

Making a compulsory course compelling

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Abstract

This case study focuses on teaching a small group of level 4 personal and professional development (PPD) students on the BSc Economics course at the University of Greenwich. A student-centred approach to learning, combined with joint decision-making, is shown to have successfully created a more engaged and productive learning environment. Evaluation is based on a mixture of oral feedback, testimonials and assessment outcomes. The possible limitations and lessons of this exercise are also discussed.

Keywords:

higher education, student-centred approach to learning, student partnership, student experience.

Introduction

The increased emphasis on employability has led to universities' developing personal and professional development (PPD) courses that can be offered as either no-credit or credit-bearing modules. This case study focuses on my experience of teaching a Level 4, compulsory, credit-bearing PPD course during the 2019-20 academic year at the University of Greenwich.

In my teaching, I have always followed a student-centred approach to learning, as I like to put my students first and aim for a more active form of learning (Baeten *et al.*, 2010); for example, through small group activities and peer learning. In teaching this module, however, my student-centred approach (SCA) worked only partially, in the sense that I got to know the students and their concerns about PPD, but I could not get them to engage actively with the material, as most of them thought that this compulsory course was not relevant to them.

In this case study, I explain my use of an SCA and the background that led to my intervention, which consisted of co-decision making with a small group of students. I then discuss the evidence of changes in the attitude of the students and how this led to improved performance on the module's summative poster assessment, drawing on measures of student engagement and performance, as well as oral and written feedback. Finally, I attempt to interpret the results of the case study and evaluate the teaching methods used.

Student-centred learning and partnership with the students

Student-centred learning (SCL) is a well-known and well thought of approach in HE pedagogy (Baeten *et al.*, 2010). It often consists of facilitating small groups in the classroom to perform certain tasks or activities, in order to encourage peer learning. The idea is to enable students to talk to each other and to be more active in their learning. If the lecturers do all the talking, it may lead to more passive learning (Roberts, 2019).

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Although student-centred teaching methods may be conducive to a deep learning approach, there are other factors that may determine whether this results in a successful outcome. Harju and Åkerblom (2017), for example, suggest that a student-centred framework alone does not necessarily increase student involvement and lead to a better outcome. Trinidad (2020) discusses the practical challenges for implementing this approach (including the fact that some students may not be comfortable speaking up in class).

The literature on 'students as partners' (SaP) in learning and teaching demonstrates that this can also be an effective way to facilitate student engagement (Healey and Healey, 2019b). The partnership framework points to four distinct, though overlapping, SaP categories: "*learning, teaching and assessment, subject-based research and inquiry, scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), curriculum design & pedagogic consultancy*" (Healey and Healey, 2019b, p5). There are several guides for creating partnerships with students. Bovill, Felten and Cook-Sather (2014) provide guidance on the use of partnership with students in learning and teaching and report some previous applications, including partnerships in research (Healey and Jenkins, 2009), in the creation of curricula (Bovill, 2014) and in the creation of course content (Cook-Sather, Bovill and Felten, 2014).

There are, however, some challenges in starting a partnership with students. Most importantly, there is an unequal level of subject knowledge between lecturers and students and an unequal power relationship. The latter can be overcome by the voluntary participation of all the members in the group and their agreeing the objectives of the partnership, which sets its context and limits (Bovill *et al.*, 2014). Choosing which group of students to involve is also important and, for this, I think that getting to know each student in the group, facilitated by a SCA, is a prerequisite for starting a partnership.

The case study

I was given a PPD group of ten BSc economics students (Economics and International Business Department) in my 2019-20 teaching timetable. PPD is a fifteen-credit module for Level 4 students, which is also offered to other programmes in the department and to international partners. The allocated time was two hours per week for one semester, which were intended to be split into a lecture and a seminar. Overall, the PPD module had nearly two hundred students and they were taught in small groups of ten to twelve. The module leader had uploaded into the Moodle platform the lectures, the questions for the seminars and the assessment details. The latter was in the form of MyWritingLab online tests which contributed 20% of the module grade and a portfolio, which overall had a 80% weighting and comprised different tasks: a mock job application (25%), a group poster presentation (25%) and an individual reflective report (50%).

I spoke to the students, got to know them, helped them to split into two groups, gave them the tasks and encouraged them to start working together. My objective was to create a student-centred environment (Harju and Åkerblom, 2017), which I find facilitates students' learning. To begin with, discussion with students focused on their concerns about the course material. Their initial impression was that the course was not relevant to them, as there was repetition of content from secondary school, from other previous experiences or from prior reading. At this point, they perceived assessment as overly complicated and some students reported that they would prefer to withdraw from the module, while others said they were

bored. As Elpidorou (2018, p.1) puts it: “*Boredom informs one of the presence of an unsatisfactory situation ...*”

I reflected on this and, after the class, talked to the students individually and wrote down some of their comments. To address the problem of the lack of engagement, I decided to develop a joint decision-making partnership with the students. In each weekly session, we would decide together on the material to cover in the lecture and seminar. At the same time, we also agreed that they would work hard on the research necessary for the assessment to achieve an excellent outcome in the production and presentation of the poster.

