Demystifying the assignment question: a democratic and collaborative approach to assessment

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Description

Students on the Level 3 'Geographies of Contested Territories' module (2019/20) were invited to collaborate in the development of their summative assignment questions. The students were given time in class to develop question ideas based on the module content and learning outcomes (starting individually before building up into small discussion groups). This resulted in a list of five possible questions, generated collaboratively by the whole class, which were written on the board. Students then voted on which question they preferred (via a show of hands). Using this information, I formulated two final essay questions, based very closely on the students' suggestions and preferences, with only slight refinement to more clearly emphasise the assignment criteria.

Motivation and Aims

Reflecting on my own experience as a student, it always seemed that there was a secret formula for writing a good essay – but this formula was never explicitly shared by lecturers. This uncertainty or sense of obfuscation around essay technique is an unnecessary obstacle for students to display their learning and critical thinking. The practice of inviting students to co-develop their own essay questions demystifies the learning outcomes underpinning the assignment, and provides students with a sense of 'ownership' (echoing the Queen's Education Strategy in giving students a 'clear voice in decision-making and opportunities to design and implement a high quality and engaging student experience' (p.2)). This was a key aspect of engendering a democratic environment in the classroom, and was beneficial to students' understanding of the assessment criteria, empowering them to more confidently display their learning and critical thinking in the assignment. The exercise functions as a form of imaginative or empathetic learning – the students are asked to put themselves into the shoes of the person setting and marking the assignment, so they come to better understand the learning outcomes implicit in the essay question. These implicit learning outcomes are made absolutely explicit – the 'mystified secret formula' for writing a good essay is revealed. By being invited into the process of assignment setting, students gain an insight into the learning function of an essay question, and can then approach the question with a fuller comprehension of the task being asked of them.

Methodology

The collaborative development of essay questions for the final assignment was carried out in Week 4, by which time students were familiar with the module trajectory, and growing in confidence in their in-class discussions and contributions. The assignment criteria were explained to the students – the essay was intended to display wide understanding across all four sections of the module content, as well as including observations and reflections from the module fieldtrip. QUB's 'Conceptual Equivalents Scale' for undergraduate marking was explained in detail to the students, highlighting the requirement to display critical thinking and wider learning as criteria for 1st class marks. The questions generated by the students, and the votes they received, were: A. Using your field observations and wider literature, to what extent is Belfast a divided city? (10 votes) B. To what extent is the history of the Troubles memorialised in the Cathedral Quarter? (0 votes) C. Taking the Tribeca development as a case study, consider the extent to which sectarian segregations are changing in Belfast. (2 votes) D. Compare and

contrast the conceptions of Belfast's identity from the perspective of a long term resident and new arrival to the city. (1 vote) E. How do landscapes provide a form of resistance for communities, relating to both gentrification and ethno-national conflict? (2 votes) The refined essay questions, and the number of students who chose each question for their assignment, were: Q1. Drawing upon your fieldtrip observations, and with reference to the literature, to what extent is Belfast becoming a less divided city? (29 students) Q2. Critically discuss the view that, 'Development projects in Belfast have the potential to reduce spatial division'. (Discuss with reference to the literature and by drawing on your fieldtrip observations/reflections.) (6 students) So, Q1 is almost exactly as suggested by the students in question A. Q2 is a refined version of the students' suggested questions C and E. The popularity of the suggested questions was reflected in their take-up by students in the assignment.

Literature Review

In-class discussion was a key feature of the module, echoing Freire's (1972, 1998) embrace of 'teaching and learning as a dialogical process' (Haworth 2012, p. 7). Dialogue was important for building student confidence (Brooks and Koretsky 2011, Seenan et al. 2016), engendering a democratic learning environment, and encouraging a collective class identity. As Harber (1992) notes, when '[d]ialogue becomes an essential activity rather than an optional extra' emanating from commitment to democratic principles: 'there is likely to develop a sense of community amongst a group of learners and a working partnership evolves between teachers and learners that leads to increased responsibility and confidence.' (back cover) Democracy is a guiding principle in my teaching approach, and this necessarily extends to assessment and feedback. Harber writes that, '[i]n democratic education … the learners have the power to make some, most or even all of these decisions since power is shared and not appropriated by a minority' (1992, p. 1). The significance of giving students real, material control over an important aspect of their learning moves this democratic engagement beyond rhetorical window-dressing to an engaged practice. The students know – and feel – this difference.

Successes | Challenges | Lessons Learned

This practice was very successful, both in terms of engendering a democratic classroom environment and in offering the opportunity for students to display their learning and critical analysis and achieve strong marks in their final assignment. The students found the exercise to be beneficial as well. Feedback from Learning Experience Evaluations indicated that this exercise was 'Somewhat beneficial to my learning' or 'Highly beneficial to my learning' in all cases. Some comments from the students included that 'allowing students to be involved in the formulation of the essay questions was particularly useful', that the collaborative exercise was '[b]eneficial as it allowed students to input their ideas' and that '[t]his allowed me to put forward a question I would feel confident in answering and my expectations were met to a very high standard'. A peer observer, who was sitting-in during the class when this exercise was carried out, commented favourably on the exercise, and was impressed with the students' engagement: 'This was a good example of "flipping the classroom" and democratising the learning experience which students really engaged in. Dr Donaghey listened carefully and it was clear that the students felt he valued their opinions.' (Peer Teaching Observation, 4th February 2020) And, perhaps crucially, the marks were very strong, with eleven Firsts (including two 90s and one 80), twelve 2.1s, nine 2.2s, with only two 3rds and one Fail. This excellent mark return, with over 30% of the class

achieving the highest classification, was confirmed through second-marking, and the external examiner's report. These assignments were submitted under Covid-19-related 'supplementary regulations', so essays were not marked down for late submission, which might have affected the final marks in normal circumstances. But, the quality of the essays submitted under the extremely stressful lockdown scenario was very impressive, and the students' achievements should not be understated.

Scalability and Transferability

This practice of demystifying the learning outcomes that underpin assignments ought to be transferable to any discipline or subject area that includes any form of assessment. The applicability to other arts and humanities subjects is clear, but I do not see any reason that the same approach might not also be effective in the natural sciences, computer technology, or mathematics. This approach could also work well in online teaching scenarios, and indeed, this would represent a valuable opportunity for meaningful class participation. There is a question around its applicability to Level 1 classes – the exercise relies on a certain degree of confidence in the students' contributions. Some Level 1 classes might rise to this challenge, and indeed be empowered by it, but this might be a daunting prospect for students' first experiences of university-level assessment, for example. The workload associated with this exercise is fairly minimal. The demand on class time could be as little as twenty minutes, and the task of 'quality control' on the final assignment questions is not more taxing than would normally be the case for assignment setting.

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Further Information

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