Weighing up the elements

Collection: Small group teaching

Resource: Thinking about seminars

Approximate duration

1 - 2 hours

Learning outcomes

To be able to articulate and build on a wide range of pedagogic choices in planning seminars and other small groups.

Introduction

This activity is designed to help you think about the pedagogic implications of the curriculum. It contains suggestions for weighing up the various factors which bear on preparing a successful seminar.

The activity

Implicit here is the idea of pedagogic *choices*. Some things may be out of your hands: if you are a junior member of a team you may not even have chosen the subject matter of the module or seminar. Recent appointees are likely to have little say in the timetabling, or the size of the group (let alone its actual composition). Every seminar group is going to have its individual characteristics that the group leader has to adjust for - size of group and personalities of members amongst them. This makes it different from other forms of teaching such as lecturing. But nevertheless, *some* choices are open to you. These are some of the questions you might want to ask yourself:

- What implications do my texts or my subject area have for the way I need to teach them? What particular opportunities or challenges do they present?

- What problems are students likely to have with this material? What do I take for granted in my own thinking about this subject that students may not yet take for granted, or even be aware of? How can I help them acquire those 'threshold concepts' which make sense of the discipline?

- How do I communicate that the topic matters? That this discussion is serious?

- What about the very first session? How do I begin? What can I do to help this collection of people become a working group?

- How can I foster group norms that encourage openness and discussion?

- What do I need to do to get as many as possible to contribute?

- How will what happens in my seminars foster or support students' own independent learning?

- What technology-based teaching tools do I have at my disposal which could scaffold the face-to-face time spent in seminars? (E.g. with online pre-seminar activities in the VLE to support my students or post-seminar follow-up activities to extend the learning encounter.) Examples could include online discussion forums with structured questions, tasks or activities; a digital drop box where work started in seminar could be completed and posted to the seminar tutor, reflective blog posts and so on.

Now imagine the beginning of a module, and choose a seminar - either one that you have already taught, or one you will be teaching. On a large sheet of paper list down one side the key intellectual topics you want the group to address. Then, down the other side, list some of the challenges faced by students either in engaging with these materials, or in getting their footing in a discussion. In the gap between these columns, start to sketch (be as imaginative as you like!) activities which might help bridge these dimensions of the session.

Once you have got some initial thoughts in place, it would be worth looking ahead to the life of the seminar over the 10 or 12 weeks of the semester. Obviously, you will want to vary pace and activities. Equally obviously, you will want to leave yourself and the group latitude for shifts and re-thinkings as the group evolves. English works very much by what Jerome Bruner called a spiral curriculum - students are likely to revisit the same texts or topics at advancing levels of sophistication. (This is a useful if brief introduction to Bruner's thought.) So you need perhaps to conceptualise your programme not just in

terms of linking texts or curriculum items (this novel + this novel + that novel), but imagine a simultaneous thread to do with the group's advancing learning processes and growing command of the vocabulary and syntax of analysis. You could draw this as a kind of double helix. The point of doing so would be to visualise the mutually supportive processes that are simultaneously at work. You want to design the process so that at the end of 12 weeks students don't simply know more about a, b, and c. The object will be to have helped them move towards heightened awareness, and an ability to 'speak' the discourse of the subject.

Relationship to the Professional Standards Framework

- **Core Knowledge 2:** Appropriate methods for teaching and learning in the subject area and at the level of the academic programme
- **Professional Values 3:** Commitment to the development of learning communities
- **Professional Values 4:** Commitment to encouraging participation in higher education, acknowledging diversity and promoting equality of opportunity

More information about the Professional Standards Framework can be obtained from the summary factsheet in the *Subject & Pedagogy* collection in HumBox.
http://humbox.ac.uk/2731/

Resources in the Small group teaching collection

- Small group teaching: introduction to the collection
- Seminar design: resource overview
    - Seminar design: individual activity
    - Seminar design: group activity
- Peer reviewing a seminar: Oliver Twist : resource overview
    - Peer review: individual activity
    - Adjusting the level
- Peer reviewing a seminar: The Bonesetter's Daughter : resource overview
    - A complex dialogue
    - Negotiated authority

- Thinking about seminars: resource overview
  - Relevance and red herrings
  - **Weighing up the elements (*you are here)**
- Nightmare scenarios: resource overview
  - Facing up to nightmares: group activity
  - Comparing notes
- Transformative writing: resource overview
  - Transformations: individual activity
  - Transformations: group activity