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First time using student-centred teaching?

Abstract

What happens when one shifts from a traditional lecture format to what have become known as 'student-centred' methods of teaching? Imagine that someone has designed a subject that consists entirely of student-centred, experiential activities - hypotheticals, case studies, debates, reflective discussions on student experiences, personal learning journals, a student-designed final exam, lots of small-group discussion, and content that evolves over the semester to reflect student interest. To prepare, one could look at theory and general description of particular, student-centred subjects. Such writings would convey how students take 'ownership' of class material and connect it with their work and personal lives. This analytical literature is complemented here by a focus on how it would feel for one to teach such a subject. In other words, what will you, the lecturer, experience? More specifically, what will it feel like in the critical period at the beginning of the semester as you get your feet on the ground?

***First Time
Using Student-
Centred
Teaching?***

**Will Rifkin
Mark Norton
Joanne Dodd**

What happens when one shifts from a traditional lecture format to what have become known as 'student-centred' methods of teaching? Imagine that someone has designed a subject that consists entirely of student-centred, experiential activities — hypotheticals, case studies, debates, reflective discussions on student experiences, personal learning journals, a student-designed final exam, lots of small-group discussion, and content that evolves over the semester to reflect student interest. To prepare, one could look at theory and general description of particular, student-centred subjects. Such writings would convey how students take 'ownership' of class material and connect it with their work and personal lives. This analytical literature is complemented here by a focus on how it would feel for one to teach such a subject. In other words, what will you, the lecturer, experience? More specifically, what will it feel like in the critical period at the beginning of the semester as you get your feet on the ground?

Perhaps, a suitable title for this article would be "What to Expect in the First Four Weeks," a play on the title of the best selling book for new parents, *What to Expect in the First Year*. The paragraphs that follow are extracted from a consultants report on the process of being 'coached' to lecture a student-centred, experiential subject. The consultant, Mark Norton of Tillotson Associates, was contracted under a University of Wollongong Strategic Development Grant awarded to Joanna Dodd, PhD, then of the University's Business School, and Will Rifkin, PhD, of the Department of Management. The project involved developing coaching methods and documenting the lecturer's, Mark Norton's, learning experience before, during, and after Autumn semester 1996. The subject taught was MGMT351 Business Ethics (Rifkin, 1994).

Mark Norton's day-to-day reflections on coming to terms with student-centred methods form the core of this article. This article is aimed directly at younger lecturers. Experienced lecturers, though, may be reminded by Mark's reflections of their own early days lecturing and the tensions involved in developing a relationship with the class. Both more experienced and less experienced lecturers should pay attention to issues of power, control, and responsibility — facets of the student-lecturer relationship shifted onto students in a student-centred subject.

Before being launched into analytical insights from the Tillotson Associates report and excerpts from Mark's reflections, you need a description of the subject. The subject, as noted earlier, is MGMT351 Business Ethics, a third-year elective subject in the BComm-Management degree. Students, when asked at the end of the semester, describe the subject as

follows,:

Student A:

Business Ethics is essentially a Management Psychology and Sociology subject. Most students would not consider most managerial decisions to be permeated with ethical considerations. But most decisions are not made [by managers] without considering how their own as well as other persons' lives and well being will be affected, how to be fair, and applying their own personal values to rules and policies they are responsible for.

Business Ethics does not have a theoretical orientation. Rather it has a topical approach, in order to promote intuitive thinking by the student and class. This is guided by examining cases and the construction of a personal journal where newspaper articles, weekly class activities, and personal thoughts on associated topics covered throughout the course can be formalized.

Student B:

Lectures are not conducted in the traditional sense, they are designed for group discussion, interaction and debate. You will not be lectured at, rather you are introduced to a concept and then encouraged to explore your own and your fellow students' ideas about it.

The course examines "Business Ethics" by looking at topics such as Accidents, Risk, Blame, Responsibility, Errors, and the Law. You will be introduced to concepts such as: groupthink, locus of control, fear, regret, mistakes which are used as tools to analyse how socially defined perspectives are formed.

