

Student engagement & a teacher's *self*: A case study of inclusive teaching

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Abstract

In today's culturally-diverse classroom teachers embrace various methods to enhance learning outcomes. Moreover, student engagement in the context of international education attracts much attention. In this paper we explore how we implement teaching and learning methods to engage our students without reference to distinctions between international and local students. We discuss practiced-based teaching and small-group learning as pedagogic methods to engage students with their learning. From our case-study of student-centered learning we conclude that a teacher's self plays a role in practice-based teaching and small-group learning. From the role of self evidenced in our study we hypothesize that self is the catalyst for the manifestation of inclusive teaching in a culturally diverse classroom.

Keywords: *student-centred learning, student-engagement, inclusive teaching, practice-based teaching, small-group learning*

INTRODUCTION

To teach is to change how someone understands, experiences, and conceives the world (Ramsden 2003) and a function of teaching is to promote learning. As such, current pedagogical practice involves matching teaching methods to learning goals and styles (Sparkes 1999). However, using current teaching and learning practices and theories we no longer impart our body of knowledge lecturing in the cathedral-style of the scholastic tradition of a West European university education (Grant 1998).

Therefore, in our culturally diverse classrooms we generally employ inclusive-teaching methods to encourage our students to question, inquire, and search our bodies of knowledge (Biggs 2003). Moreover, often a result of conflicting and dynamic stakeholder groups, contemporary institutions of higher education tend to adopt teaching and learning policies with the goal of improving learning outcomes. Hence, as educators we have an imperative to explore how we teach albeit sometimes to people far-removed from the traditions of education embodied in our universities.

To answer the question of how we engage our students in a culturally diverse classroom we used case-study methods to relate student comments to small-group learning and practice-based teaching. In our data analysis we used the principles of grounded theory to explore what students thought about our teaching and learning methods. The comments suggest that students respond positively to inclusive teaching in the form of small-group teaching and practice-based learning (See Data Analysis).

Here, we discuss Level-3 teaching (Biggs 2003) to draw on the literature of small-group learning and practice-based teaching. We then explore the

classroom as culturally diverse learning environment before we outline our research methodology. We follow our data analysis with a conclusion based on our findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

For many teachers and students accepted methods of teaching a professional body of knowledge include practice-based teaching and small-group learning. Springer, Stanne, and Donovan (1999) researched small-group learning in science, mathematics, engineering, and technology undergraduate courses and Towns, Kreke, and Fields (2000) conducted research with first-year chemistry students, and MacPherson, Jones, Whitehouse, and O'Neill (2001) found that students wanted tutors 'to act as an expert resource and to be flexible in allowing students to direct the discussions'. Smith (2000) linked small-group learning to the broader notion of learning communities and Simpson, De Stefano, Allen, and Lutman (2005) combined video-conferencing and small-group learning to the education of health professionals. However, in relation to property, we found no literature on small-group learning.

Likewise, practice-based teaching does not appear in the literature on property courses. Again, practice-based teaching appears limited to the health sciences and particularly concentrated in medicine. For example, Svab (1998) researched practice-based teaching in the medical curriculum in Slovenia and Hindmarsh, Coster and Gilbert (1998) researched vocationally trained general practitioners; and Koh (2002) studied the perceptions of nursing students of practice-based teaching and Gillespie (2006) researched practice-based teaching in the role of the nurse teacher. Thus, from our literature review, we

can see that practice-based teaching and small-group learning associate with the education of professional bodies of knowledge, they are not yet linked to the teaching of property.

Student engagement

We define student engagement as entry ‘into a particular community of practice, discourse and inquiry, in order to become an ‘insider’ in the culture’ (Durrant & Green 2000). It is important that teachers recognize that to engage our students in the decisions that affect their learning can empower them beyond the classroom (McFadden & Munns 2002). Research shows greater student engagement is a strong predictor of success; students more engaged in class are more likely to earn higher grades (Goodenow 1993; Voelkl 1995). Moreover, from cross-cultural studies of the sociology and psychology of international students we know a culturally diverse classroom brings special needs to bear on students and teachers (Volet & Ang 1998).