Partnerships with students can occur in many diverse ways (Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2014). My objective was to enhance learning in my group by giving the students some decision-making power over the content of the taught sessions. Although decision-making was an element of my collaboration with the students, the partnership was limited in scope; for example, we could not change the module assessment. As Healey and Healey (2019a, p.1) comment, “*Undertaking partnership is messy and no single approach will be effective in all cases.*”

With this agreement in place, I began to present the content in the lecture slides. The students were now all focused and the classroom turned into a dynamic place where students were empowered to say when they felt that the material was not relevant to them. When this happened, discussion followed, in which the students who had come forward spoke about their previous learning about the part of the lecture which they wanted me to skip and we would then elaborate on any additional aspects that they had not covered. This is a form of recontextualisation of students’ practical experiences to an academic context (Harju and Åkerblom, 2017). It is also in line with Race (2020, p.19), who notes that it is important that we help students to discover “*strengths they already have*”. Time went by quickly and it was evident from their behaviour that the students were much happier and more fully engaged.

In the second part of the two-hour sessions, the students had to perform some tasks; these took place in small groups. Because of the joint decision-making and shared ownership of the session content, engagement gradually increased and students began to have lively discussions in which they drew on their own experiences and perspectives. My role became the facilitator of their learning. In the pedagogic context of a student-centred framework, the lecturer facilitates the control over the acquisition and production of knowledge by the students (Frambach *et al.*, 2014), but I had achieved this only after entering the co-decision partnership with them.

As for the assessment, the agreement was that they would decide how to do this in their assigned group of five. The online tests and preparation of the mock job application were straightforward, but the poster presentation was a more stretching task as they had to create and present, as a group of ten, an academic poster on a topic relevant for their programme of study. The completed poster would then be used for a presentation for which they would get a grade and, finally, they would produce an individual reflective report on their learning experience, to be submitted in the second semester.

In line with the partnership approach, I let the students decide the research project through brainstorming individual ideas, including mine. The members of the group then suggested,

explained and discussed various equally worthy projects and I asked questions and contributed to the discussion. ‘The effects of technology in business’ was chosen by a democratic vote and everyone seemed happy to accept this outcome. I then helped them to split the overall task into smaller ones, including the design of the poster. In allocating the tasks to the groups, I used my knowledge of the students’ relative strengths and took account of their preferences.

The student-centred approach and our partnership resulted in greater motivation and a more enjoyable experience for everyone in the classroom, as evidenced in the student testimonials and informal feedback I received. The resulting poster and the presentation were impressive. They had done excellent work and they presented it clearly, speaking with confidence and pride. They also respected their self-allocated speaking allocations. The time spent in getting to know each student and the partnership had paid off in terms both of their learning and of the positive outcome. I facilitated their group work only by, for example: encouraging them to meet regularly; listening to presentations on some relevant scholarly papers for the choice of the final reference list; and by debating with them how to separate the information into the positive and negative aspects of technology in business.

The poster (Figure 1) produced by my seminar group is reproduced below:

