Reviving ghost-town like lecture and tutorials – Linking engagement and assessment

Introduction

In and outside class participation have been described as being a vital component for student progression in tertiary education (Kahu, 2013). However, participation doesn’t equal student engagement (Trowler, 2010), participation is part of student engagement. Coates (2007) says that student engagement is a broad construct that links academic and non-academic aspects relevant to the student experience such as active and collaborative learning, participation in challenging academic activities, formative communication with academic staff, involvement in enriching educational experience and feeling legitimate and supported by university’s learning communities. Trowler (2010) referred to three dimensions of student engagement: positive, negative and non-engagement. Ideally students show positive engagement throughout a semester long module, however observations of the developmental paper presented here, have shown that students’ engagement is really high during the first weeks of each semester (especially due to the fact that all necessary assessment information is delivered at that point) however the rest of the weeks can be characterised as teaching in a ‘ghost town’. So, why does this happen and what can we do to increase and maintain positive student engagement?

Bryson and Hand (2007) and Zepke and Leach (2010) pointed out that student engagement is a multi-faceted process, a continuum from disengagement to engagement with three levels and degrees of engagement. Levels of engagement are between staff and student, which is understood as discourse, between staff and subjects, which is defined as enthusiasm and between staff and the teaching process, which is called professionalism. Certainly, enthusiasm plays a significant role in engaging students (Kunter et al, 2011; Kunter, 2013) on a behavioural, emotional and cognitive level (Coates, 2007). Kunter et al (2011) point out that enthusiasm is associated with positive and intrinsic motivation and can enforce such characteristics in students. Enthusiasm is described as a person-specific characteristic and depending on the high or low intrinsic motivation of a teacher towards a topic or the activity of teaching itself can vary. In contrast the degrees of engagement refer to students’ engagement with a task, the students’ engagement with a specific module and the students’ engagement with the course. These three degrees of engagement are key as they are all related to one specific goal of a student: achieving the expected grade (Kuh, 2001). Findings of Bryson and Hand (2007) case study emphasise that assessment is the key feature for engagement, thus enthusiasm or the levels of engagements mentioned above might only facilitate engagement (Carini et al, 2006). Understanding how to achieve positive levels and degrees of engagement by linking it to the motivational factor of assessment is the central focus of this paper in order to overcome ghost-town like classrooms.
**Case Study**

The Business School implements a two semester type approach to teaching and learning where modules usually have 15 credits. These run over one semester and usually comprise of 2 hours of lectures and 1 hour of seminar each week for 11 weeks per semester. Although this approach is adequate in covering the material in depth and provides the opportunity to be involved with many different activities per lecture subject, some disadvantages like the necessity for increased student engagement for the duration of the semester have been noted by teaching staff. One could argue that this might be due to a lack of enthusiasm however results of the module evaluation questionnaire for the module in question confirmed a high level of enthusiasm from both lecturers involved in delivering the module over several years. Cavanagh (2011) used the term lectorials, which describes nicely the approach taken here. However in addition to using cooperative learning activities and small lecture type information sessions, every activity needs to trigger student’s engagement based on the motivation of achieving the desired grade. This can be achieved by bridging assessment and engagement. However, before explaining the procedure of the case study it seems necessary to discuss the construct of motivation further. According to Deci and Ryan (1985) motivation can be related to various outcomes as learning, curiosity and persistence to a task. Although motivation has been treated as a singular construct, even a superficial understanding of the process of motivation reveals the different levels of the concept (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Especially the idea of intrinsic, extrinsic and a-motivation have been widely discussed (Deci, 1975; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Vallerand et al., 1992). Intrinsic motivation (IM) refers to the fact of conducting an activity for the pleasure and satisfaction derived from it. For instance a student attends a class because the student finds it interesting or satisfying to learn.

Extrinsic motivation pertains to any activities performed as a means to an end and not for their own sake. Again three types of extrinsic motivation have been suggested: External (I am studying because my parents forced me), Introjection and Identification (both describe processes where students start to internalise the behaviour when in reality the reasons for the behaviour remain external). As teaching staff, we have very much debated the type of motivation and the suggested approach is based on both constructs and the concepts of engagement discussed earlier.

**Bridging engagement and assessment**

The suggested approach which has been implemented as part of the module Marketing Communications (HE level 5) suggests the bridging of inside and outside class engagement with formative feedback and summative assessment in the form of workshops. Instead of lectures and seminars, we offered 3 hour workshops for six weeks (week 1-6), two 2 hour seminars in week 5 and 6, no teaching in week’s 7 and 8 and three 2 hour seminars in week 9-11. For each workshop (week 1-6) students were asked to participate in several group and individual activities each week. Instructions for each activity were given in the end of the workshop. Students had a week to prepare presentations, write reflective essays or produce posters outside the classroom. The outcome was then presented by students in the following workshop, which was also useful to recap content. Individual or group feedback was provided.
to students during this time either in class or online. Examples of such activities are the production of a poster regarding one of the forms of marketing communications e.g. social media, the production of a presentation where students are asked to re-brand an existing product or a short written report on advertisement effectiveness. All portfolios had to be submitted via the VLE.

The activities have been connected and related to the group assignment and the exam. So the portfolio feedback was useful for both assessment components. The exam was split into two parts. Part A focused on theoretical concepts and tested knowledge, whereas part B was related to the portfolios. Students were asked to do at least 6 out of the 8 portfolios and without participating students would not be able to answer the questions in part B. A potential exam question was phrased like: Reflect on your individual portfolio, how relevant do you think was the creative strategy used for the advert you analysed? Why would the opposite appeal or a different execution style be better or less effective? In addition, student’s attendance was monitored and students who missed 2 classes consecutively have been contacted. Students who missed 3 classes consecutively were asked to see the module leader and give evidence of their absence.

This allowed us to test a. the actual knowledge students gained from the module, b. knowledge gained from the process of group and individual work but also c. students’ reflections of the activities and group work. In that manner the following aims are achieved: 1. Students’ active learning is facilitated as they have to participate in extended activities which act as formative assessment and simultaneously assist them with the summative assessment and 2. Student’s motivation to participate in class and in group activities is higher as they have a benefit to expect results from the process.

The approach has been pilot tested this semester and preliminary evidence suggests some interesting findings: 1. the assignment marks increased and the module had the highest average mark (70.7%) of the last 3 years, 2) student engagement has also increased. Engagement has been monitored and 75% of the class has attended each workshop.

**Conclusion**

Following what it seems to be a successful implementation this year, a more structured ‘scientific’ methodology is planned to test the effectiveness of the approach in terms of student’s engagement and student’s reflections of the process as well as students and staff perception’s towards module delivery around student engagement rather than assessment. Video-diaries (Olmos and Ramella, 2005; Cashmore et al, 2010) will be utilised to collect data over a period of 12 weeks in semester 1 from both students and staff. In addition, in-depth face-to-face interviews will be conducted with the video-diary participants and participants will be asked to elicit their video diaries.

Further research and data collection is necessary to prove how the levels of engagement are perceived by students (discourse, enthusiasm and professionalism) and how module should be designed to focus on student engagement rather than learning outcomes and assessment.

**References**


