



## **A Four Stage Process of Co-operative Teaching for Beginning University Teachers Meeting First Year University Students**

*New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work, Volume 6, Issue 1, 71-78, 2009*

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### **ABSTRACT**

*A four stage process of co-operative teaching for beginning university teachers meeting first year groups of students provides a structured way in which classes can be developed. Through a process of induction, barriers to classroom participation are minimised, roles are clarified, academic goals are considered and an active knowledge concept is introduced. Students are encouraged to critically assess their own learning and classroom participation and to provide feedback on teacher performance. The notion of co-operative teaching has been found to be an effective way of organising the classroom environment for beginning teachers as well as providing a process through which they can critically reflect on their own practice.*

Small classes in first year university courses are often conducted by graduate students who have had no previous teaching experience and little preparation for their new roles and who, in many cases, receive minimal guidance in conducting their initial tutorials. The first year university students that teachers meet in their classes usually face two problems which conventional classroom organisation does not acknowledge: competition for grades and feelings of loneliness and isolation.

First year university teachers and first year students often share a common situation insofar as both are new to the university classroom in which they find themselves. Together they have to structure a pedagogical dialogue that is mutually effective, while teachers have to ensure that the course requirements are met by all participants.

A four stage process of co-operative teaching can minimise these problems for first year university students and, in turn, become a strategy for introducing beginning teachers to their initial classes. The following four stages were developed and trialled in a first year Education course at Victoria University of Wellington. Approximately 350 students enrolled in the course, of whom 120 participated in the co-operative teaching programme. Each class consisted of approximately 18 to 20 people. The course was characterised by the diversity of the students that it attracted in terms of academic and professional backgrounds as well as age and ethnicity.

In the co-operative teaching programme new teachers were paired with colleagues who had experience conducting first year classes or some form of small group teaching. Each class was in this way, jointly prepared by a teacher co-operative. All new teachers taught their classes conjointly with more experienced colleagues. At the conclusion of each day of classes, the teaching team met and evaluated the lesson, individual student requirements as they arose and planned future sessions based on their observations and reflections.

The four stages of the co-operative teaching programme were: induction, student self-assessment, analysis and feedback.

### **STAGE ONE: INDUCTION**

Induction was the initial stage of the co-operative teaching strategy. Its essential element was the fostering of group relationships that were subsequently developed through the academic activities of the course. There were four phases of induction: the removal of barriers, role allocation, the setting of goals and the introduction of an active knowledge concept.

#### *(i) The removal of physical barriers*

There are many barriers to classroom participation. The two most prominent are the physical environment of the classroom and the social barriers that exist in a group of people meeting for the first time. Teachers decided to concentrate on these in the initial class meeting.

Before each class began desks were removed and chairs arranged in a circle. This had several advantages: students could see each other and there was no desk to serve as a physical barrier to class participation. By removing desks participants in classes could move easily into small groups. The physical teaching environment, accordingly, had minimum structure and maximum flexibility. This classroom arrangement reduced feelings of intimidation for both teachers and students and contributed to a positive pedagogical relationship. Initially, some of the older or more 'mature' students were not enthusiastic about this arrangement and some said they felt threatened by it, but after a couple of classes there was unanimous agreement that this less formal physical setting worked well.

The first tutorial was set aside for the beginning teachers and their students to talk about themselves and to get to know one another as well as discuss the aims of the course, although several of the older students wanted to use this time to talk about the first assignment. The teachers, however, had decided before this initial session that it was important to spend time getting to know each other and setting up mutually agreed procedures for each group's future interaction. In the initial session students were asked to explain why they were taking this particular course and what they hoped to gain from it, particularly in terms of their academic careers. They were, furthermore, asked to outline what they could and would contribute to the course. This was found to be an effective introduction considering most students dislike talking about themselves in front of strangers. An agreement was reached in the initial session that no one would be called upon to speak in front of the whole group in future unless they wanted to do so.

*(ii) Role allocation*

As a further aid to reducing social barriers, teachers chose to allocate classroom roles to students. This clarified the nature of their participation in class as well as the expectations of the teacher.

