Creating an Environment for Active, Relational Learning and Teaching Educational Sociology in Large Classes

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Abstract

The focus of the research was to develop a model for effective learning and teaching in a large class to promote active engagement with students and encourage deep learning. The research has evolved into a wider discussion and exploration of the scholarship of teaching and learning particularly in relation to teaching sociology to student teacher educators as a core rather than curriculum paper. By seeking regular feedback from students the teaching team and co - researchers have sought to develop opportunities for regular dialogue to improve teaching and learning in a large class.

Introduction

The motivation for this research has evolved from our experience of co-teaching the paper whānau, family and society over the past two years at AUT University. The paper is taught in the second semester of a first year undergraduate teacher education programme to both primary and early childhood education students. For many students their focus is to become a 'teacher' and even by the second semester of the first year have become 'curriculum' focused, hence at the beginning of the paper they question the necessity to learn about families and the sociological issues that can affect and challenge them. 'What's that got to do with me being a teacher?' they ask. It is not unusual for students to approach the subject from a deficit perspective or deem the whole thing to be 'just common sense'. The challenge for the teaching team is to engage the students to reflect on their own place in society and through this consider the circumstance which some of the children and their families may encounter outside the education environment will influence and effect their way of being in school or an early childhood education centre.

The process of creating a 'learning –friendly' environment was also challenging as the teaching team sought opportunities to engage with the students in discussion. To encourage active learning and a sense of the individual in a large tiered lecture theatre various learning/teaching strategies

were put in place. Students were asked for regular feedback and the co-researchers recorded their reflections in a professional journal.

Revised model of Learning and Teaching

At the beginning of the 2011 academic year a revised learning and teaching model was implemented that had lectures scheduled in the first six weeks of semester to introduce sociological theory and factors, followed by four guided tutorials. During the tutorials the lecturers met with each group to discuss their individual needs. This offered students an opportunity to decide early in the semester which sociological factors and theory they would choose for their assessments. A variety of teaching strategies and learning activities were employed to engage the students in active learning including mini lectures, group tasks and discussion, all of which were designed to encourage the students to relate the content of the paper to their own experience.

It was intended that the assessments serve as more than a 'measurement' of students learning and were designed to deepen and extend learning. The assessments were aligned with the learning activities and intended outcomes to enable students to engage with the content of the paper contextualised in their own experience (Boud & Falchikov, 2006). The learning strategies included group work, presentations, peer review and reflection. Current narratives emphasise student engagement as the key ingredient for academic success (Jones, 2008) therefore placing the student at the heart of the assignments helps them become aware of and reflect critically on their presuppositions and perceptions of whanau/family (Mezirow, 1991, p.14). In the process of reflecting on their own reality, sociology students are more likely to build a foundation on which to learn about themselves and transform their learning into an 'attribute' that will inform their professional practice. This approach supports the view that '... higher education ... provides a foundation on which a lifetime of learning in work and other social settings can be built' (Boud & Falchikov, 2006, p. 399). In connecting the application of the broader learning experience the students were exposed to the theory underpinning their 'common sense' perspective of sociological challenges; both positive and negative.

Literature

A literature review of research on teaching and learning in large classes, particularly in relation to teacher education (Lewis, 2010) highlighted the challenge to meet the needs of the constructivist nature of student learning indicating a shift from surface to deeper learning.

From the literature it is difficult to demonstrate any clear relationship between increasing class size and the effect on learning. The evidence, however, indicates that large classes can create particular challenges for teaching and learning and some common findings from the literature review are:

- The nature of the lecture theatre space with its tiered rows and large space makes it an impersonal and intimidating environment which can result in low levels of student engagement and interaction with students exhibiting apathy and distractedness.
- Learning in large classes is perceived as impacting negatively on student learning.
- Team teaching using mixed media and a range of teaching strategies was identified as being beneficial to learning whereas non- assessed workshops, didactic teaching, group work in large lecture theatres were less successful.
- Research on the theoretical and empirical rationale for using small group work as an adjunct to the large group/class lecture as a way of ameliorating some of the negative characteristics of large class teaching and learning.