You need to be prepared to contribute to class discussions, to challenge your own and others' ideas and arguments, to accept that you do not have all the answers and that others have different points of view. You will need to remember that there is no right or wrong in this subject, disagreement is not necessarily a criticism of you but a different perspective. Don't take arguments personally, remain open minded.

Student C:

[This] course will equip you with a series of tools of thought, which may form a useful framework for viewing ... [a] situation when used in combination. The course will better equip you for the process of consideration, rather than necessarily help you to qualify or rationalise the outcome. ... The quality of your learning depends on your commitment and preparedness to consider situations, decisions and relationships.

These descriptions illustrate that students seem to be conscious of basic precepts of student-centred, experiential learning. How did they gain this insight?

Tillotson Associates Report — Analytical Insights

This journal is divided into three parts based upon the stage of the semester:

- 1) Initiation and the development of the learning environment;
- 2) Working and knowledge in mid-session;
- 3) Assessment and termination of the working relationship. ...

The nature and intensity of the coaching input changed through the duration of the course. In the initial phase, considerable support was required in the detail of design and execution to establish the necessary environment. In the second stage feedback was helpful on the sessions designed and the reflective discussions this generated about practice were helpful. Towards the end of the course, the coaching input required was minimal, mostly directed at managing the needs of the university which is unlikely to be a significant issue for staff making a transition from conventional practice.

Initiation and the Development of the Learning Environment

This section covers the preparation period and the first four sessions. During these weeks the important emphasis was upon the establishment of a comfortable space for students to work in, the development of 'tools' for them to think with that could be applied later in the course and the initiation of a series of new

working relationships both among the students and between the member of staff and students. It was clear as the weeks progressed that the breaching of the student expectations about course delivery had various consequences. They appeared to have an enthusiasm about the opportunity to contribute and work together, coupled with a concern about whether the course was delivering what it should and whether they were learning anything. These dual experiences were a reflection of the emphasis given to the development and management of working relationships within this stage of the process. The rationale for this early attention to the working relationships is that it builds an environment for later in the semester where a more concentrated focus upon knowledge transfer and student ownership of this knowledge is possible. It was during this stage that the coaching experience was most valuable.

Mark Norton's Journal Entries — Edited and Excerpted

Preparation

'The course outline was provided by the principle investigator, with a detailed reading package. As I had no previous experience of this style of teaching, it was impossible for me to evaluate whether or not the exercises and readings included would work. I felt that the course wasn't coherent at this stage. Despite having read the session notes for the whole course no 'point' appeared to be made by the course, instead it just felt like a disjointed set of topics that could be interpreted any way. I just had to trust that this material would work without me understanding the rationale behind the design or how it was going to link into later classes. The principal investigator was not forthcoming with any explanations or background ideas for the way that the class had been designed when I pushed. He later told me that this had been deliberate to force me to address the uncertainty of the situation. Given the approach to be developed within the class, I can to a certain extent understand this, but it felt as if he was withholding information or that he could not explain. The main impact it had for my style in the classroom was to avoid giving a similar experience to the students. This raised an interesting concern for me, which was how to provide

the opportunity for students to offer their ideas without making them feel that I wasn't taking enough responsibility for the content or was hiding the fact I may not know something. ...'

Session 1

'The size of the class was around 40 students and most of these turned up for the first session. The first activity was arranging the class into the groups that they were going to work in for the rest of the semester. When asked, they moved into groups of 6 as required and as not many people knew each other, this was often just a case of moving chairs closer together. As a means of getting to know each other, I put a list of introductory facts about me on the OHP and asked the students to write some details about themselves on a sheet of paper, name, main study, reason for choosing Business Ethics, first language which was to be handed in at first break. These were completed and provided a useful source of information which I read in detail before the next session.'

After the 10 minutes allocated to this we moved onto the first exercise. This was a discussion within the groups using the 'croc's in the atrium' story which gave a series of people taking actions which had differing moral consequences. Each person had to rate the characters from the story and then discuss within their own group. This felt like it opened the classroom up as a student from each group had to come out and report the group's results. People seemed quite happy to walk to the front of the room to write down what they had discussed which helped me relax as they were clearly participating. As people began the tasks in hand the groups appeared to gel and were quite noisy, doing the work assigned. The first 30 minutes were quite stressful but as the class began to work on their assignment it gave me a breathing space to settle down.'

