Annual Academic Monitoring - Dissemination Event


The formal subject matter was innovations in assessment, but much of our discussions revolved around the use of small groups within larger classes and techniques for encouraging student participation. Particular questions we addressed were:

1) What degree of involvement in leading teaching is expected of students?
2) How is success to be measured?
3) How involved should students be in grading?
4) If students mark their classmates’ work, how can standards of marking be policed and cheating (via mark-fixing) prevented?
5) How can marking criteria and the marking process for ephemeral elements of coursework, such as presentations, be made transparent for, e.g., external examiners?
6) Should marks for group presentations or collaborative projects be collective or individual?
7) If marks are collective, what can be done about under-performing students dragging their team-mates’ marks down? (Or, conversely, about high-performing students dragging the marks of less hard-working students up?)
8) What principles should govern the selection of groups?
9) How can seminar-style (as opposed to lecture-style) interactions be encouraged and students drawn into discussion?
10) Do presentations benefit the audience as well as the presenters? How can the learning benefits for the audience be maximised?

1) ASSESSMENT

Assessed group presentations
- All Schools involved already used assessed presentations (some group, some individual) to some extent.
- Some members of the group had given individual marks to team-members while others had given collective marks.
- Where the presentation accounted for no more than 5-7% of a module, the problem of students’ marks being pulled up or down by others students was felt not to be significant.
- In collective work, the achievement of a good team result is important, so assessment on a collective basis reflects the nature of the exercise.
- If several presentations were required, feedback could be given enabling groups to improve their collective importance. Roles within the group could also be rotated between presentations.
- In order to make marking (more) transparent (e.g. to externals), presentations could be recorded, or handouts and/or PowerPoints, or even written-up versions submitted. Markers could note if there was a significant difference in quality between the submitted materials and the presentation on the day.

Group selection and dynamics
We discussed the composition of groups. All methods had pros and cons.
- Self-selection encourages students to work with friends, housemates, etc. This is unhelpful if we are taking the workplace skills agenda seriously, since group work is partly about being able to work well with relative strangers. There is also the danger of cliques forming and the demoralising effect on the students who are ‘picked last.’
Selection by where students sit has some of the problems of self-selection (it is a form self-selection) and may disadvantage students without the social clout to be able to sit where they wish and with whom they wish. In some classes, ethnic or cultural ‘enclaves’ can form and all sides learn more if they can be sensitively mixed up.

Random selection avoids the problems of cliques and students being picked last, but gives no control over group composition, though semi-random selection (within chosen parameters of group composition) might alleviate this problem, if it is a problem.

Engineering by the tutor requires good knowledge of the students, which may not be possible early in the semester, but offers the potential to create groups that are balanced in terms of ability, gender, background, etc.

2) GENERAL DISCUSSION
Broader discussion generated a range of promising ideas for promoting student participation in class and encouraging seminar-style rather than lecture-style interaction:

1) ‘Leading the class’
- Students could be selected (individually or in small groups) to lead class discussion. This exercise requires careful branding. ‘Presentation’ encourages students to replicate the one-directional lecture model, whereas ‘chairing’ or ‘leading the discussion’ can encourage them to view their role differently.
- Leaders/chairs can be encouraged to ask questions to the class, not just address them.
- Students can be allowed/encouraged to base coursework on the topics they led, using feedback from the group and/or discussion points to improve their work (which requires careful integration of assessment and seminar topics).
- The teacher must be careful not to sabotage the class dynamic; it is often useful to vacate the ‘teacher’s chair’ and find a spot in a back row or off to the side, allowing the student chair to take over.
- Students need not be primed in advance that they will be leading discussion, but can be selected on the day and given a few minutes to gather their thoughts. If they are inadequately prepared, the tutor must make it clear (possibly afterwards) that this is not acceptable and that another student must pick up the task because of them.
- Break-out groups can be used to build on questions raised by the student chair(s).
- The hand-over from the student chairs to the rest of the class requires care. The tutor will need some reserve questions in hand in case discussion falters. Alternatively, a student chair can be appointed in addition to more formal presenters.

