Active Learning in History seminars
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Introduction, Aims and Problems

As part of the MMU Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice course, undertaken during the 2008-09 academic year, I endeavoured to create a more effective teaching and learning environment within the seminar sessions (usually consisting of between 15-20 students) for a course (‘The Medieval World’) which I run. I wanted to do this primarily by developing a range of seminar activities that focus on more innovative teaching strategies based on active and experiential learning, and which foster group-work activity, creativity and the acquisition of skills beyond subject-specific ones.

In the current Higher Education climate, it seems clear that with rising student numbers, and increased pressure on resources, there is a danger of isolating students and alienating them from the full benefits of the learning process. Likewise, with growing numbers of graduates and changes in the type of graduates employers are looking for, the employment sector is becoming more competitive and the student’s ability to acquire, harness and be aware of their skills is of paramount importance, particularly for students in non-vocational courses.

Seminars can offer an excellent space to engage with these new challenges. However, they often are not utilised as effectively as they might be; sometimes they are not assigned the same importance by staff and students as lectures, and consequently can be unproductive, and devolve into replications of preceding lectures.

With this in mind, I hoped to create a set of seminars to encourage students to take more responsibility for their own learning; to promote the development of skills alongside knowledge; and to develop life-long learning (Denicolo et al., 1992: 3; Huntington, 2005: 27). In adopting activities based on active learning, seminars can offer an excellent space in which to achieve this and to enhance the students’ learning process - moving towards a deeper learning where the student transforms information rather than simply regurgitating it. The key aspect underpinning active learning is that our learning is more effective when we are direct participants in the learning experience (Jacques, 2001: vii).

In my ‘Medieval World’ course, lectures are usually followed on the same day by a 50 minute seminar on a connected topic. The seminars are intended to offer a space in which the students can deepen their exploration of the topic out of their background understanding gained from independent reading and the associated lecture. They are intended also to enhance other skills (interactive, communication, teamwork skills) that might not be developed in the same way in different teaching formats. In 2007-08, my first year teaching the course, the week before each seminar I usually gave a short overview of the key points we should look to cover, offered some tips for reading and handed out useful source material. Sometimes class presentations or small exercises based on source analysis were assigned. But otherwise my underlying aim was to allow the students freedom in how we used the seminars and what they wanted to gain from them, giving them the responsibility to structure their own learning process with me as facilitator. While often this approach worked well and the students engaged and developed their understanding of the topic, enjoying the more open format, there were some occasions where a seminar did not develop as effectively as it could have. Some problems identified were that occasionally students were under-prepared and in some group activities were not able to participate sufficiently, on other occasions the open forum format of the seminar required more structure, while in some instances there was a tendency to focus on and repeat material covered in the lecture.

In addition to the broader aims outlined above, I also wanted to incorporate new learning activities into my seminars to: encourage...
more overt active and experiential learning, with all the learning and developmental benefits this brings; overcome the problem of students arriving under-prepared by providing activities in which they could still participate; deepen the exploration of the lecture topic rather than have it regurgitated; offer more structured activities without diminishing both the students’ freedom and responsibility for their own learning and my role as facilitator. There is a further significance of using these teaching strategies. The seminar is a key arena for creating peer friendships, particularly among ‘non-traditional’ students who, because of external pressures, do not always have the chance to form them elsewhere. This in turn strengthens a shared identity and attachment between students and their department/institution, which can be crucial to student success and retention (Thomas, 2006).

Planning

The ‘Medieval World’ course has approximately 20 seminars across the year, divided into three thematic blocks. One seminar in each block is an overview/reflective session and thus not based on a new topic. I initially trialled the new programme over the first block (See Table 1), and my findings are drawn from this.

Within this framework I aimed to structure the topic of each seminar in a block around a different main activity; some examples of which follow. Seminars on ‘The Crusader States’ and ‘The Gregorian Reform’ focused on debating and role play which can provide excellent opportunities for enhancing critical thinking, the ability to analyse and communicate, and to problem-solve. However, they must be managed sensitively to create an environment in which all can feel comfortable and which prevents the activity being too confrontational. If set up correctly, they can also encourage the students to identify themselves as an authority on the subject with their own valid interpretations, which is hugely important for personal self-development and for dissolving the student-tutor divide (Walker & Warhurst, 2000: 37-8; Lean et al., 2006: 228).

