a variety of programmes. These changes presented a number of issues which I needed to address prior to delivering the module.

Firstly, the newly diverse student composition meant that the course content and assessment needed to be reviewed to ensure that it remained fit for purpose. Final year students are typically more conscientious and concerned with the requirement of group assessment (which accounted for 30% of the module), given the importance of final year module performance in determining degree classification. Secondly, the mix of students from different degree programmes meant that the cohort was no longer homogenous with regards to prior knowledge and academic background. Some students had a lot of insight into organisational behaviour and psychology topics, whereas others had no experience at all. The 80% increase in class size also meant that teaching methods which had previously been used to deliver the course material in a small group setting may no longer be feasible or effective.

To address these challenges, I began by reviewing the learning outcomes of the module. It was important to ensure they used adjectives which reflect the higher levels of Bloom's Taxonomy of Education Objectives (1956), meaning that on successful completion of the course, students will have developed evaluation and analysis skills relating to the module content, as well as mastering basic cognitive skills relating to comprehension of the topic area. In order to achieve these learning outcomes with the new learning cohort, the content, structure and methods of delivery used needed to be revised and updated. I therefore decided to implement some key innovations on the module, each of which are summarised below.

Key Innovations

New teaching methods.

Given that the class size had increased from the previous year, I decided to use a variety of teaching methods during the two-hour weekly lectures in order to capture all types of learning style, some of which had not previously been used. These included open group discussions, mind mapping exercises, case study activities, audio and video content (such as DVD and YouTube clips), a team climate questionnaire (which gave each team unique feedback on its group processes), and class quizzes. This variety was favourably viewed by the students. For the revision quiz for example, I used Optivote to engage each student individually and provide a novel and exciting class activity. This activity was particularly valuable for students with an 'active' learning style (Honey & Mumford, 1982) and students seemed to appreciate the quiz as an interactive activity which helped with revision. The only disadvantage was the challenge of getting the Optivote software to work properly!

Incorporation of my research.

Research in the field of organisational behaviour is expanding at a rapid pace, and I therefore revised the module reading list in order to reflect to most recent trends in the literature. In doing so, I included a number of my own papers on the topic of effective teamwork, thus recognising the importance of the 'research teaching nexus' (Jenkins, Healy & Zetter, 2007). For example, a book chapter that I recently published became a core reading for the module and I used the activities and discussion questions from the chapter in several tutorials. This not only underpinned my teaching approach on the module, but also served to enhance my credibility and expertise on the topic in the eyes of the students.

Management of group assessment.

Given the subject matter of the module, I decided to retain the group-based assignment (which counted for 30% of the assessment) for a number of reasons. Most crucially, group work gave the students an opportunity to test out and critically evaluate the practical principles of effective teamwork covered in the lectures in a collaborative learning environment. Group assessment involves grouping learners with various abilities to work together on a common interdependent task, whereby the success of one learner depends on the success of another. This task structure fosters conditions of 'cooperative outcome interdependence' (De Dreu, 2007) which facilitates team member helping behaviours, joint responsibility for learning and helps groups reap the benefits of their compositional diversity (van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007). Indeed, developing intercultural awareness via cooperation and teamwork is a crucial learning outcome in Aston's diverse student body.

Group work, however, is a common concern for students. I, therefore, applied principles covered in the PGCert to ensure that the group assessment was well-received and supported. I began by setting all groups a task to complete on Blackboard™ in the first two weeks of the course, in which they were required to provide a group name and agree upon five specific behavioural norms and objectives that the group would follow throughout the term. These included norms for equal effort and contribution, consequences for non-contribution, regularity of group meetings, and expectations for group performance. This acted as a group contract and ensured commitment to group-based work from the outset by guiding expectations of group member behaviour. I also encouraged students to report any group member problems early, and worked with groups experiencing conflict to help them find positive solutions, drawing upon the module content. Part way through the module, groups also completed a team questionnaire which provided unique feedback on their processes and effectiveness. Groups then completed a second Blackboard™ task to reflect on their objectives and revise them accordingly. Finally, I ensured that all students were fully aware of the consequences of non-participation. As a result, the group work went smoothly and students did not report any dissatisfaction or concerns with the process.

Mid-way reflection on learning outcomes.

Based on my learning from the PGCert, I recognised how important it was that the module was underpinned by a set of clear, realistic and relevant learning outcomes which could be used to benchmark individual learning and performance. To raise my students' awareness of the importance of the learning outcomes, I decided to not only present the outcomes at the beginning of the module but also spent some time re-visiting the learning outcomes in week 5 of the course. Here, I distinguished between learning outcomes which should have already been achieved, and those which were yet to be covered so the students could get a sense of their progress. This also helped me to reflect on how the module was going, allowing me to take a step back and consider if the learning outcomes were in fact being achieved. I also asked the students what aspects of the module they were enjoying, and probed for elements which could be improved. Students emphasised how much they were enjoying practical examples and DVD and YouTube clips to demonstrate psychological phenomenon in practice. I therefore made a concerted effort to incorporate this teaching method into the remaining lectures, demonstrating to the students that I was willing to act on student feedback.

Group discussion forums.

As well setting up a cohort-wide discussion board on Blackboard™ for all students to access, I also set up group pages which allowed group members to communicate internally regarding their assignment. In the early weeks of the module, this facility proved important as it allowed group members to make initial contact with one another and to easily share information. As the module progressed, however, active use of the group pages decreased dramatically. I was initially concerned that this was an indicator that groups were not collaborating between lectures. Nevertheless, on discussion with the students, it became apparent that most groups were switching to other forms of technology, namely social media such as Facebook, Skype and MSN messenger, as a means of making between-lecture contact and working electronically. While this form of working is likely to enhance participation and reflects common tendencies in the Me generation, one key disadvantage is the reduced access and insight that teaching staff have in the on-going monitoring group progress. In future years, I will be more aware of the prevalence and importance of social media as a learning tool for students.

Peer support

Common sense and insight from the PGCert certainly go a long way in helping lecturers make decisions about their teaching. As a new lecturer, however, with minimal experience in module leadership, at first it was difficult to envisage which methods and approaches might work, and which might not. What I found most valuable in the first few months of my new job was the informal peer support and guidance that I received from the previous module leader; also a lecturer in my academic group. Peer mentoring refers to a mentoring model in which the mentee and mentor have broadly comparative status in their organisation. It therefore capitalises on the identification and empathy that is derived from their shared experiences (Chesler, Single, & Mikic, 2003; Luecke, 2004). Mentoring has been shown to be most influential and beneficial early in one's career, as well as during significant transitions into a new job role (Christman, 2003; Daloz, 1999).

I found having the opportunity to discuss potential plans and new ideas for the module with a more experienced peer invaluable, and the advice I received gave me confidence in my own decision making and teaching approach. I also sought on-going help and guidance from my group head, which was also a very helpful source of support. In conclusion, I would encourage all new lecturers to engage with their peers and mentors to seek advice and obtain feedback on their teaching methods on a regular basis, especially given that student satisfaction is now more important than ever before.

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Example used with second and final year Undergraduates on BH2286:Effective Teamwork