Teachers used the first few minutes of class time to take a roll call and to share a cup of coffee with students. This was a carefully planned settling in time and gave students a few relaxed minutes to settle into the class and clear their heads usually after coming directly from another class. Teachers then introduced the topic to be discussed and the class moved into small groups of about five people. Each group selected a facilitator who was responsible for keeping discussion on track and ensuring that everyone had a chance to contribute. Another member of the group was chosen to record the discussion for the whole group and this proved to be a useful strategy for those students who felt uncomfortable speaking in front of others. Because teachers were not supervising each small group discussion, competition between students was reduced and everyone was able to concentrate on formulating meaning and understanding the academic tasks. Each of the small groups of five people had a set of questions formulated by the teacher and these were used as a starting point for discussion and for reflection on the bigger social issues that underpinned the course. Questions were formulated in ways that used the course content as a starting point for reflection and involved all students, enabling them to feel like participants with their teachers working on shared problems.

*(iii) Academic goals*

Before the beginning teachers entered their classes, learning objectives were set, sometimes involving complex theoretical goals. Students in the classes of the beginning teachers were told of the goals of each session in terms that all could understand and in most sessions these were, in fact, reached. Many experienced teachers in the department were critical of this and suggested that the aims were unrealistic for people beginning a first class.

It is likely that the beginning teachers' informal approach to their classes, coupled with careful preparation, contributed to their success in realizing academic goals.

Teachers avoided forming close relations with students in these classes and, in fact, were reported to sometimes appear rather aloof. Nevertheless, at the conclusion of the course many of the beginning teachers were described by their students as "friendly but assertive".

*(iv) Introduction of the active knowledge concept*

Each beginning teacher worked on the assumption that the students in their classes were the creators and organisers of their own knowledge and that they were active in the development of their own understandings. A second assumption was that each student had come to the course as men and women with skills and understandings that could be used in the group to enhance the learning environment. With this in mind, students were encouraged to use each other as resources rather than rely exclusively on the teacher. Typically, the

teacher represents academic authority and knowledge that they are expected to pass on to their students, a relationship which is invariably one of power. This view of the classroom situation encourages students to be passive receivers of knowledge rather than active learners. In the initial stages of the course this tradition was an obstacle for some students who wished to take passive classroom roles. The beginning teachers wanted students to consider themselves in relation to their own learning processes and so attempted to develop more than just academic understanding. The importance of having students complete the course with not just academic understanding but with the ability to analyse, reflect and challenge the issues that the course brought before them was considered by the beginning teachers to be of particular importance. This was a view based on their own recent experience as undergraduates.

During the first session a contract was formulated between the beginning teachers and their first year students of education, following the setting out of the procedures that have been outlined, including such basic considerations as arriving at class on time, not arriving if they had not prepared for the discussion on a topic set the previous week and not coming to the class if they were not prepared to participate. At the initial meeting students were given a week to consider these matters and at the following class either accept them or negotiate new ones. This set additional expectations of teachers as these agreements were then written out and accepted as a contract by all members of the class.

## **STAGE TWO: STUDENT SELF-ASSESSMENT**

Group work was developed on the foundation laid by the first stage of co-operative teaching – the process of induction. A key element in a co-operative class was encouraging students to critically self assess their own learning and classroom participation. There were implicit and explicit expectations in this process.

### *(i) Implicit expectations*

Some students who had low expectations of their academic performance revised their assessment of themselves after a few weeks in the class and this generated considerable enthusiasm for the course. The teaching team themselves had high academic expectations of all their students and communicated this implicitly to their classes. For example, although the new teachers always treated students as a group, individuals were rewarded with a smile or a nod but verbal praise was rarely given to particular members of a class. Instead, this was directed to the class as a whole that helped to build up a strong sense of group identity. This approach was, furthermore, considered to be the most culturally appropriate way of teaching this group of students. By the time the first essay was due to be submitted for marking students were regulating their own work habits and group behaviour and had gained confidence from their teachers' expectations of them.

(ii) *Explicit expectations*

After students had received their grades for the first essay in the course, the beginning teachers decided to evaluate their classes to ascertain how students perceived the process. Each teacher was particularly interested in establishing the significance of the group interaction for students. An exercise was constructed which became known as the 'great ball of wool' lesson, aimed at linking group discussion with group process. The teachers asked their students to consider the topic for that week, familiarise themselves with the learning objectives for that particular occasion and to leave with an understanding of how the group actually worked. This session provided an explicit insight into the operation of the class.

