A brief reflection on my first year of university teaching

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I began my first year of university teaching six months ago when I started a PhD studentship at the University of Kent. I recently completed my second term of leading seminars in introductory sport psychology topics. Teaching offers me a welcomed break from reading, writing and other tiring PhD activities. While I have found teaching enjoyable, learning how to teach has been a challenging experience. One particular challenge that I have faced relates to the absence of "right answers" to the questions that I ask about teaching (e.g., "How do I stop people from talking during a seminar? Specifically, what do I say or do? What works?"). A lot of the problems that I have encountered do not come with "one size fits all" solutions. Instead, the challenge is to find answers that fit your own personality, preferences and teaching style. This might involve asking colleagues how they would handle a situation or observing another person teach and then adapting ideas so that they work for you. I have also found that it is easy to make sense of teaching experiences through inappropriate cause and effect attributions (e.g., "If I had set ground rules before the first seminar, students would have talked one at a time and listened while I was speaking."). It is easy to bring unrealistic expectations into the seminar room and to take too much responsibility for the behaviour of students. I have found that even the most focused groups check their mobile phones, go "off topic" or hold side conversations. In the better seminars, I have handled these issues by asking the group if I can have their attention back and by returning the discussion to the seminar topic. Wanting to be liked by my students, who are similar in age to me, also makes it difficult for me to lead the more unfocused seminars because, on the one hand, I am trying to be assertive and, on the other hand, I am trying to avoid being unfriendly and "telling people off".

After each seminar, I reflect using Gibbs' (1988) cycle of reflection and this process has helped me to identify some of the controllable aspects of teaching that help me to lead a constructive seminar. Being well prepared for a seminar and understanding the topic has consistently helped me to lead the discussions and communicate my own understanding of the topic with confidence. Finding time to study the seminar key reading, reading relevant book chapters, attending the preceding lecture and preparing my own answers to the seminar questions have all helped me during the seminar itself. Understanding the topic also makes it a lot easier for me to admit not knowing the answer to a question. Making an effort to learn students' names is also helpful for facilitating group discussion and for drawing out a student's opinion (e.g., "What do you think about this, Natalie?"). As I gain more teaching experience, I would like to learn to judge when the quality of a critical, challenging or interesting discussion justifies loosening time allocations in the pre-planned seminar structure. For example, I have often found myself thinking, "This is the kind of discussion that I am trying to encourage but we are falling behind schedule. Should I move on to the next question?" I would also like to let go of my own personal tendency to "jump in" and tell the students what I think is the correct answer instead of asking probing questions and teasing out an answer from them. As I look forward to my next two academic years of teaching, I hope to learn from experienced others and to accept that I will not always find a simple solution to the challenges that I face.

References

Gibbs, G. (1988). *Learning by doing*: *A guide to teaching and learning methods*. Oxford, UK: Oxford

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