'The second task the students were given was to think of a 'crime' they had committed in the past and to discuss it within their groups. When I sensed that this was completed which I picked up because people seemed to stop concentrating or started talking in a different way to their neighbours, individuals were then asked to volunteer to report their crime to the class. Very few students were willing to openly discuss their 'crime' with the whole class. This is not surprising

given that this was the first session and I wouldn't have been surprised if no-one spoke up given the content of the discussion. However, by this time, the class was quite well settled in the room and with each other which enabled me to relax and feel comfortable with whatever was shared. ...'

'I felt that most of the class seem to find this method of teaching quite strange, most expecting the lecturer to stand up at the front and lecture rather than the class working during the session. An illustrative comment from a student's journal was: "I'm finding it a bit hard to get the general gist of business ethics and the way it is being taught but I'm an open minded person and will try anything once".'

Session 2

'The classwork for week 2 was discussed with the Learning Interest Group (LIG — Mark Norton's coaches: Joanna Dodd and Will Rifkin) and as the previous week had felt a little rushed, we decided to drop one of the topics on the original session notes to allow more space for the other items. The first session was discussed in some detail which was of great value as it allowed the immediate consolidation of the experience of the first week. It allowed me to make comments about what had worked and what had felt uncomfortable and to consider how this could be converted into a second session that would use this knowledge I had acquired. From this discussion a format was decided upon jointly with the original course designer. It emerged from this that we had different styles in our interaction with the class, in particular the attention given to discussion in class. This design process allowed me, in a limited and controlled fashion to start trying out ideas I was developing about where to take this course. At this point I still had little idea where the course was going but, given the previous weeks experience, I decided to accept this as 'normal' and not to be too concerned at this stage. ...'

'One of the key points to remember was a question they had asked me about the difference between morals and ethics. I had left this as I was not clear of the answer myself. As I discussed this problem with the LIG it became clear that I did not need to answer such questions, but instead needed to make the question legitimate. I had therefore prepared a case study

which raised the differences between personal and social concerns and actions and consequences to encourage them to think this through. Freeing myself from the need to answer and so resolving my earlier concern about what I would do with a question I couldn't answer was important in freeing me to allow the class to discuss ethical issues openly. ...'

'Many students had asked questions concerning the [personal learning] journal as it is such a big part of the course and worth so many marks. Rather than explain what the journal should have in it, I suggested that the student should discuss their ideas of what a good journal would contain and follow their own guidelines. Some students were still confounded as to what this would consist of and so continued to ask about the its contents. The students seem to feel a bit uncomfortable writing a journal as this may be the first time they have been asked to do this. It would be much easier for me at this point to show them a journal from a previous course to help control their anxiety but I was concerned that this could result in a journal that is not personal but rather a copy of someone else's work so I decided against this tactic. However, they appeared to need a little more assistance to confirm their ideas so I offered that if anyone was really concerned they could bring me an illustration of something they had thought about including [in the journal] and I would give them some feedback. ...'

'Walking through the classroom during the group discussion helps to settle any personal nerves and seems to help the students relax with the lecturer in close proximity. This served to emphasise the way the classes would be run, with lots of participation desired from students. This section of the class was finished by asking them what 'locus of control' implied and what interest it could have in Business Ethics. They were asked to discuss this question in their journals rather than at length in class. This felt important as a way of making them continue the work that was started in class and to emphasise that the class session provided the material but was not a substitute for independent work.'

'After the break, the students were asked to write down the three biggest 'risks' in their life at the moment and to relate it to the previous test. This was discussed in an open forum after a brief period of personal work although the majority of the students are not yet willing

to talk in such a forum, a sizeable minority will make such a contribution. This helped allay my fears that students wouldn't come forward in class to discuss their findings.'

'This work took longer than envisaged, despite the changes made to the original design and so I decided to drop the discussion of the prepared readings within this session. This instead was moved to the tutorial sessions for the following week. I was concerned that the timing of sessions did not appear to accommodate the amount of discussion of topics that was emerging. I realised that I would have to be more flexible in the design of sessions so that items could be dropped if necessary, without me feeling as if I had left an important part of the session out. The concern arose because of running out of time for the discussion of readings was that this might give the message to the students that it wasn't necessary to prepare for class.'