**STAGE THREE: ANALYSIS**

In the 'great ball of wool' session students began discussion as usual in small groups but a ball of wool was introduced. Students were asked to take a thread of wool when they contributed to the discussion and then pass it to the next person who spoke. As the discussion progressed, the ball of wool was passed on, forming a connecting thread between participants. The group was given fifteen minutes to consider and discuss the questions set by the teachers then asked to reconstruct the discussion they had just had by rewinding the ball of wool, beginning with the last person who spoke. When this had been completed, students were asked to reflect on the exercise and suggest constructive ways for improving the quality of discussion. In particular, they were asked to consider whether anyone had dominated the discussion they had just completed and the nature of their own contribution.

Most students found the exercise rewarding but it led one or two students to comment on the ways in which they habitually avoided classroom participation and the possible reasons why they did so. The outcome was that all members of the class were required to reflect on what was happening in meetings, on their own learning and the extent to which they were participating in both the class and their own learning.

This exercise encouraged students to evaluate themselves, and, because the class was a supportive one, constructively and positively evaluate each other. Student responses to each other were observed by the teachers throughout the exercise and reactions were recorded. The following comments indicate the nature of the reaction to the exercise:

- 'People listened to each other more today.'
- 'Sometimes someone emerges as a leader even if they're not usually a dominant person.'
- 'You could see where the information was coming from.'
- 'This group has raised my awareness in terms of issues.'
- 'We were more directive and asked more questions with each other.'
- 'I can see a very good point in this exercise.'
- 'You keep more to the topic and you think more before you say something.'
- 'I found it useful to be on-task.'

## **STAGE FOUR: FEEDBACK**

Students were asked to reflect on and evaluate their teacher's classroom performance and encouraged to make constructive suggestions for improvement. All written comments were made without identifying the students. In all cases small group discussion was found to have had an influence on how much was learnt. Both students and the beginning teachers were able to make connections between the social aspects of the meetings and the academic content of the course. In many responses an element of enjoyment in the class meetings was mentioned together with the frequent comment that more time was subsequently spent preparing for this course's meetings than for other courses. Some members of these groups said that this course had become a focus for their academic work in other courses and that a lot of their time was spent reading for meetings, not because the workload was exceptionally heavy but because they enjoyed it so much. Some said they had never experienced a classroom situation like this before and that they believed that they were 'really learning'. All but three students out of the hundred and twenty participants responded that they had changed their ideas about learning since they began the course, indicating that they believed that learning was an interactive group process rather than an individualised and competitive one. When the beginning teachers were officially evaluated in terms of their teaching by the university at the conclusion of the course, these results remained consistent with the earlier informal student feedback, indicating that there is a high probability that the quality of academic work is improved through co-operative methods.

## **CONCLUSION**

The co-operative teaching of first year university students draws attention to the context of teaching and learning (Hall & Kidman, 2004; Schussler et al., 2008) and formed the basis of a learning community (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003). In a large first year University class teachers are likely to encounter considerable heterogeneity in terms of student backgrounds, ages and knowledge of the subject. They often meet their students having little or no experience of classroom management and are, accordingly, frequently anxious about their teaching abilities. At the same time, many first year students feel anxious about the expectations of the University. A way has to be found to bridge the expectations and needs of teachers and learners in this complex situation. The process of drawing teachers and students together into a co-operative programme helps to alleviate feelings of isolation and anxiety.

For teachers, co-operative teaching was found to provide a way of structuring the classroom environment with a more experienced colleague. It offered new teachers a clear process through which they could reflect upon their own practice.

For students, co-operative teaching provided an opportunity to work in a more independent manner than in traditional classes, linking their perceptions with course content and process. In doing so, students overcame many of the barriers of isolation, uncertainty and shyness that many experience in their university classes.

The development of a co-operative teaching and learning programme was found to be a useful approach for introducing new teachers and new learners to a large first year Education course. The four stage process outlined above has been found to be a particularly effective way of preparing first year teachers for their initial meetings with students.

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