A session on ‘Carolingians’ was to focus on source-analysis based on the ‘snowball’ group-work method. Through this method students directly encounter other ideas and interpretations from their peers, and hopefully develop their own understanding from this (Habeshaw, 1992: 53-4). This kind of peer learning can be particularly effective. The changing size and composition of the groups should also enhance communication skills and encourage adaptability. Creative drawing and the use of visual sources was to form the basis of a session on ‘Centralised Monarchies’. History students are used to dealing primarily with written material, therefore the analysis of visual imagery offers a different sensory experience and encourages new methods of investigation (Wilton, 1989; Frederick, 2000). The plan, therefore, was as follows:

Having analysed medieval imagery, students, in groups, would be asked to imagine themselves as a medieval ruler and to draw their own image, which would then be presented to the wider group for discussion. Similarly, in a session on ‘Vikings’, students would compose a fictional Viking diary. Finally, the last overview seminar in each block would be restructured into a session in which students discussed their learning narrative on the course thus far and reflected upon it with each other.

It was hoped that these activities would move beyond more ‘traditional’ approaches and could fulfil the learning aims discussed above. Significantly, all should encourage creativity and enjoyment, an important ingredient for successful learning (Jacques, 2001: 10).

The introductory session of the course would inform the students on the types of activities they would engage with in the seminars, the norms and rules involved in them (such as on group participation), their connection to assessment, and the learning outcomes that

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should develop out of them. It is important to reiterate that the seminar was to be structured only around one main activity, with smaller complementary tasks if time permitted; a key finding from the literature was to not be too ambitious. Deeper learning looks to develop understanding in a qualitative rather than quantitative way; providing more time to cover less material can be far more beneficial. It was intended however that there would be variation between the time given to these activities in each seminar (a particular group debate may not need to be as long as a role play for example) and in some sessions other additional exercises or activities might be utilised to either introduce the topic, contextualise it or to deepen the learning process (such as brain-storming, additional source analysis, open forum discussion, activities designed to select and create groups).

Equally, it is vital to offer a variety of activities and teaching approaches from one seminar to the next and also within each seminar. As students become more diverse in their backgrounds, so do their learning styles and needs, and by offering a blended range of activities and teaching methods we are more likely to engage with this diversity. Also, variation will continually stimulate, challenge and engage students, and will produce a greater variety of seminar activities. Finally, variety will expose both student and teaching methods based on active and experiential learning, and teaching strategies based on active and collaborative small-group-work.

Implementing and outcomes

Implementing this new practice was difficult and challenging, but I also found it fun and exciting. I feel that to a large extent the aims were achieved, namely: to create a more effective teaching and learning environment within my history seminars, and to foster the acquisition of skills beyond subject-specific ones, by developing a diverse range of seminar activities that focus on more innovative teaching strategies based on active and experiential learning, and collaborative small-group-work.

I now feel able to identify some of the most important aspects that create the type of learning environment that I was aiming for, and thus to assess how effective my new practice was. First of all, clarity was of prime importance, and the feedback from my observed sessions emphasised that I was able mostly to achieve this. Clearly communicating to the students the seminar’s structure and activities at the start was vital, and gave a framework and purpose. Providing the students with a printed handout from the previous week detailing the activities required in the forthcoming session, also contributed to this. However, it is evident that in some respects I could have been clearer, and this was apparent from the observation feedback. Above all, at the start of each session I should have been more explicit about learning outcomes and why we were doing certain activities. I did dedicate part of the introductory seminar on the course to discussing learning outcomes and the benefits (both in terms of knowledge and skills acquisition) of engaging with the sorts of activities that we would be. I also covered the potential advantages and disadvantages of group-work (passengers, dominators, jokers, gender issues etc). However, I now recognise that this introductory discussion may have been too broad, and simply forgotten or missed by the students at the start of the programme. I think, therefore, these issues needed to be revisited in later seminars when the students could place it better into context as a result of their own experiences within the sessions.

The pace and timing of the sessions also emerged as an essential factor, but one that proved to be a recurring problem. I think in the earlier seminars I underestimated the time needed by the students to engage fully with each activity. It felt that I often had to move them on from the current task to the next one. Therefore, I streamlined and restructured my later seminar plans, so that they generally focused around one main activity, and one small complementary task (rather than two or three); and I think this worked better. In particular it
allowed me more time to introduce the session and its learning outcomes at the start, and to have more debriefing at the end. I found that having one main activity and one complementary task allowed enough time for the students to engage deeply with the activity, it kept the seminar uncomplicated, but provided a gentle change in focus during the session.

