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THE USE OF ACTIVITIES IN LECTURES

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Update to:

Cooper, S., Davies, M. (2007) "The Use of Activities in Lectures'", in Aston Business School Good Practice Guide to Teaching and Learning, Vol. 4, pp 30-32.

http://www1.aston.ac.uk/clipp/learning-innovation/ltr-good-practice-guides/

> *"I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand".*
> (Confucius, a long time ago!).

What has changed?

It has been interesting reflecting on our work. Whilst we continue to use activities within lectures, in recent years we have extended and adapted this approach in two particular ways.

First, in longer, usually three-hour postgraduate, lectures we have developed slightly longer group activities. As discussed in our original article group activities provide an excellent opportunity for students to learn from each other. With these longer activities, which can take 20-30 minutes to complete, students are required to work together in order to complete the activity. It provides more time for students to discuss and learn from each other, but the role of the lecturer is perhaps even more important. With these longer activities there is a greater likelihood for students to disagree or become confused. The lecturer must, therefore, remain available and the resulting student/lecturer interactions are very important.

Second, as we have developed more distance learning materials we have attempted to find ways to incorporate activities. In some ways activities can work well with distance learning students, but the remote nature of the students can also prove challenging. We have integrated short activities such as multiple choice tests and quizzes into e-learning packages that we have developed to support distance learning versions of our modules. One advantage of the e-learning format is that we can design activities which provide a student with tailored feedback based on their particular response to a question posed. Longer activities can also be used, but these usually require the students to go off-line in order to complete the activity. With longer and more research-based activities it is less easy to provide tailored feedback. For these types of activities we see discussion boards and webinars / virtual classroom sessions both to promote student engagement and also to provide us with immediate feedback on the level of students' understanding of and engagement with key concepts. We are still learning how to better utilise the many different ways of interacting with and providing feedback on activities to distant learning students, but activities once again appear to be an important way of engaging students and enhancing their learning.

Research Informed Practice

The approaches discussed here appear to be at the very centre of good learning practice, developed and run by reflective practitioners. Taking as a starter Kolb's learning cycle (1976), we can see the importance of giving students the opportunity to reflect on what they learn, to assimilate it, put into practice what they have learnt, and to have their learning confirmed. This is what deep learning is all about. It engages the students and makes them take responsibility for their own learning. It is a demonstration of what Biggs and Tang (2011) call 'constructive alignment', as the lecturers have

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purposefully developed the teaching and assessment strategy for this module by reflecting on where their students are coming from and where the lecturers want the students to move to in their learning by the end of the module. In this case study you see the lecturer's thought processes as they mediate between these two points. This demonstrates another of Bigg's points. There are three kinds of lecturers, he says, those who blame the students, those who blame themselves, but the best lecturers are those who work on the learning partnership. These lecturers take time to find out the students' starting point, they have a clear understanding of where they want them to get. They know the only way to get there is to learning experiences which are led by the students, mentored by the staff.

This is not an easy way of teaching. It involves a great deal of planning and research. Passive learning experiences are much easier to deliver. They rely on content rather than the learning process. The lecturer does less work, but does not check whether the student is benefitting. The student does less work and so does not learn so much. It would be easy to conclude that a student paying more for their education wants to do less, but that is not true. Anecdotally evidence at Aston this year indicates that first year students paying higher fees and in the library more, they are going to see their personal and module tutors more, because they want value for money. They want to learn, and they particularly want to learn the things that make them more employable. This is not content: they can get that in a book, or off the Internet. The real value they seek is from the personalised mentoring through activities like those described above. As Schreiner et al (2009) "Students who feel both challenged and supported by persons who matter to them and believe they are capable of performing discover an environment that fosters the development of their intrinsic goals." (p.573)

Conclusion and the Future

Finally, a reflection on what has happened since the original article has been written. Ten years ago the majority of our teaching was on campus, face to face. Now blended and distance learning is very much more prevalent, even for on campus students. The principles of best practice in active learning are the same but the constructive alignment has to be different. Controversially for some, the preparation by the lecturer is probably even greater, but the rewards are also enormous. Activities like these can literally change a student's life, in a way that a passive power point presentation cannot.

Bibliography

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Examples used with various students