2) Dissertation symposia
- Suggested by AR, who uses this method in Art History.
- Each supervisor in a dissertation module arranges a mini-symposium for his/her students (or the students of more than one supervisor, if they only have a few each) in week 6-7.
- Each student has 15 minutes to present their topic and invite questions.
- The exercise is for motivation and feedback, not credit.
- Presentations are back to back, so all students present tend to get involved. Speakers are motivated because they have chosen the topic themselves.
- Students then hand in a draft section of the dissertation the following week.
- Short of symposia, group and individual meetings could be intermixed, provided that students have loosely compatible subjects.

3) Marks for class participation
- Suggested by ES, who has used it in US universities.
Students are given a grade for their participation in class over the semester.

We had some reservations about this. Problems include the subjectivity of such grading; its lack of transparency to externals; disability concerns, such as students suffering from anxiety or depression; the impact of personality, with shy students potentially being disadvantaged.

However, students should be learning to articulate their ideas verbally, and the exercise could be presented as an opportunity to practise this skill rather than an assessment or ‘putting the student on the spot’.

ES had used the method as an opportunity for practice, worth 5% of a module. Students were marked for their willingness to attempt to articulate their ideas: inarticulacy per se was relatively unimportant. ES started each student’s mark at 5% and they lost marks if they did not participate.

Some method was needed to ensure no students were left out. ES used a pack of index cards with the students’ names on, shuffled to select a random student each time.

### 4) Audience marking of presentations

- In order to give the audience of presentations an active role, they could be asked to mark the presentations or provide written feedback to the presenters.
- Marking (whether qualitative or quantitative). ES uses ‘CAP’ criteria: Clarity (of communication), Accuracy (emphasising the right things and presenting accurately) and Precision (whether the presenter’s language is precise and unambiguous; avoidance of vague terms such as ‘thing’, ‘stuff’ etc.)
- Students would need some coaching on how to listen

### 5) Questions submitted in advance

- Students could be required to send a couple of discussion points or questions for discussion to the tutor ahead of the class (e.g. 48 hours ahead).
- Questions can then be collated and circulated to all students.
- Alternatively, questions can be posted on Moodle and made visible to all students.
- The length of posts must be limited (and the limits enforced).
- Tutor workload can become a factor if word-limits are not policed or if the tutor undertakes to respond to all the posts.
- Students can be asked to introduce their questions in class (which can alleviate fears of asking a silly question, since the fact the tutor picked that question validates it).
- Students’ submissions could be assessed, but the preference was to use them only to prime classes and to encourage students to share responsibility for the class.
- This method is in use in the MLitts in History and Classics and in some Classics Honours modules.

### 6) Learning diary

- Used by GS in IR, also Classics MLitt and some Hons modules.
- Students keep a research diary including initial notes on what they took from their reading and a reflective note added after each seminar.
- Entries can be handed in each week and marked as they go. This creates workload problems for the tutor, but the diary exercise can be offset against other forms of assessment.
- In other models of this exercise, students write up their weekly entries into a single, reflective document, including an end-of-semester overview, which is submitted as the final piece of coursework.
- The learning diary can be a very effective tool for prompting students to reflect upon their own studies and guide their future progress.

### 7) In-class writing

- Students can be given 5-6 minutes in class to write notes on a topic.
➢ The notes are not collected in but are used to help the students frame their thoughts prior to discussion.
➢ If it appears that the students are not taking the exercise seriously, the notes can be collected.

3) DISSEMINATION
None of us felt that we should be dictating to colleagues that they should or must use any or all of the above techniques, though many of them are already in use. Nor did we feel that innovation for innovation’s sake was a sound rationale for shaking up established and successful modules. The action planned is to pass on these ideas as a circular in each School for colleagues to adopt as they see fit.

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