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Practice sharing

Teaching questions rather than answers: inquiry-based learning on an MSc course

Tom Stafford, University of Sheffield

Introduction

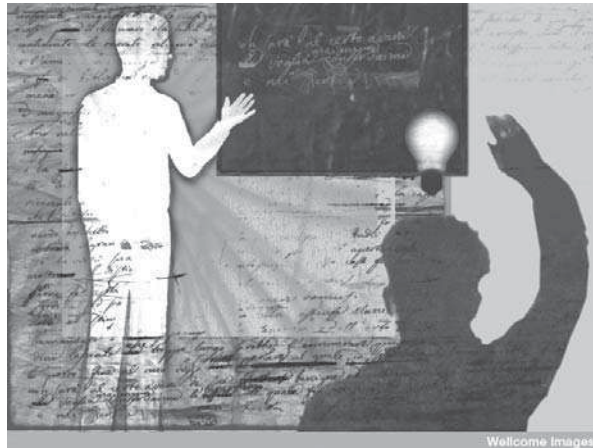
This is the story of a module I designed for the new Computational and Cognitive Neuroscience MSc at the University of Sheffield. From the beginning, I was aiming to create something different, which contrasted with undergraduate modules involving large numbers of students, text-books and standard answers. I wanted to focus on research as an active - and contested - process. I had an inchoate idea that I wanted to structure the module around various debates in cognitive neuroscience, to bring to the fore this idea of research as a process of engaging with uncertainty, rather than as something which produces authoritative answers.

Duncan Jackson from The University of Sheffield's Learning and Teaching Services came up with the key innovation: to use the same questions both to define each topic covered and as the assessment questions. For example, the first topic of four was "What causes dyslexia?". As well as being the title of the introductory lecture, this question also acted as a focus during the subsequent student-led seminars, and the same question was also one of the four questions that students could answer in the end-of-course assessment essays.

Module structure

Each topic on the course was introduced by a professor whose research revolved around the topic. Rephrasing the topic as a question emphasised the purpose of the information and ideas covered in the introductory lecture. Rather than a static body of facts, the lecturer's presentation became targeted on how researchers were addressing this question, what it might mean, and who disagreed about the answers (or the question frame) and why. This approach served to align the students with the community of practice that researchers form, as is appropriate for a postgraduate degree.

An important part of the module was question-asking, which I actually made part of the assessment of the module. Credit was available for asking a question during or after each lecture. Note that quality of question was not assessed. Rather the credit (a token amount) was given for the simple fact of asking a question. After the introductory lecture, each topic continued with a seminar, in which the lecturer was available to answer further questions. This was then followed by further student-led seminars, in which students presented and discussed



Rowena Dugdale, Wellcome Images

independent reading. Without the focus of a single question, these student-led seminars could have lacked direction. However, the central question provided a base to which discussion could return if it wandered, and could also be used as a gauge when the group was prioritising what to discuss.

Assessment

Assessment was via a 'seen exam', in which the students knew the questions in advance. By asking for answers to questions that were known in advance, we made the assessment transparent, while simultaneously emphasising that marks could not be gained by simply knowing a correct 'set' answer but instead would be gained by articulating, in written form, an answer to the question that encompassed an awareness of the issues, the questions raised and the progress made so far. The seen exam format also allows the students to focus clearly on how they want to use the lecturer's time to assist them in answering the questions, rather than making the students preoccupied with question spotting. In many classes, students might not know why they are being told something, but they will have to trust that they are being told it for a reason. However, when

assessment questions are known in advance, this legitimises student questioning of the lecturer during the class: if the student knows the question on the topic that will be in the exam and does not understand how the lecture relates to the question during the lecture, then the student also knows that they need to find out more from the lecturer right now.

An assessment proforma was used to ensure that essay marking was based on the clarity and analytic strength of the essays, rather than conformity to a standard answer. The assessment proforma was given to both students and staff who taught on the module, to make the standards of assessment transparent (for the student) and standardised (for the staff).

Successes

My experience of this course has convinced me of the value of a question-led module, and of the importance of using question-asking to provide the engine for the seminars. Given this opportunity, students and

staff enthusiastically engaged with the questions: researchers emphasised the forward looking elements of their research programmes, and students actively collaborated in organising their reading and presenting their results to develop a perspective on the topics. By the end of the module, I felt that it had challenged the 'receptacle model' of education (in which students passively receive predetermined information and then regurgitate it), had succeeded in creating moments of genuine dialogue and of active, self-directed, inquiry, and had resulted in education that was truly transformative.

I would like to thank the Centre for Inquiry Based Learning in the Arts and Social Sciences (CILASS), who provided funding to encourage me to reflect and write on the pedagogical issues that the module raised. For more information, contact: t.stafford@shef.ac.uk.

Clarification

Tom Stafford would like to make it clear that the neuroscience lab class about which he wrote in the last issue of the Psychology Network Newsletter (Issue 45, November 2007) was run by him and his colleague Chris Martin, not by him alone.