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Abstract

Have you ever asked students to read and be prepared to discuss an article in a seminar or tutorial group, only to find that the students haven't read the article and that you end up presenting a mini-lecture? I know I have had this experience in the past, and therefore decided to try out a few techniques to encourage active participation by all students in the group. The major aim of the seminars was to encourage students to critically evaluate research literature in the area. I found the following method was extremely effective with a small group of fourth-year Psychology students.

Allison Fox, a lecturer in Psychology and a participant in the course Introduction to Tertiary Teaching, was concerned that her students did not always do the reading required for seminars, and this made discussion impossible. Here she describes the success of an approach she tried in Autumn Session which required that students develop questions through which to evaluate the set article.



An Approach to Dealing with Prescribed Reading in a Psychology Class

Allison Fox

Have you ever asked students to read and be prepared to discuss an article in a seminar or tutorial group, only to find that the students haven't read the article and that you end up presenting a mini-lecture? I know I have had this experience in the past, and therefore decided to try out a few techniques to encourage active participation by all students in the group. The major aim of the seminars was to encourage students to critically evaluate research literature in the area. I found the following method was extremely effective with a small group of fourth-year Psychology students.

Preparation and Planning

Newble and Cannon (1991) provided some excellent suggestions which helped during the preparation and planning stages of the class. Detailed preparation was essential to ensure that the content was covered in class and to prevent seminars from deteriorating into occasions for social chit-chat. The time required for preparation of each class equalled or often exceeded preparation time for other teaching methods (eg large group lectures). I attempted to develop a non-threatening atmosphere during the sessions, to encourage all students to participate, to provide structured and purposeful discussion activities and to evaluate the success of the methods adopted in achieving the major aims of the seminars.

Development of a non-threatening atmosphere

It was important to develop a non-threatening atmosphere during the first week of session to enable all students to feel comfortable contributing to the group. As there were only eight students in the group, I decided to incorporate personal introductions between all students in the first week of class, using the format adopted by Ellis and Gillett (EDGA807 - Introduction to Tertiary Teaching). Each student introduced themselves to all other students in the class and briefly discussed their reasons for enrolling in the subject. During the discussion sections, I carefully monitored my reactions and responses to students' ideas to ensure that I didn't make anyone feel inadequate when presenting their ideas. For example, if a student offered a comment which did not seem to follow logically, I asked them to explain their rationale to the rest of the group and also asked the group whether they had any further comments. I found that students in the class were actually very good at providing constructive criticism.



Encouraging participation by all students

To encourage active participation by all members, I divided the group into pairs for discussion of a particular set of issues. These pairs were varied for each of the discussion sections covered within the class, to ensure that students interacted with all other members of the group. The role of both the teacher and students was clearly explained on the handout provided and discussed in the first week of the course. They were informed on the handout that they should read the prescribed article prior to class, jot down any questions or problems that occurred to them and be prepared to discuss these questions in small groups (2-3 students). They were also informed that my role would be to co-ordinate summaries from the small groups.

Providing structured and purposeful discussion activities

A clear plan of the class structure was provided to the students, indicating the tasks to be achieved and the proportion of time allocated to each activity. An example of the class schedule provided is included below.

Teaching plan

Method:	Discuss recent journal article that addresses relevant issue
My role:	Overview of techniques used Co-ordinate summaries from small groups
Your role:	Read article prior to seminar Jot down questions/problems with article Discuss issues/problems in small groups
Schedule:	
5 mins	Preliminaries/Housekeeping
5 mins	Review questions on techniques, theoretical rationale.
10 mins	Discuss techniques, theoretical rationale in pairs
10 mins	Summarise ideas on techniques/theoretical rationale
5 mins	Review questions on methods/results
10 mins	Discuss methods/results in pairs

10 mins	Summarise ideas on methods/results
10 mins	Coffee break
5 mins	Review questions on interpretation
10 mins	Discuss interpretation in pairs
10 mins	Summarise ideas on interpretation
20 mins	Overview of techniques for next week's article
10 mins	General questions/comments

