

How consistent are the teaching styles employed by Politics lecturers in F.E and H.E?

Rationale

Research has shown that Politics lecturers still largely adhere to transmissive teaching styles in both further and higher education (McCarthy and Anderson, 2000; Amoore and Langley, 2001). Furthermore, students who enrol on AS/A2 Politics programmes are likely to want to continue studying Politics or other Social Science subjects at a higher level. Subsequently, the teaching styles in F.E and H.E remain consistent, in that A-level students are prepared for the progression into H.E by having a strictly lecture based program. It is my intention to analyse how far this statement is true today, by investigating how Politics subjects are taught in a selection of local further and higher education institutions. In particular, I will be looking to see if these institutions are adapting their teaching methods to coincide with recent research that promotes the consequential benefits of active learning on student knowledge retention (Bonwell, 1997; Jacques, 2000; Black et al, 2001). By making general observations on their interpretations of active learning, as well as considering the specific methods they use in relation to Politics, I hope to be able to measure the consistency of teaching styles across post-compulsory Politics education. From this I will be able to make recommendations regarding how Politics is taught and also on how colleges and universities communicate and share their experiences of teaching and learning. My contention is that by engaging with innovative active learning techniques, politics teachers can make the subject more relevant and exciting for students and imbue them with a passion that goes beyond their studies.

Methodology

I have developed a questionnaire that will be sent to individual Politics lecturers from three F. E Colleges and two Universities. There are three key areas which I would like to address, regarding their teaching and learning methods. Firstly, I aim to discover if active learning has a significant role in the

teaching of their courses. In particular, do they try to engage with active learning techniques to compliment lectures or do they find that lectures still tend to dominate the subject. Secondly, what methods of active learning do they find most successful for Politics subjects? Finally, do the colleges and universities share their teaching and learning experiences? The questionnaires and their responses can be found in the appendix. I will articulate my findings by considering and discussing the consistencies and inconsistencies of the responses and relating them to trends and developments in education discourse. I will then be able to make recommendations regarding teaching, learning and communication in post-compulsory politics education.

Literature Review

My research has involved two key areas of investigation. Firstly, an overview of the educational benefits of active learning on knowledge retention and understanding, including the different methods of active learning that have been developed and tested over the last twenty years. To do this, I have engaged with some of the pioneering literature on this subject, as well as some of the recent debates from key education journals. Secondly, a consideration of how active learning techniques have filtered into politics education in recent years. The journal *International Studies Perspectives* has been particularly useful, as it contains a regular section on pedagogical debates and research for politics subjects. I will now outline the key areas of discussion.

Traditional styles of teaching are largely transmissive and subsequently create an environment that 'provides incentives to learn only at the surface level' (McCarthy and Anderson, 2000: 279). Alternatively, active learning refers to 'experiences in which the students are thinking about the subject matter' (McKeachie, 1999: 41) and are therefore more likely to gain a deeper understanding of the material they are presented with (Marton and Saljo, 1976). Active learning has therefore been promoted by educational theorists at all levels. Of particular significance is the research of Black et al 2001

which has disseminated into post-compulsory education and also that of Chickering and Gamson (1987, 1999) which highlighted the need for active learning to have a larger role in undergraduate education.

Particular emphasis has been placed on getting students to work in groups for the purpose of 'learning from each other, pooling resources, making decisions' (Jacques, 2000: 77). The idea of getting students to solve problems together is synonymous with the psychological paradigms of both the gestalt and cognitive schools of thought (Curzon, 2004), in that it can encourage student intuition and develop communication skills. Another selective style of active learning is role-play. Ladousse (1989) claims role-play can develop language skills as well as help to integrate all the students into the learning process. Furthermore, Van Ments (1989) discusses how role-play can make unobservable situations seem more clear and real to students. It is from this basis where we can begin to consider how active learning can benefit Politics students.

Research on active learning in politics education focuses around the idea that students 'increasingly experience and contribute' to the subject 'in the course of their daily lives' (Langley and Amoore, op cit: 18). In this respect, active learning will encourage students to bring these experiences into the classroom, where teachers can use them to make abstract ideas and theories seem less alien (Drainville, op cit) and more relevant to the students studies. Langley, Amoore (2001) and Drainville (2003) elaborate on this, suggesting class discussions could focus on the students' role either as consumers or workers in society, allowing them to relate abstract terms such as capitalism or globalisation to their own daily practises. This corresponds with constructivist methods of teaching and learning, in that it encourages teachers to build on the students' knowledge and experiences and allow them to be intuitive in finding out new information (Petty, 2004). Drainville also suggests using slides in lectures, to discourage note taking, which he feels is 'a process that individualises and well as instrumentalises knowledge' (Drainville, 2003: 238). Instead, teachers can help refine the practise of 'cognitive mapping and help [students] develop the feel of a place' (242) which they can relate to an

idea or an event. Waalkes' (2003) use of film is another example of this, as it too tries to broaden student curiosity by relating the subject to their own experiences of visual culture.