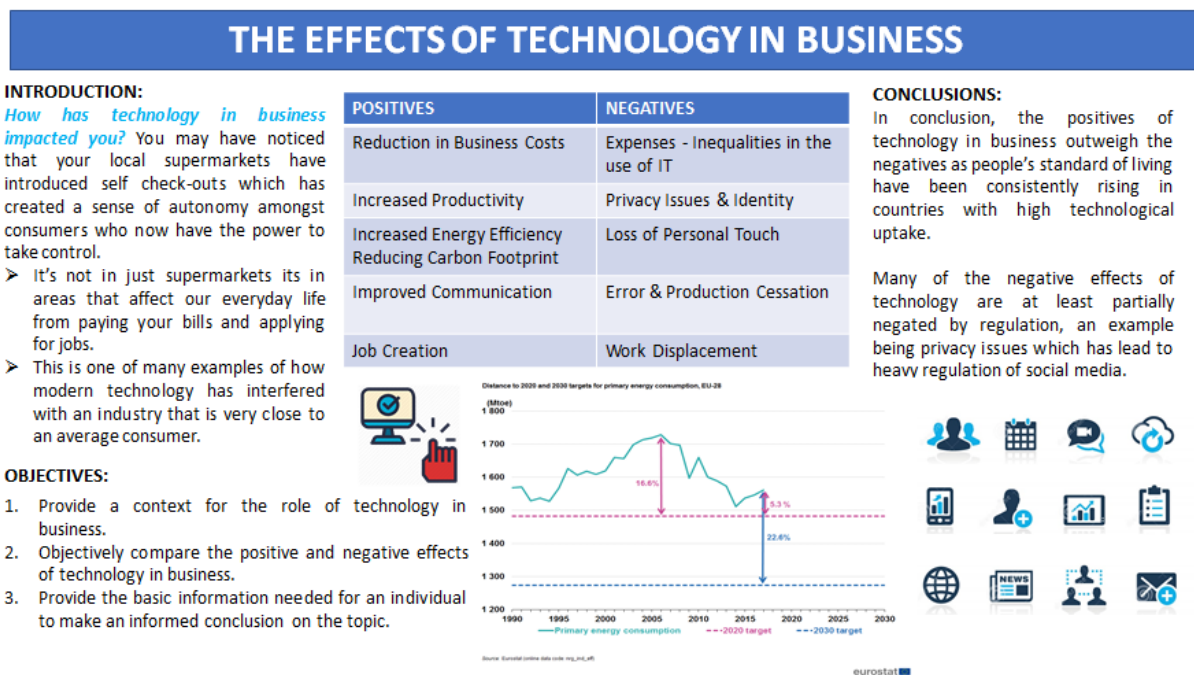


Figure 1: Group poster

Evaluation and outcome

A small case study makes it feasible to use qualitative feedback. This enables “a deeper, more context-specific perspective of the student experience” (Steyn, Davies and Sambo, 2019, p.21). My evaluation of the SCA, combined with a co-decision partnership with students, makes use of oral feedback and written testimonials from the students. I also provide evidence of student engagement (measured by attendance) and information on the assessment outcome (the mark for the poster and the overall mark for both the poster and

the reflective report). As my group was part of a larger group of PPD students, I am not able to report specifically on their end-of-module feedback.

My intervention to adopt a joint decision-making partnership was followed by a new consensus across the class, which manifested itself in very positive oral feedback to me and other students on campus. The students all told me that they felt engaged and part of the process of learning. At a formal meeting with all PPD students, my group stood out in expressing that they were happy with the module. After the meeting, my head of department remarked on this to me and asked me what I was doing with my students. Attendance was consistently good and the students even managed to encourage one of their number, who had been absent for personal reasons, to go back to the library and into class.

For the poster, the group was awarded a high mark of 90%. This mainly reflected the quality of the content, analysis and the presentation, which was meticulously timed and organised to allow each of them to have a small role. Students in my group achieved a mean mark (combining poster and individual reflective report) of 69.4%, which compares favourably with the average mark of 57.3% across all students doing the course.

I told the students that I wanted to write up our experience as a case study and they all offered to contribute with a testimonial or written feedback. I report here testimonials from three students in my seminar group (who all granted permission for their words to be reported):

The “collaborative method of teaching the PPD module meant that we as students were at the centre of the process of learning which meant that the material became more engaging and we were able to achieve better outcomes given that we were granted some power. The lecturer’s support and partnership with us was so beneficial to our learning. As a PPD class we were able to look beyond each other’s education qualification, to skillset, drive and personality which were key in creating the warm and non-judgemental environment we had going on”.

“There was a very healthy form of dialogue amongst all of us. ...The learning environment was both informative and fun, and also tailored to us being university students, so there was more maturity amongst all of us in the class and our relationship with our lecturer.”

Our lecturer *“ensured that every member of the class had an opportunity to have their voices heard and encouraged the shy members of the class – myself included – to engage in more group discussions and build our confidence.”*

Conclusions

This is only a small-scale case study, based on a single semester, but it shows that there are many diverse ways to engage students in face-to-face teaching of small groups in order to achieve better outcomes. I regularly use an SCA, but the addition of a partnership approach was new to me and, in my view, the results were extremely encouraging. Putting this into a broader context, there is evidence that the SaP experience may have longer-term benefits to students, in terms of their skills and even their future employability (Pauli, Raymond-Barker and Worrell, 2016).

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It has to be acknowledged, however, that this is just one case study and my approach might not be suitable for other compulsory courses, especially where teaching of content may be more rigid. Moreover, more thinking would be required to adapt the methods used for larger seminar groups. A final caveat is that, in a student-centred framework, whether pure or combined with other variations, there are other hidden factors which may play a role in a successful learning approach: for example, the authority and personality of the lecturer. Baeten *et al.* (2010, p.243) make the point that: "... *teachers play a role; if they are involved and oriented towards students and changing their conceptions, students are inclined to use a deep approach.*"

Despite these limitations, I think that there might be more general lessons that go wider than how a specific PPD course is designed and delivered. This case study shows that a modest partnership with the students can release a lot of talent and creativity, resulting in greater engagement and better outcomes. The main implications I draw from this are that we need to involve students more in the design of modules and find ways to empower them. This will not be easy, but there are surely ways to create some additional flexibility and give students more control over the creation of their work, if it leads to increased engagement with their studies.

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