Although the discussion sections often exceeded the allocated time, this structure enabled monitoring of time required, and allowed me to adjust the time for subsequent activities to ensure that all content was covered in class. Each of the discussion sections had a clearly defined purposeful activity. Students generated approximately 5-6 questions related to each of the areas, for example, theoretical rationale, results and interpretation of data. They then discussed these questions in pairs. I also generated a set of possible discussion questions to fall back on should they fail to provide any questions. This consisted of some general questions (e.g. What theoretical issue is the article addressing?) as well as some specific questions (e.g. Why did the authors exclude 3 of the 16 subjects from the analyses?). Examples of general questions are also provided by Mowshowitz and Filner (1979, cited in Habeshaw and Steeds, 1987). Although I had to draw on my sample questions during the first class using the method, students generated high-quality questions in all subsequent weeks.

Potential problems and solutions

During the first class, two students indicated that they had not read the article. I mentioned (in a non-threatening manner!) that they would get more out of the seminar if they read the article in future, but that they should form pairs with someone who had read the article this week. This worked well - they participated in the discussion sections and all students read the articles before subsequent tutorials.

Two students were somewhat reluctant to voice their opinions in front of the whole group. By individually asking all pairs to discuss their answers to the questions, these students were encouraged to join in without feeling as if they were being singled out or picked on. I carefully monitored these students during the pair-wise discussion sections, and noted that they contributed well on an individual basis. We usually went over



the allotted time during discussion. I did not try and rigidly adhere to the schedule, as I felt the discussion was productive and relevant. However, I made up time in subsequent sections by asking each pair to discuss different questions and arranging for them to transcribe responses directly onto an overhead transparency for presentation to the group. Both techniques worked well and ensured that we covered all the content in the seminar.

Evaluation

Informal evaluation of the technique was carried out by asking students whether they were happy to continue with the format in subsequent weeks. I monitored their continuing participation by drawing up seating plans during the discussion sections to evaluate whether students continued to mix with all other students in the group. I also audio taped sections of the discussion to examine the extent of participation by each student and to evaluate my role in the group. Analysis of the audio-tape was invaluable for identifying times when I was more likely to dominate the group and to identify my use of open and closed questions. I also used information from a visit by Liz Ellis to discuss and evaluate one of the classes as part of a cycle of reflective practice. I was delighted with the progress made by students over a four-week period, in particular with the high level of motivation and involvement. There was a noticeable change in the tone of the discussion sections, with students confidently discussing issues and raising problems with the articles as though they were evaluating the work of "peers", rather than the work of "experts". I'll certainly continue to use this technique in small-group seminar settings!

References

- Habeshaw, S. & Steeds, D. (1987) 53 Interesting Communication Exercises for Science Students. Technical and Educational Services Ltd, Bristol.
- Newble, D. & Cannon, R. (1991) A Handbook for Teachers in Universities and Colleges: A Guide to Improving Teaching Methods (Second Edition), Kogan Page, London.

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GRADUATE HOUSE SUPPORT CENTRE

Graduate House is a unit of the University, set up to provide academic and social support services for postgraduate students. It is managed by a committee whose members are seconded from many sectors of the campus community, including Academic, Administrative and Postgraduate. The chair is currently occupied by Professor Bill Lovegrove, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Research).

The house is staffed mainly by postgraduate volunteers. Postgraduate of all Faculties use the House, and find many of their needs met within a supportive educational and social environment.

An invitation is extended to all Faculties and Departments to book facilities at Graduate House for social or academic activities involving staff and postgraduates. The house and its facilities are made freely available in the interest of postgraduate welfare.

Regular lunch-time seminars are a popular activity with postgraduates and staff. Topics on offer this session have been:

- Thesis Writing
- Presentation Skills
- Supervision
- Intellectual Property
- EEO workshop
- Basic Computer Literacy
- Interview and C.V. writing strategies for Postgrads
- English Conversation Groups.

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- Quiet study areas
- Spacious BBQ/outdoor entertainment area (bookable)
- Microwave Oven, refrigerator, free tea and coffee
- Computer facilities
- Laserwriter
- Photocopier

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