Hence, we ask how we manifest small-group learning and practiced-based teaching in the culturally-diverse classroom of a market-driven cosmopolitan university. Past literature tends to focus on the cultural differences of students that tend to create and maintain the dichotomy of international and local students (Dawson & Conti-Bekkers 2002; Biggs 2003). To dissolve the distinction we first look at the Biggs’ discussion of inclusive teaching.

International students are students who have gone to another country to enroll in full-time study at a university (Biggs 2003). Stereotypically, international students face three problems: socio-cultural adjustment, language, and learning/teaching problems (Biggs 2003). The use of the

English language is one challenge, but many learning barriers are due to cultural differences that considerably impact on a student's learning (Weiland cited in Bretag, Horrocks & Smith 2002).

Commonly accepted is that cultural background makes study difficult for international students to adapt to the style of tertiary teaching in the host country (Biggs 2003). As a result, many university teachers face difficulties when teaching international students. Difficulties presented by students include deficient language skills, learning-related problems that are seen as cultural in origin; such as reliance on rote-learning and a lack of creativity (Biggs 2003).

We argue that regardless of citizenship and residency status many students face the common dilemma of 'culture shock' (Dawson & Conti-Bekkers 2002) that is—adapting to the culture of higher education. Therefore we must engage all students in the culturally diverse classroom. We discuss inclusive teaching (Biggs 2003) using small-group teaching and practice-based learning as methods to extend inclusive teaching to all students.

Biggs's three levels of teaching

Level-1, teaching as assimilation, focuses on how international students differ from local students (Biggs 2003). It reflects blame-the-student thinking.

Everything is the students' fault; we expect students to absorb the culture of higher education. As a result, we tend to stereotype students based on differences. For example, international students are seen as rote-learners who lack critical thinking and remain passive in class (Biggs 2003). To learn their first language, students of Confucian heritage are taught from a young age to

use memorization and repetitive activities to learn thousands of written characters. The stereotypical student of Confucian heritage is seen to be different from a local student because of a perceived deficiency in the use of the English language. Cultural background is often advanced as the reason why many students refrain from participating in discussions. However, we argue that if international students must adjust to the culture of higher education, so must local students.

Through informal class discussions with students we found that language was an obstacle to learning, irrespective of cultural background. Based on our professional experience we recommend extra encouragement and support will help any student. Instead of focusing on cultural differences, we should emphasize the cultural similarities that make teaching easier (Biggs 2003).

Different from Level-1, Level-2 teaching views cross-cultural teaching as accommodating students' cultural expectations. That is, adapting one's teaching to meet the preferred ways of international students (Biggs 2003). Level-2 teaching strategies include providing copies of lecture notes, explaining key concepts, assuming no background knowledge, speaking slowly, avoiding colloquialisms, summarizing key points at the end of discussion, and mixing international and local students in group activities (Ryan 2000; Biggs 2003).

Although many researchers recommend the above approaches to assist international students, these strategies also benefit local students. The formation of culturally-mixed groups helps improve cultural awareness while fostering communication skills (Volet & Ang 1998). This seems important for

local students, particularly first-year cohorts, who must also assimilate to the culture of higher education.

Levels 1 & 2 are *deficit-teaching* models that offer a no-win approach to teaching. We propose Level-3 inclusive-teaching for all students because everyone benefits from a good teaching (Biggs 2003). The contextual approach to Level-3 teaching is a strategy to activate the learning processes appropriate to the learning objectives. Moreover, Level-3 inclusive teaching addresses the needs of all students. When teaching, our focus should be on the similarities between students rather than differences (Biggs 2003). However, we must also pay particular attention to the specific needs of individual students. Hence, merging group dynamics and the personal needs of individual students is best done within the whole teaching system. Thus, if we are to understand how student-centered learning improves student engagement and learning outcomes we must first understand small-group learning (Lorenzo & Juste 2008).