Alternatively, Morgan (2003) emphasises the need for students of Politics to teach each other difficult ideas. An *Environment for Learning* study in 1997 proved that retention of knowledge increased when students did this. Morgan argues that because politics has such a diverse range of theories and positions, peer learning is a suitable way of differentiating the students' tasks before allowing them to pool the information they have gathered. Furthermore, Chasek (2005) claims that simulation and role-play allow students to experience real political dilemmas which would usually seem beyond their practical capacity. Her example of 'The UN Security Council's Response to Terrorism' is both topical and suitably challenging, in that the students have to debate with each other and make recommendations and solutions regarding a real issue. In doing so, they will be accessing the synthesis part of the knowledge dimension (Bloom, 1956; Anderson et al, 2001) by being creative and productive. These examples highlight how innovative methods of teaching are beginning to be used in Politics education and that they correspond with the developments that have been made in active teaching and learning in recent years. I now hope to discover similar progress in the local institutions who have received my questionnaire.

Findings

In this section I will discuss the responses from my questionnaire, outlining similarities and differences in both the universities and colleges' interpretations and implementation of active learning strategies as well as their perceptions on creating avenues of communication for F.E and H.E politics lecturers.

All three colleges agreed that perceptions of learning Politics were consistent, in that students do expect a lecture based program. However, it was also suggested that debating and discussing issues are key aspects, which

students who enrol on their courses are made aware of. Furthermore, institutional as well as personal commitments to making politics an interesting subject, has resulted in all of the colleges trying to engage with active learning techniques. This highlights both changes in the attitudes towards teaching, as well as evidence of the implementation of government proposals regarding skills based learning. So, it can be concurred that active learning has become a significant part of teaching politics subjects at college level.

The different styles of active learning were also consistent. All three colleges regarded simulations and role plays as being successful methods of inciting student participation in lessons. Newcastle College aptly suggested class debates were a 'logical' way of teaching politics (See Appendix), as it mirrored real fractions in political discourse. Interestingly, South Tyneside College recommended using videos such as 'Bremner Bird and Fortune', as it provided a different, yet suitably engaging insight into the contemporary political landscape (ibid). In regards to how teachers prepared their students for university education, all tended towards a more lecture based, question and answer session for A2 classes, with Tyne-metropolitan even criticising the effectiveness of 'playing games' at that level. Whilst Newcastle and South Tyneside saw effective teaching to be based around allowing the students to guide the lessons - Newcastle using the phrase 'student autonomy', Tynemet again criticised the emphasis of having to adhere to active learning, suggesting when grades are poor a more teacher-led position would be more agreeable. Tynemet's position here concurs with a recent move by theorists and unions, towards re-emphasising the importance of teacher autonomy in F.E, as to how certain subjects are taught. Bathmaker (1999), Ginsberg (2003) and the ATL (2005) have all expressed concern at the one size fits all model imbued in skills based learning.

Finally, none of the college lectures had any formal contact with university staff regarding their teaching styles. Although it was generally agreed that there would be no harm in creating 'avenues of communication', they all expressed concerns as to how useful it would really be because of the

different types of politics subjects they offered, as well as in their academic levels.

Similarly, the two universities regarded politics to be perceived as a lecture based subject, yet have implemented active learning techniques into their seminar programmes. Simulations, role-plays and debates were considered important, Newcastle also emphasised the significance of students to 'bring their own experiences into the classroom'. A common problem they both encountered was in getting students attuned to debating and discussing political developments and opinions. Although they agreed that formal communication between F.E and H.E would be inappropriate, Northumbria expressed the need for continued developments in promoting the practical uses of pedagogical debates on active learning strategies.

Recommendations

My aim was to enquire into how politics subjects are taught in F.E and H.E, in particular, if the local institutions who received my questionnaire, were adapting their teaching styles to include methods of active learning. Furthermore, I wanted to see what there opinions were on sharing their experiences of teaching and learning, from this I hoped to make recommendations regarding teaching, learning and communication across post-compulsory politics education.

My findings have highlighted that the consistencies of their opinions outweighed the inconsistencies. All institutions had adapted their teaching styles to incorporate active learning techniques and had developed them for the benefit of politics learners. So, in answering my research question, I can claim that the teaching styles between F.E and H.E politics education do show a level of consistency, having moved away from the traditional transmissive, lecture based format. Also, although the colleges seemed keen to develop a formal avenue of communication with the universities, both were aware that it may be inappropriate because of the different types of politics courses that each of them offer as well as the difference in their academic levels. On

reflection, I have chosen to concur with this position. The only major criticism that came from my research was regarding the lack of autonomy in teaching styles, because of an institutional over-emphasis on the need for active learning. In light of this I have come up with three key recommendations.

There needs to be a review of the institutional emphasis on active learning for politics subjects in F.E colleges, whereby college lecturers will be allowed more autonomy in deciding the teaching styles that are appropriate for AS and A2 students. Secondly, instead of instigating communication between colleges and universities, set up a system whereby local college lectures in politics can come together and discuss their experiences. At university level, communication appears to happen through academic journals and conferences (Newcastle University, see appendix), but there seems to be no such system at F.E level. Finally, in relation to both of these points, is to encourage a continued commitment to developing and implementing innovative methods of active learning in politics education, and ensuring that theory is disseminated into practise. This is a position held by Langley and Amore (op cit) and McCarthy and Anderson (op cit) and is concurrent with trends in educational discourse from all disciplines.

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Appendix

NB. The following questionnaires were all e-mailed to specific individuals at the colleges and universities and subsequently e-mailed back to myself. I have emboldened their responses for presentation purposes.

New College Durham also received a questionnaire; however they could not take part in the research as they no longer offer a Politics A-Level.