One of the most important elements of the new seminar programme was the activities used and the way that they built on each other week to week. One of my central aims was to offer diverse and innovative activities that would encourage the students to collaborate and be active learners with more responsibility for their own learning. Group debates, role-plays, the use of different materials such as imagery, creative thinking and drawing tasks were all ways of doing this. I feel that the diversity of tasks maintained the students’ engagement from session to session: it required them to focus on different skills (collaboration, communication, critical analysis) and to be comfortable with change. However, I always made sure that there was some overlap in activities, so that the students could actively build on their past experiences to engage more deeply with new ones. I saw this process as a kind of scaffolding; where I gently accustomed the group to working in small-groups doing different and unusual activities, and I did this by taking on more of a hands-on role in the early sessions. I was then gradually able to move more to the sidelines as the term progressed and become a ‘facilitator’ in the true sense, as the students became more comfortable with their learning environment. This process of change was something that struck me notably in the last session of the programme of seminars, where the students effectively led the session and taught each other. Despite initially feeling slightly uneasy, I moved increasingly into the role of a facilitator, supporting rather than leading the students, who were more able to act as autonomous learners, and use each other’s understandings to develop their own.

A large part of this process involved fostering mutual trust and respect, both among the students, and between them and me. I felt that the ice-breaker techniques, used at the beginning of each session to form sub-groups, often brought laughter and encouraged group interaction. Indeed, one of my main findings was that fun, laughter and deeper learning can all take place together. The amount of laughter and buzz in the classroom, especially in the Viking diary and the interpretative drawing of a medieval ruler tasks, was really quite high. Yet I noted that the work produced in these tasks was impressive, demonstrating real critical thinking, and that the experiential aspect of the activity was more likely to retain and deepen the students’ understanding. In the ‘Viking diary’ activity for instance, when the groups presented their diaries, I was struck by a number of things: they seemed to be proud, and not embarrassed to present them, most members of the group appeared to have made telling contributions, and the accounts themselves were very well written and perceptive, merging creative thinking with a firm evidential base. Some of the student responses given in the ‘one minute papers’ also specifically noted how useful it was to do a task which allowed them to think in the first person, to combine creativity and historical knowledge, to consider varied perspectives, and which was simply enjoyable. The questions asked showed a desire to understand more complex and subtle issues which had developed out of the challenges they had faced when writing the diaries. Also, by the later sessions, group-formation activities ran much more smoothly, and interaction within sub-groups commenced much earlier. It became increasingly clear that many of the students were making well-informed statements and digesting, and responding to, their peers’ responses. I also noticed a significant beneficial effect of using quite different tasks from week to week; the students engaged differently with different tasks. For example, some students who found it hard analysing written source material, and were reluctant to contribute in an associated task, led the way when working on images. Some who were quite shy in group discussion were the most expressive when doing drawing activities. I felt that the diversity in the tasks worked well with the diversity in the students’ learning styles. Most sessions also had diverse tasks within them that allowed students to participate in different ways and at different stages, meaning that individual students were far less likely to be alienated within sessions (and also able to still participate if under-prepared). This ultimately worked well, and in most sessions I was able to see that most students made substantive contributions at some point.

Nevertheless, while there are many positive aspects to these types of activities within this type of environment, I recognise the need to be aware of those group dynamic and power issues that I tried to cover in the introductory session. Groups will always have a tendency to form power hierarchies, for some this will not be a major problem, for others it can seriously limit equality of participation and the overall effectiveness of their learning experience. I attempted to mitigate the impact of problematic group-dynamics, by constantly changing the composition of sub-groups. Also, as the sessions passed, I grew more familiar with
each student’s learning styles and how they contributed, which meant that on occasions I could structure the groups to sometimes have ‘jokers’, ‘dominators’ and ‘passengers’ etc. in different groups, and sometimes have them in the same one. However, I also chose tasks which allowed for random group-formation, and I did this to show that I trusted the students to learn in whatever group they were placed - and I think that this was an important statement to make. Additionally, I found it important to be aware of the power relationship that exists in the classroom between myself, as tutor, and the students. My presence, whether through intervening in sub-group discussions, monitoring, or merely being present in the room, can change the learning dynamics and shape different student responses. I noticed that this could happen, particularly when intervening in sub-group work. I tried to minimise my interventions, but wanted to maintain a presence to show my commitment to the group, and to act as a point of support. Overall, my observation feedbacks offered very positive comments on the rapport I had developed with my students and the respectful environment that we worked in, and I think this went a long way to ensuring the students engaged as active learners.