Each issue was addressed in the revised model of learning and teaching of this paper with a noticeable degree of success. The process worked particularly well with ninety students but less well with one hundred and eighty students. Active learning in a full tiered lecture theatre was patchy and the combination of teaching sociology to resistant students in a less than learning-friendly environment challenging.

The particular challenge of teaching sociology in a large class

The challenge of teaching theory has been widely documented within the wider discourse of the scholarship of teaching and learning of critical theory. However there is less research on the scholarship of teaching and learning specifically relating to the discipline of sociology.

Sociology within the paper whānau, family &society is taught at an introductory level within the wider context of the research and literature on the changing role of whānau, families, specifically in the New Zealand context. The focus of the paper is to introduce students to the complex and changing nature of 'family life' while introducing topics of economics, class and gender to demonstrate the wider social factors that can interrupt and influence how families function and their role within society. The students are introduced to 'family' theorists and asked to relate the theory of family to their own experience in the first assessment.

The teaching of social and critical theory as part of foundational knowledge within teacher education has been subject to shifts and changes and as Stephenson and Rio have recently pointed out 'over the past five years, however, we have experienced changes in our teacher education programmes which have progressively reduced student access to these (and other) foundational knowledge' (2009, p158).

The case is made effectively by Stephenson and Rio for reinvigorating the teaching of sociology as being consistent with the Graduating Teacher Standards (New Zealand Teachers Council [NZTC], 2008) which require 'students to demonstrate critical engagement with contextual factors…it is no longer possible for graduating teachers to accept the advice of less critical and more sceptical colleagues to forget the theory of education..' (2009, p158). Much of the literature on Teaching Sociology is researching innovative and practical ways to introduce theory to students who may only be studying sociology as a minor subject rather than their main discipline. Some of these ideas include students keeping journals, online quizzes and role play (Pederson, 2010). Other research has focused on the challenge of supporting students to think critically about social justice issues and their own values and beliefs.

More recently there has been an interest in developing teaching and learning strategies for critical pedagogy (Fobes and Kaufman, 2008), with a view to 'unsettling beliefs' that students hold in relation to aspects of social justice. A number of writers have outlined how teachers in higher education can work more constructively with student teachers to engage in some of the wider political discourses on teaching and learning in schools and early childhood settings. Often this requires teacher educators to 'help people learn new ways of seeing a familiar world' (Diem and Helfenbein, 2008, p xii) which the authors concede is 'no easy task'.

In keeping with other research (LeMoyne and Davis, 2011) our experience of teaching student teachers has often been frustrated by an attitude which already views the study of sociology as just 'common sense'. Our aim is to create opportunities for moving the students into a space where they are questioning/disrupting some of their own 'taken for granted 'views and dominant discourses about the world and in particular education.

From our experience of teaching sociology we are aware of what is widely documented as student resistance to learning sociology theory (Diem & Helfenbein, 2008; Pedersen, 2010). In fact the resistance can be so great that it

is counterproductive to learning per se and 'it becomes readily apparent that theory represents a stumbling block for many students, and this attitude toward theory can pose problems for the theory instructor' (Pederson, 2010 p197).

Methodology

As qualitative researchers we were interested in understanding 'how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences' (Merriam, S. 2009, p5). The students' learning experiences during lectures and tutorials were evaluated using Brookfield's (1995, ch. 6) Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ). The CIQ is a method for finding out how students experience their learning i.e. on specific concrete 'happenings' or 'events' rather than what student's like or dislike. It was developed by Brookfield to enable him to 'see his practice through the students' eyes...and to help embed ... teaching in accurate information about students' learning that is regularly solicited and anonymously given' (p92).

The CIQs invited feedback in four iterations; twice during lectures and twice in tutorials. The questions were the same each time:

1. What moment or moments during the class did you feel most engaged with what was happening?
2. What moment or moments during the class did you feel most distracted with what was happening?
3. What action that anyone (teacher or student) took during the class did you feel most affirming or helpful?
4. What did you find most puzzling or confusing?
5. What about the class surprised you the most (This could be something about your own reactions to what went on, or something that someone did, or anything else that occurs to you).