Small-group learning (Tutoring)

Small-group learning takes place in the traditional form of a tutorial and being less formal than lectures; it provides opportunities for students and tutors to discuss key topics, concepts and ideas. Tutorials are an ideal forum to develop our students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills. In tutorials, the role of tutor is that of a guide, a supporter, a teacher specialist, a teacher coach, a helping teacher, a support teacher, an encourager (Dennis & Lauland cited in Schpilberg & Hubschman 2003). Thus, we now turn to a discussion of strategies to facilitate small-group learning.

Strategies for small-group teaching

First, the teacher must know the subject, the curriculum, assessments, and how tutorials articulate with the lectures. Only then is a teacher able to structure a learning activity. A teacher must take time to prepare appropriate questions to achieve the learning objectives of the tutorial. The teacher must give students time to reflect on what they are studying. To engage students in discussion, the teacher must remain focused on and interested in the subject by listening and responding with interested self. Quoting examples from personal and professional experience is recommended because students relate what they learn to the real world.

In the context of a culturally diverse classroom we must ensure that all students are aware of the common culture of higher education. We achieve this goal when we explain our expectations in relation to the learning objectives. For example, to encourage students to contribute to discussions, we respect the views of all students and we do not dominate discussion. We also encourage student participation when we 1) explain how they benefit from the opportunity to discuss and refine their understanding, 2) ask students to solve problems by applying the body knowledge to new situations, and 3) ask them to reflect on their attitudes and feelings (Steinert 1996).

Formation of effective peer-to-peer relationships between students helps to increase discussions (UniSA 2007a). Icebreakers are used to introduce students to each other before they are socially and personally comfortable. Another strategy for cultural inclusion, based on common social inclusion, is as teacher to remember the name of each student for this simple human act can impart a strong sense of worth to the named person.

Moreover, two approaches help to encourage introverted students to work in groups 1) the teacher forms the groups or 2) students organize their own groups. Group work gives students time to reflect on issues that arise in the discussion during tutorials. Other strategies include give them explicit expectations about assessments, provide model answers, and encourage them to use the support services offered on-campus (Bretag, Horrocks & Smith 2002).

As suggested by Schpilberg & Hubschman (2003), computer-mediated tutoring helps to complement face-to-face tutoring making it more effective. Thus, besides class work, we encourage students to speak to or email us whenever they have problems. Teacher feedback of student discussions and presentations in class is crucial for student learning (MacMillan & McLean 2005). Teacher should synthesize and summarize group discussions in a clear and concise manner (Steinert 1996).

Our discussion of small-group learning suggests that student-centered teaching encourages student engagement. We now discuss another type of student-centered learning that receives strong emphasis in today's higher education— practice-based teaching.

Practice-based learning

Biggs (1999) asserts the responsibility of the teacher is to organize the teaching and learning context so students are more likely to use higher order learning processes. We can achieve this goal when all teaching components express the kind of understanding we want our students to obtain. An effective teaching context encourages the student to undertake learning activities likely

to achieve the required understanding. Furthermore, assessment tells students what activities are required of them and tells the teacher if the learning objective was met (Biggs 1999).

One example of an aligned teaching system is practice-based teaching. Practice-based teaching provides students with ‘real-world’ activity that encourages reflections on theoretical studies. Practice-based teaching allows a student to explore and apply knowledge and skills to real workplace contexts (UniSA 2007b). Therefore, practice-based teaching is important in preparing graduates for employment opportunities.

We briefly evidence practiced-based teaching in a third-year course undergraduate offered at an Australian university. The course enables students to understand the property-development process and various property-development issues. The main assignment, a property-development feasibility project, requires that each student identify a potential development-site and prepare a development proposal, market study, and feasibility analysis.