'However, this was not too problematic as the homework set for this week was to write an account of a personal experience relevant to the readings for the next week. This again was raising the importance of work beyond that undertaken in the space and time of the class. ...'

Session 3

'The original design of the session for this week was problematic as it required the students do something that I would find uncomfortable. This entailed students leaving the lecture room and going out to interview people about the biggest 'screw-up' that the University had made in their experience. I decided that anything I would not be comfortable with would be omitted from the course, or done in a different way. This particular scenario was changed so that the students organised themselves into pairs and interviewed each other about the same subject. This produced quite a heated discussion within the LIG about the differences between staff members in what they consider legitimate to ask students to do which raised the impact of style and professional judgement on the details of design. This also generated some discussion about how and when you get the students to the stage when they can legitimately say no to a request. This discussion was important as it helped me realise the central importance of me feeling comfortable in the classroom and feeling that I am treating the students fairly if I am to work

which means taking over responsibility for the design of the details of the course. I don't think the students are yet in a position to resist so I need to do the resistance for them.'

'The class started with three points to remember from the previous week which were discussed. I am feeling increasingly comfortable with this ritual and will continue with this as start and close out for the class sessions. ...'

'I was not as attentive to time as I should have been which meant that the debate [activity] had to be closed too rapidly suggesting that careful use of the clock is needed to control the timing. This exercise created an environment where an increased number of students were prepared to speak and made listening to other's arguments and disagreement legitimate. This increased participation is also reflected in the following comment from one student's journal: "I'm getting into this journal thing now I think."

'However, it was the first time I have had to assert direct control over the class by stating explicitly that the discussion must stop. Teasing me afterwards, one of the students said that she thought I was "losing it" before I intervened. When I discussed this later with the LIG for confirmation they suggested that this was because it was the first week that students really felt safe to operate within the alternative power relationships set up within the class and would inevitably push the limits. Next time I will try and make such an intervention by stating explicitly that we have overrun the time allocated because they had done such a good piece of work but we had to stop. In the classroom, I just knew I needed to take control of the time. ...'

'The transition from individual to collaborative work feels comfortable within the classroom, but the institution still requires individual assessment.'

Session 4

'... The class was divided into the groups for Moral Mazes, the course book for MGMT 351. The first idea was to let each group decide which chapter they would like to focus on. However students mentioned that the best idea would be for me to allocate chapters as there were large discrepancies in the size and difficulty of the chapters. This was interesting as it was the first

indication of their approach to assessment. They appeared to be more comfortable with me taking responsibility for allocating the work, which as long as they accepted my right to make this decision felt appropriate. It is strange however that the difference was in the process by which this took place rather than the outcome; they requested my intervention rather than responding to my requirement.'

'During my discussion with the LIG I had remarked how competently I felt the students had been responding to a class that had been designed to emerge rather than follow a pre-existing structure. It was suggested that this feedback be given coupled with a request for feedback from them about their experiences so far. The class was given positive feedback this week about their manner of dealing with the uncertainty generated by this course. I emphasised that I was interested in how they developed their own way of understanding the issues addressed in class so that this uncertainty was necessary to encourage them to make their own connections whilst thinking and dealing with the concepts discussed. More explanation was given as to how these results would be different on an individual basis as there were differences e.g. in background and culture. Later in the session feedback about the course to date was requested from them. This acknowledgement appeared to give the students the feeling that they were more in control of the class rather than the discomfort felt at the beginning where the feeling of uncertainty was high. ...'

'The quality and quantity of homework was increasing as the students were beginning to realise that the work was theirs and I wouldn't demand an explanation if it wasn't handed in on time. Students began to apologise if for any reason their work was late.'

Summary of issues emerging [from Mark Norton's journal]

'... The initial phase of this session can be characterised as an extended 'warm up' period where the environment, the necessary tools and the working relationships become so familiar that none can act as blocks in the focused learning that emerges in the second phase.'