The responses were analysed using content analysis (Kumar, 2005, p223; Mutch, 2005) anticipating that a number of themes would be identified from the questionnaire feedback.

Findings

Our initial analysis of the feedback indicates that students' experience of the paper is diverse but there are identifiable themes which are consistent with the literature on teaching and learning large classes:

- Overall most students felt that their learning was more effectively supported in the tutorials
- Environmental factors including noise levels making it difficult to hear when people were answering and sharing opinions.
- Students using laptops was considered a distraction.

- IT management – this included problems with lecture theatre technology that delayed and disrupted classes
- Mixed reactions to the student's use of microphone when asked to give feedback
- Difficulty of establishing student/teacher relationships – some students did not feel supported or affirmed in their contributions.

Overall the students did appreciate the opportunity to discuss in small groups and well as open large group sharing during 'lecture' time. Other findings relate to sociological theory which they found complex and conceptually challenging.

Discussion

According to Fobes and Kaufman 'The distinguishing feature of critical pedagogy is that it is both a form of practice and a form of action' (2008, p27). This definition fits well with our aspirations for teaching and learning on the paper Whanau, Family Society. As teacher educators we are concerned to promote a classroom environment for the students to 'actively engage' in theory and see its relevance in their own lives and in the context of the families/whanau they will meet in the classroom or early childhood centre. The point is also made that 'joining together the process, content and outcome makes critical pedagogy uniquely problematic for both learners and teachers' (p27).

Fobes and Kaufman (2008) identify three aspects of challenge for teacher educators who wish to incorporate critical pedagogy in the teaching space; Challenges concerning learners recovering students' voices', resistance to professors' political agendas and the Free-Rider Problem. In the feedback received from the students on their evaluation of the paper using the CIQ these three challenges are evident. For example, a number of comments from the students referred to the difficulty of speaking or giving their opinion in the lecture particularly given the large numbers of students.

One of these challenges became particularly relevant for one of the researchers/ lecturers in the teaching of gender as one of the topics in the paper. The focus of the lecture was strongly 'feminist' in its bias and resulted in some angry and agitated feedback. This experience prompted the lecturer to reflect on her own teaching and how this was strongly influenced by her own feminist agenda.

The problem of the 'free rider' is a common issue in group work tasks and has been evident in the feedback from students who have found the group assessment frustrating. However other feedback, while acknowledging the

tensions in group work, also commented on the positive aspects of sharing ideas and having the support of colleagues

Emerging concerns were identified and discussed in the feedback and appropriate changes made to our teaching where possible and practical. Where change was deemed impractical or unrealistic, opportunities were created for dialogue to maximise trust and inclusivity.

Conclusion

According to Gosling (2006: 99) 'When faculty are encouraged to engage in pedagogic inquiry, it is normally because it is assumed that both teaching and student learning will be improved as a consequence'. Certainly in our research we were motivated by the prospect of improving both teaching and learning although always aware that this was not a predetermined outcome. The relationship between investigating and researching our own teaching to enhance student learning is complex and does not necessarily follow a linear trajectory. Gosling makes an important distinction (2006: 101),

> when claiming that a particular change has had a particular impact. Ultimately, we have to make professional judgments, within parameters of uncertainty that are typical of complex social situations, about the relationship between a change in teaching and the changes in students that we think are improvements.

By asking the students about the changes we have made to the paper we are anticipating that their feedback will inform our understanding of the complex relationships between teaching and learning and ultimately lead to enhanced practice. To make claims beyond this is problematic and we are aware of the limitations inherent in much investigative research.

Despite this we believe that it is important to share our practitioner led inquiry with others so as to encourage 'engaged pedagogy ….perhaps most important, it generates debate and discussion about what constitutes improvement in learning' (Gosling, 2006, p106).

As educators, we strive for our students to be critical thinkers and to move from a place of passive resistance to active engagement and inquiry based learning. In seeking to give the students regular opportunities to dialogue with us about their experience of teaching and learning on the paper we hope to support the students to 'do' sociology' rather than simply acquiring knowledge and memorising 'facts' about theory and research.

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