Students must gather and compile information related to their site and planning regulations and gather relevant economic statistics and market data to work out the highest and best use of the site. The assignment was student-centered with the central attention on what and how students applied knowledge and skills to solve a ‘real-world’ problem.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In our qualitative study we employed a case-study method to understand how students responses to inclusive teaching methods of small-group learning and practiced-based teaching (Silverman, D 2000; Yin 2003). We adopted a

single-case design with one class of students as the unit of analysis (Gillham 2000; Yin 2003). The case consists of a class of undergraduate students at an Australian University. The class had 50 students, 34 males, 16 females, with 5 international students. The class had 31 students aged 18-24, 10 students aged 25-34, and 9 students were older than 35. All international students were younger than the age of 35. The respond rate for the questionnaire survey was 70%.

Qualitative data collection is an open-ended process that includes all contextual information related to the research topic and site (Silverman, D & Marvasti 2008). A common practice is for a qualitative researcher to use existing social relationships for their research (Silverman, D & Marvasti 2008). We used an open-ended questionnaire survey to ask students to comment on the teaching methods employed in the class. In accordance with the university policy, the identity of each student is not disclosed. In addition, we developed process and reflection notes from informal class discussions (Parker 2008) over a period of 5 months. These notes were retained and kept in confidence. Questions in our surveys included: name the best aspects of the teaching, what would improve the teaching, how did assessments affect practice-based learning and small-group teaching. Students were encouraged to articulate their thoughts relating to their learning experience.

Data analysis focused on identifying themes and associated categories of meanings within the data (Parker & Roffey 1997; Parker 2008). We used the principle of grounded theory because we want to understand the 'real-world' situation of how our students receive our teaching and learning methods (Parker & Roffey 1997; Charmaz 2006) and coded whatever themes we found

in the data. Coding is the result of ‘raising questions and giving provisional answers about categories and their relations’ (Strauss 1987).

All questionnaires, process and reflection notes were analysed and coded for emergent themes. We developed categories deduced from the data and crossed-indexed to the source (Parker 2008). We coded all data as many categories as appeared relevant and some data were coded under multiple categories. Categories with near zero data were discarded or merged with other categories. We refined the categories through a process of comparison, where data coded under one category were compared with data from other categories. This allowed for category consolidation and identification of other categories (Silverman, D 2000; Parker 2008).

The limitation of the study, an imbalance power relationship between the lecturer and students, was partly controlled by the anonymous questionnaire survey where students were encouraged to respond without being recognized.

DISCUSSIONS AND DATA ANALYSIS

Classrooms as networks of culture

‘We are experiencing a huge shift in the ways we construct and approach our subjects of study as well as in the ways we perceive ourselves as certain kinds of ideological subject, geographically and historically’ (Pope 2002). For example, we can now explain and describe the ability of olfactory and optical organs to discriminate a vast range of smells and colours by analogy to the mathematical concept of a *vector space* (Lipson & Lipschutz 2001; Rorres & Anton 2004). By using a visual representation of a cube with the dimensions of sweet, tart, and neutral we can *see* the difference between smells.

Likewise, we can understand culture as a *vector space* with dimensions of religion, class, wealth, education, occupation, age, gender, sexuality, and country of birth et cetera. In fact, we find that ‘in terms of the *General Systems Theory of Cultural Adaptation*...people [are] individual systems that function through interaction with their physical, cultural, and human environment’ (Dawson & Conti-Bekkers 2002). Hence, when we extend our notion of culture to include the social groups of the post-modern era (Lyotard 1984) we find that our classroom reveals hitherto hidden diversity of cultures.

Since Lyotard heralded the post-modern world, Western pluralist societies have devolved around cultural signifiers. Hence in our classrooms we engage with students who identify with generational tags such as *Youth culture*, *X-gen*, *baby-boomer*. Students and teachers present particular dimensions of culture such as gender, sexuality, and age. Cultural descriptors, therefore, signal the ‘systems of symbols which act to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations’ (Geertz 1973).

