Student-centred learning and critical thinking in a large business course - Tracey Harrison-Hill

A Case Account: Creating a Large-Class Learning Environment that Promotes Student-Centered Learning and Develops a Critical Thinking Ethos

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This case account is exploring the problem of passive learning within the large class setting. This class had between 250 and 300 students enrolled and was delivered in both a large-class lecture format and a small-group (24) tutorial. The problem of passive learning was primarily apparent within tutorials when students were not part of the presenting teams. The topics being debated were contemporary issues critical to the subject matter and were supposed to be involving the audience in the complexities of the issues. The problem of developing a critical thinking ethos and creating an engaging environment for learning has been ongoing. This account will give the background to the problem, discuss the initiatives that were developed and review the effectiveness of the initiatives in creating an active learning environment within a large class.

Background
In past years the subject Consumer Behaviour included Oral Presentation and Critical Analysis as two of its skill development initiatives. The presentations took place on a weekly basis within tutorials and were based on various topics aligned with the lecture progress. The topics involved a literature review and an application of the literature to consumer purchasing. Each presentation was 15 minutes in length and was accompanied by a 1000 word report on the topic. The presentations were, on the whole, uninspiring and mostly read from notes. The remaining class members were supposed to be learning from these applications, but were passive participants. The reports were informative but lacking in critical analysis of the subject material. I identified two crucial problems: passive participation by the class was unlikely to be resulting in any quality learning, and a lack of critical analysis demonstrated a shallow understanding of the topic by the presenter.

In an effort to remedy the problems, I initiated a change to oral debates and a semester-long project that included a critical review of a consumption decision the student has made. Both of these activities were designed to reflect my objective of developing a critical thinking ethos in both oral and written format. The design of the debate and its development as an effective learning tool is the primary concern within this account. Though the use of peer feedback to assist students to become more involved in their own learning is also highlighted.

Design of debates and supporting activities
The aims and procedures involved in debating were discussed with students in a series of large group workshops early in the semester. The workshops showed various examples of debates and engaged students to point out and discuss good
and bad techniques within these examples. Students were also provided with the marking criteria they were to use later in the semester so that they could ascertain the levels of critique required from presentation style to quality of argument. Ways to develop and structure an argument and rebuttal were also discussed. The tutorials were also designed to support the development of a critical thinking ethos and to prepare students for the debates. Short activities were used with groups being given counter-argumentative perspectives to explore on various topics. These were then discussed in an informal manner to promote critical thinking, quick replies and the ability to create an argument.

Towards the latter part of the semester the assessable debates were conducted. The topics being debated were contemporary issues within consumer behaviour that were critical to the subject matter and were designed to hopefully be both interesting and involving. Assessment was broken into a team portion and an individual portion on both content and execution. The result was certainly an improvement on the previous presentations, with the quality varying from excellent to boring, but with evidence of critical argument building. Class engagement also varied, depending upon the topic and the quality of the debate. I was still concerned that the remaining class students were passive participants and not truly learning or engaging with the content and argument of that content that was being presented.

Further development initiatives
The following semester, I implemented a new initiative. Peer assessment and feedback on debates was trialled in an attempt to engage students to actively think about the content and process going on in front of them. Class members not participating within the debate were required to complete a feedback form for the presenters that asked for feedback by way of comments and a mark on both the content and the execution. These marks were then considered by the tutor who deemed the final grade awarded to each participant. The class were also asked to provide reflective comments; these included any tips, techniques or arguments that caught their attention and engendered further thought. These reflective comments were kept by the tutors and the anonymous feedback forms were handed back to the debaters the following week after perusal by the tutor.

Peer Review and Feedback
While much has been written about strategies for teacher-to-student feedback, the guidelines for formal student-to-student interactions are not as clear. Nevertheless, having students give their peers feedback is appealing for several reasons: It promotes student-centered learning, it encourages students to reflect on how they feel the exercise should have and could have been completed, and it involves students within the content (Latham 1997). Receiving peer feedback has also been acclaimed by some as better attended and understood than teacher-to-student feedback (Beatty & Haas 1996; Graeff 1997).

The key problem reported in the literature with respect to peer feedback, is whether students are capable of providing the same quality of feedback. Beatty & Haas (1996) note that without proper training and rating criteria, students often respond to lower-order concerns, such as audibility, as opposed to the argument and engagement of the presenter. Other significant considerations include developmental level and inherent biases toward peers (Latham 1997). If all students receive peer
feedback, then inevitably some will be receiving it from less able peers, and some from disliked peers.

These issues were addressed where possible, by outlining that peer assessment would be considered in calculating the final grade, but that the tutor would be ultimately responsible for the grade. The exercise itself was more centered at having the audience participate more actively and take part in a reciprocal learning experience. A detailed marking criteria was also developed to assist students in directing their assessment and in priming feedback to consist of both lower and higher order concerns.

Evaluating the Initiative
Both student evaluations and tutor evaluations were conducted to ascertain perceptions of the debate and peer feedback process. Subject tutors reported that enlightened class discussions have been following on from the debates. Whereas previously the only learning that was apparent to the tutors was for those presenting the material. This in itself is evidence that the class is becoming more involved in the learning activity. It has also been noted though that the quality of the debate (and the topic) both seem to impact substantially upon the following discussion. As there was a mark (10% of the semester total) associated with providing peer review and the quality of reflection on each debate, students were motivated to attend and participate (albeit extrinsically) in the debates.

Student feedback largely agreed that receiving comments from peers was helpful and helped them to reflect on areas of their work that needed improvement. The comments most apparent in answering the question " What did you like least about the feedback from your peers?" included conflicting opinions, non-constructive criticism and when peers made little or no attempt to provide written comments. The responses to what they liked most included the honesty and encouragement.

Students also largely agreed that giving feedback about their peers had helped them to learn about the debating process and reflect on their own performance. Having reported that though, the open-ended responses drew predominantly comments that involved the difficulty of reporting on others, with little on how it had influenced their own learning.

The subject evaluation from students on both of the items " created a stimulating learning environment " and " I was motivated to perform well " showed an improvement from a mean of 3.9 to a mean of 4.1 on a scale of one to five. The item "Class sessions were organised to facilitate my learning" also increased from a mean of 4.2 to a mean of 4.4. These items though were not exclusively asking about the debates and tutorials, but also lectures and large group workshops.

Discussion
My objective with this initiative was to develop a more student-centered approach to the learning environment and create a critical thinking ethos. But no model can work effectively without student buy-in. The utilisation of the peer review as part of the assessment and debate process resulted in more enlightened class discussion and a reciprocal learning experience- students felt they benefited both from giving and
receiving feedback. The process of critiquing peers’ performances also triggered more critical thinking and reflection. Tutors reported that the quality of debates improved across the two semesters, and student grades also reflected this. The advantage of debating was developing critical thinking skills. This was extended through the peer evaluation, which also engaged the non-debating students in the content and argument more actively. For a large class group it is particularly helpful resource-wise in that you have six students being assessed at one point in time within gazetted teaching time. The nature of the debates also ensures that the individual student’s performance is primarily their own work. It also enables oral presentation skills, critical thinking and teamwork to be developed and practiced with one assessment item. The disadvantage is at the commencement of semester when trying to balance tutorial numbers at 18 or 24 (divisible by six). Inevitably some debates are with uneven numbers of students. Overall, at the second year level I feel this initiative has worked well and has achieved the objectives set out.

References