Managing the Environment

One issue that emerges from the data before the course starts is the importance of taking ownership of

the classroom prior to the commencing of student contact as the nature of teaching in this fashion tends to require that both students and teacher move around. It is important to have a clear sense of the space that is available. The students cannot be forced into rows as they need to work with each other and the process of establishing contact between teacher and student requires space in between groups for access. In addition, the early requirement for students to move within the space, both by moving into groups and in writing reviews of their group discussions on the board is a means of making the environment familiar and comfortable.

Timing is extremely important in managing the environment as the class time is limited. Of central importance were two features. The first was encouraging the students to link the individual time outside the class to the work done in joint sessions to encourage the necessary preparation for the class based activities. The second was designing exercises that were balanced in content and in process, which did not feel as if they were dragging or as if discussion was too constrained. ...

Managing the working relationships

In this case study, a significant source of anxiety was the possibility for these relationships to break down. There were very few people who knew each other in this classroom and so a considerable amount of work was necessary directed at establishing contact between students so they could rely on each other, listen to each and offer constructive criticism to each other. As the first few weeks emerged it became clear that the exercises as designed worked to encourage students to get to know each other and to begin the process of disclosing personal information. In establishing an appropriate relationship between the teacher and students, one pattern that emerges is the need to give continuing attention to the questions asked by students about the form and structure of the class and assessment. This is time consuming and at times frustrating, but when conceptualised as part of the 'warm up' process of relationship development, it can be viewed as a form of reassurance. As part of this, the use of short homework exercises that generate feedback but only use a very simple grading structure [marks of plus, tick, and minus] worked to establish a form of individual

contact with the teacher that was reassuring. ...

The existence of LIG was essential for this as it provided the equivalent source of reassurance and checking that the students appeared to require. The pre-existence of relatively simple exercises also was experienced as beneficial as attention then did not have to be directed at design or at in-depth review of the subject, but could be retained for the work on relationships. This focus was time consuming, which may have been exacerbated by the unexpected nature of the course for students, but it is questionable whether the later emphasis on learning would have been possible without this input.

Managing Knowledge

As stated above, the conventional approach is to start with this component of course work. It was anxiety provoking running a class which wasn't based upon this type of initial exchange as it requires an openness to being presented with questions or challenges that could demonstrate a lack of knowledge. This awareness raises concerns about the legitimacy with which you will be perceived. This is not easy. It is also troubling for the students as they all have a primary concern to succeed. To engage in this style of work, they need to trust the instructor. For this reason, the success with which the environment and relationships are managed will be important in the capacity for students to tolerate the lack of structure within the content.

[end of Mark Norton's journal entries and reflective analysis for the first four weeks of the semester]

How well did students internalise the messages about class process? One student, Student C (from three who described the subject previously), gives the following 'code of conduct' for the class —

- My primary objective in this course is to challenge my thinking.
- I am responsible for my individual success.
- I understand that effective learning involves the sharing of ideas and undertake to share my ideas with my study group / class as appropriate.
- All work submitted will be my own. I understand that plagiarism and cheating undermines the primary objective.
- I will be constructive in the learning of others as I trust they will be constructive in my learning.

Conclusion

These excerpts from Mark Norton's journal and the conclusions reached in the Tillotson Associates report show how both the lecturer and the students come to terms with their working environment, with their working relationship with one another, and, finally, with the knowledge content of the subject. The need to engage in these three negotiations is undoubtedly common to all subjects. However, the process of conducting these negotiations among lecturers and students, and the outcomes, will differ in a student-centred subject. Which approach — traditional or student-centred — produces more long-term learning? Let me avoid that paradigmatic debate, though this article has as a subtext promotion of student-centred methods. Each lecturer selects a set of approaches with which she or he is most comfortable. Deviating from one's habits and from one's discipline's norms involves leaving such a zone of comfort. A map describing the terrain outside the zone of comfort might help. However, every class and every lecturer is different, and no such map is available. This article, though, might be viewed as a travelogue of how it feels to take a journey into facilitating student-centred, experiential learning. Read it yourself and take that journey, or share this travelogue with a young colleague. Send me a postcard.