Take two students born in the same country with the same religion and ethnic bonds: one 40-year-old male and one 20-year-old female. On the axes of age and gender they instantiate different versions of a shared national culture. Small differences between cultures are significant because social and personal differences affect the social-relations between people.

Cultural dimensions such as age and gender affect the physical environment and the social context of the classroom. That is, students learn in a network of cultures embedded in an institution. To teach in this network of cultures a teacher, as an employee of the institution, must present to each student a conflation of personal, national, and institutional cultures. Our

discussion therefore focuses on how *small-group learning* and *practice-based teaching* function ‘in the meeting place between different cultures where there is a recognition of the manifestation of cultural difference, and where equal and meaningful reconstructive cross-cultural dialogue can occur’ (Leask 2004).

Data analysis

We turn to our analysis of the data collected via questionnaire survey and informal class discussion. We grouped our data, 37 significant phrases, into the following categories: Personal qualities, Communication, Experience, and Teaching. In this section we evidence the relation of each category to *small-group learning* and *practice-based teaching*. Table 1 outlines the links between analytical categories evidenced by data analysis.

Table 1: Relationships between personal qualities, teaching methods, and students' perceptions

	Teaching method	
	Practice-based teaching	Small-group learning
Personal qualities	Student perceptions	
Personality	Mentors and nurtures	Makes subject interesting
Communication	Links theory to practice	Links theory to practice
Experience	Informative answers	Solves problems
Pedagogy	Knowledge relates beyond curriculum	Real-life examples

Personal qualities

Despite any ‘controversy between a competency-based view of teachers and an emphasis on the teacher’s self’ (Schpilberg & Hubschman 2003) we argue that when a teacher acts as guide and mentor to a student the personality of the teacher plays some role in the process of learning. We evidence the theme of self in comments that the teacher was ‘approachable’, ‘caring’, ‘friendly’,

‘helpful’, and ‘kind’. A teacher’s personal qualities help or hinder a classroom culture conducive to discussion; the foundation of small-group learning (UniSA 2007a). From the comment ‘eager to teach and help’ we infer that the teacher’s personal qualities support and extend the discussion because the comment implies a willingness to reach beyond a disinterested view of students.

Moreover, to mentor is to nurture or help someone develop and grow; provide for and care for; help someone become a member of a community (Delbridge et al. 2005; Lewis 2007). We therefore infer *practice-based teaching* based on the theme of *nurture* in the comments that the teacher made ‘special preparation’, and the teacher ‘made [the] subject interesting’. The implications of the comments are that the teacher went beyond a mere functional relation; beyond the call of duty as it were. We glean direct evidence of *practice-based teaching* in the comment that the teacher related a ‘good amount of real life examples’ to a student’s ‘working experience’. We see the outcome of the process in the remark that a student was ‘able to apply the knowledge...to work out the assignment.’

Communication

We take communication to be the activity of conveying information (Delbridge et al. 2005; Lewis 2007) and the foundation of education. We therefore seek to know what the comments reveal about the teacher’s communication in relation to *small-group learning* and *practice-based teaching*. What is more, we recognise that communication involves more than mere words; communication puts people in direct social relation to one

another. Thus communication is evidenced without reference to the meaning of any communiqué between teacher and student. Rather, we evidence the necessary communication in the teacher's presentation of the curriculum.

For example, to teach a small group of students a teacher must prepare assignments that facilitate reflective discussion (Voelkl 1995; Steinert 1996; UniSA 2007a). Thus, we explore the following comments for links to small-group learning: 'good explanations' and 'links practical to theory'. To each comment we shall put the question 'How communication evidences small-group learning?'

