

'Now I feel like I am at University...'

Using a community of enquiry approach to promote engagement in seminars

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Abstract

This poster describes a project which supported students in taking responsibility for the learning process through encouraging them to pose and interrogate their own questions during seminar discussions. The work spanned a variety of undergraduate courses related to Early Childhood and Education, including professional courses for trainee teachers and early years professionals. Using a community of enquiry approach, tutors worked alongside students to support them in pursuing enquiry and critical thinking. The project evaluation has suggested that participants are becoming increasingly confident in generating their own questions, influencing and shaping discussions and reflecting upon the development of their own thinking. Moreover, tutors have begun to question and adapt their teaching styles in order to more effectively promote student-led dialogue. This work will be used to prompt consideration of the value of oral work in developing academic literacy.

Introduction

Feedback from students and tutors had highlighted a lack of engagement by some students in the academic dimensions of these courses and drawn attention to the significance of social and cultural contexts to the nature and quality of seminar discussions. In order to address possible barriers to participation, the team decided to use the Philosophy for Children (P4C) methodology to support the development of academic literacy initially through promoting engagement, confidence and critical thinking through oral work.

Tutor comment

'I was quite anxious... because I would be taking more a back seat...I found that I had to give a lot more thought into what I was doing than usual'.



Method

- Stimulus
- Individual questions
- Question chosen
- Discussion
- Final thoughts

Student comment

'The students taught the students rather than the lecturer teaching the students kind of thing... the learning I got out of it was more valued, the fact that we done it ourselves, that we had done it ourselves rather than being a piece of paper and that was it, kind of thing. I valued it a lot more. I think the learning was a lot more.'

Aims of the project

- Investigate whether P4C can be used in a higher education context
- Explore tutors' perspectives on the effectiveness of P4C in improving engagement and participation
- Explore students perspectives on the impact of P4C on their learning experience

Findings

Tutors perspectives

- Engagement and involvement
- Anxiety and uncertainty

Student perspectives

- Empowerment and participation
- Critical thinking
- Learning environment

Tutor comment

'The most positive aspect was the confidence students showed in challenging particular ideas, while doing this in a way that was sensitive to the possibility of different point of view. Also positive was the very natural way in which the discussion focussed on picking key concepts, ...I was very impressed by the depth of students' thinking and the way in which they were able to draw on their own professional experience in an authoritative manner'.

Evaluation

Students: post-seminar paper evaluations, 2 Student focus group interviews, 1 in-depth interview

Tutors: paper based evaluation, 4 individual interviews

Strengths:

- Can be used in HE context
- Reflective tool
- flexible, easy to use structure
- Supports learner autonomy and critical thinking
- Creates an enabling learning environment

Limitations

- Novelty factor
- Self-selected participants
- Small scale research
- focus on early childhood education courses

Student comment

'I think it worked really well because it seemed to give everybody else the onus rather than the tutor talking...you were questioning yourself, questioning your development and your ideas about things ..'



Next stage (2009/10)

- Use P4C methodology in at least 5 seminars in a 1st year personal and professional learning module
- Pre-intervention survey of perspectives on learning, attitudes to participation in discussion, expectations of learning in university
- Reflective accounts after each session
- Post- intervention evaluation of perspectives of learning, attitudes to participation in discussions, expectations of learning in university

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