The process of acquiring feedback was especially significant; it helped me constructively to identify areas to develop, while also giving me confidence in my own practice. As this process was ongoing throughout the programme I was able to implement recommendations immediately (for example, following the first observation I increased emphasis on outlining learning outcomes, following the second observation I incorporated a suggestion for enhancing student-directed learning into a subsequent session).

Student feedback was of paramount importance. I aimed to create constant dialogue with my students about their learning in the sessions through a range of strategies and mechanisms. I found this immensely valuable, particularly through acquiring different forms of feedback, which gave me overall a more representative student response. Equally, the feedback was gained across the seminar programme and not solely at one isolated point, which allowed me to acquire student responses and react to them immediately. I gained feedback in a number of different ways. I did so indirectly through student body language, levels of engagement and work produced in the session, and also through more direct means. I used ‘one-minute papers’, which enabled me to check their understandings and any gaps needing to be addressed. These mostly reassured me that the students had developed their understanding, but in cases where responses seemed insufficient or confused I was able to address this. It was noticeable that the students’ one-minute papers became more detailed when they had grown familiar with using them, but I still chose to use this technique sporadically as research suggests that if used consistently the level of student response drops. I also made space at the end for a ‘debrief’ (often longer than the main activity itself), which I considered crucial for contextualising the activities that we had just engaged with, and as a valuable informal space for feedback. The majority of the group usually contributed to the brief, and some specifically said that they valued this time to clarify what they had learned from the activities.

I also used this space not just to reflect on the content of the session, but also as a forum for students to discuss how they felt about the course and the seminars. I found that some students were willing to make suggestions, but others were reticent about discussing such matters in this space. I tried to mitigate this problem by using one session, towards the end of the first term, specifically dedicated to reflecting on the course and the students’ own development. Sub-groups discussed their own experiences, what they struggled with and suggestions to improve the course, and then a designated member fed back to the whole group. This gave me some important insights into the way the students had developed their understanding, how they studied, and their anxieties, although there was little direct reference to the seminars themselves. Whether this should be taken as endorsement of them or not is open to interpretation!

Finally, in the penultimate session of the term, I asked the students to fill in an anonymous questionnaire on the seminars which provided quantitative and qualitative information. It should be noted that there was below average attendance when the questionnaire was given (due largely it seems to nearing the Christmas break and an important assignment deadline the following day). This diminishes how representative the findings can be considered, and further justifies my other measures to gain feedback. The quantitative material suggests that on average the students classed most seminars as developing knowledge and skills ‘a lot’ (with skills development averaging slightly higher than knowledge). The highest ranking seminars were the ones on ‘Centralised monarchies’ (use of visual material and creative drawing), ‘The Gregorian Reform’ (use of role-play and debate), and ‘The Medieval Empire’ (developing creative thinking through devising strategies). The lowest were the ‘Carolingians’ (source analysis) and ‘Crusader States’ (student-directed learning, drawing and use of imagery). The low scoring seminars might be explained by their being the first and last sessions, and

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this sort of statistical evidence must be treated with caution (not least because students may have forgotten precisely what they did in certain sessions).

Perhaps of more use in this instance is the qualitative evidence. Some of those who explained what sort of seminar activities they preferred, and why, related their answers to this course. Some of the answers mentioned: writing the Viking diary (which was ‘fun’ and good for memory) and debating (provides ‘lots of opinions’); ‘drawing and debating because you’re active so you have to think more’; the diversity of activities which allow for fun and interaction; the seminars were ‘creative, but controlled to ensure that the arguments are understood and debated’; ‘group work and discussion’. All of these were aspects which I aimed to develop in my seminars, and it was pleasing that many of the students identified these as good for their development. On the other hand some responses preferred to work as one big group, rather than in sub-groups, and a couple preferred ‘making lists’ and ‘discussion’ to the drawing activities. This highlights clearly the different learning styles and the importance of acknowledging this diversity.

On the whole, the implementation of a new seminar programme aimed at encouraging active learning appears to have been reasonably successful, but far from the finished article, and has provided me with ways and ideas to develop my practice further. I genuinely feel that my students’ learning benefited considerably from participating in these new style seminars, and that it was largely an enjoyable experience. Nevertheless, I also feel that there always remains a place for ‘traditional’ lectures and seminars, which are valuable, and the key overall is to offer a diversity of experiences and approaches (both traditional and new) to our students.

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