We answer that students cannot discuss or reflect on what they do not understand. To facilitate discussion-based learning the teacher must begin with 'good explanations'. Moreover, to use a body of knowledge a student must recognise, ken, comprehend the practical value of theory. Thus, the teacher must explicate the link between the pragmatic and the analytic domains of the subject. Hence, the implicit value drawn from the second comment is that the teacher achieved the goal of illuminating the relevance of theory to practical problems. Taken together the comments evidence the value of the communicative act in small-group learning and we extend our inference to practice-based teaching.

We premise our extension on the observation that learning and teaching are two sides of one coin in a space where the teacher provides 'real opportunities for dialogue' (Leask 2004). For example, the students acknowledged that they learned 'how to gather market data' and 'to work out a feasibility study.' Thus the comments evidence a teacher relating practice and theory via examples of real problems.

Experience

A culturally diverse classroom presents a teacher with continual opportunity to ‘open up “new and diverse paths of learning” and “cross-fertilise” different strategies for teaching and learning and acquiring new knowledge’ (Kalantzis and Cope cited in Leask 2004). Moreover, Australian universities employ ‘staff with Asian backgrounds to ensure that the teaching in commerce and business for [international] students will be useful and appropriate’ (King, Hill & Hemmings cited in Leask 2004). Hence, the classroom is a space where a teacher draws on personal, pedagogic, and professional experiences. Thus, in terms of small-group learning, where discussion and reflection are important, we evidence the use of the teacher’s experience in comments such as ‘answers questions well’ and the teacher was ‘informative.’

Likewise, to employ practice-based teaching is to use real examples to illustrate the principles and concepts of a body of knowledge. The goal of practice-based teaching is to encourage a student to develop experiences of the body of knowledge by solving practical problems. The comment ‘we learned how to solve problems throughout the processes provides direct evidence of practice-based teaching.

Teaching

While we acknowledge the controversy between competency-based models of teachers and *Humanistic Based Teacher Education* (Korthagen 2004) we now turn to comments about what we call the delivery and style of teaching. We define *delivery* as the presentation of the subject, and argue that to deliver a

subject a teacher must address various questions from variegated cultural perspectives. Moreover, a teacher must refine each answer to attend to a student's unique needs. Thus, we link the delivery of the subject to *small-group learning* in comments that a 'knowledgeable' teacher gave a 'good amount of information', a 'good amount of real life examples', and 'good explanations'. Likewise, we evidence the delivery of the subject in *practice-based teaching* with comments that a 'knowledgeable' teacher can 'link practical to theory', and a student could 'relate both my study and working experience to the assignment.'

To understand teaching-style as the persona of the teacher we 'need only think of the status of [an] unconditionally acceptable person which ... translates into the relationship between the teacher educator and the student teacher' (Korthagen 2004). *Small-group learning* focuses on discussion and is therefore an act of communication. We therefore evidence links between teaching-style and small-group learning in students' comments that the teacher had a 'passion for the subject', and an 'interest in [the] student' and an 'interest in [the] questions.'

CONCLUSION

Before we conclude we revisit the ground covered. Student-centred learning is a process that actively involves students in their education. Practiced-based teaching encourages students to adopt deep-learning approaches to their study. Students must understand the principles and concepts of a body of knowledge and solve practical problems. In an international classroom teaching and learning must take place regardless of ethnicity and cultural background. Thus

by recognising the needs of students, and being mindful of cultural diversity when organizing learning activities, we bring inclusive teaching to all our students. This is important in today's classroom because the increasing cultural diversity requires effective strategies and teaching should benefit all students.

Having covered our ground we now draw our conclusion from our analysis. In this case-study our students' comments evidence the role of the teacher's self in practice-based teaching and small-group learning. Therefore, given the importance of self in teaching (Dennis & Lauland cited in Schpilberg & Hubschman 2003) we hypothesize that self is the catalyst for the manifestation of inclusive teaching in a culturally diverse classroom. However, as this is a single case-study we recommend further research using the same research methodology as a way to extending inclusive teaching methods beyond the stereotypes.

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