Engaging with the confidence student – Reflection through active learning

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Critical incident

The new satellite campus for Staffordshire University in London was opened in September 2019. A new academic team was assembled of two lecturers for the two inaugural courses, BA Esports and BA Games Design. This work will focus on the BA Esports students and their relationship with the learning material through active learning via lesson plans.

Being new to academic practice in this environment is challenging. The students all being recruited through clearing results in a cohort from various HE or non-HE pathways with different approaches to learning. Some have fallen out of the cadence of academic learning and often have not been in a structured learning environment for a significant time.

Student confidence in the subject matter is high with such a group. On a course where the subject matter is their hobby or passion, they are engrossed in the subject matter outside of the classroom and have been for many years before coming to study. However, without a critical lens from experience, they find it hard to separate experience with knowledge. This can often be a challenge in how they engage with learning material and engage in the class on topics they feel they know a low about.

Intervention

The intervention used was one of a focus towards active learning. By engaging students in practical work first and then by progressing through high order thinking skills we are able to both show the students where their knowledge is lacking in academic rigor or accuracy as well as where their knowledge ends on the topic. Simply telling a confident student something is harder than they imagine it to be is not as conducive as letting them try themselves. Becoming an active learner themselves in this practice introduces experience to their evaluation of the topic and significantly changes their perspective.

Granting students earlier access to the high-tech equipment as part of their Broadcasting module proved to be a success. Instead of delaying the practical teaching with theory, students were given both instructions simultaneously. An appreciation of the difficulty towards the techniques and tools used in broadcasting was established very quickly and students who previously identified themselves as 'had experience and will pick this up quickly' were more attentive to the material than previously when it was theoretical delivery away from the equipment.

Conclusion

A final review of the intervention and conclusion that highlights key learning that others may use for their own developing practice

Students who have a high degree of confidence in their abilities on a topic that is being taught can be challenging. It is hard to overcome that position externally, especially using passive learning techniques. It is instead wiser to guide the students through active learning to test their knowledge or skills practically with creating or evaluating to which they quickly discover more to the task than they first anticipated. Often, the drive and confidence they have can be used to accelerate learning when given an active learning task which leads to reflection.

After this initial period of reflection, the students are more receptive to the material and teaching can be more dynamic. Overcoming their position on the topic before learning takes place is very challenging and seeing this confidence and belief as a positive characteristic in the student is important. When that confidence and belief can be reflected by the learner and later used for learning, instead of dismissing knowledge in favour of personal bias, it's a powerful tool which can lead to greatness.

Literature review

The position of the academic is one which is written about extensively through various lenses. To establish active learning in the class requires a grounded understanding of the academic's position amongst their students and the role they take. McPhillimy explores the topic of 'self-concept' as "another central aspect of the cognitive approach is the importance it attaches to the influence on a pupil's behaviour of his self-concept.". The idea that the learner, when in an academic setting, takes on an "academic self-concept" which is the mode of which they will engage with the session. This concept is core to the mindset that students should be guided toward in this setting. Entering the room with a notion of knowledge to the topic being delivered can often prevent their progress, preventing them engaging academically and viewing the subject as topical or in a casual nature.

Gould raises two important factors when considering the notion of self-concept:

1.   It is situational - it takes on a different form in different situations. The way a person views themselves in a social situation may be different from the way they view themselves in a learning situation, which may in turn be different from the way they view themselves in a sporting situation, for example.
2.   It can either be positive - people have an optimistic, upbeat picture of themselves - or negative - the picture is pessimistic and gloomy.

An important point here is understanding the student's own position socially within their peer group. When we apply this to the subject matter, Esports, we understand that their knowledge as a fan and viewer can be confused with industry experience and knowledge on the subject matter. Similar to fans who have a great self-belief that they can do better than their team's manager or who would do things differently than their chairman or CEO.

The model which can be used to achieve better results in this setting is Bloom's Taxonomy (Creating, Evaluating, Analyzing, Applying, Understanding, Remembering). "Students that are engaged in more activies than just listening. They are involved in dialog, debate, writing, and problem solving as well as high order thinking, e.g. analysis, synethsis, evaluation and creating", Bonwell and Eison.

Data

Mentor Observation Feedback

Having a greater presence in the room to the learnings was a key piece of feedback drawn from mentor observations. Connecting the different parts of a lesson plan are difficult, with focus on the isolated elements and getting them working well. Starting with instruction at the front and breaking into smaller groups for discussion and peer learning. Drawing attention back to the front between these groups continually to keep the structure of the session tight was something that required more focus. The transitioning between these parts of the lesson plan were highlighted. More attention was needed on this and not just on the segments alone. Which on reflection takes more confidence in that the lesson plan is strong and that it is possible to let them flow themselves and therefore control moving between segments more.

Student Feedback

One student remarked "Accessing the esports arena and being able to try out various roles was really fascinating. The professionals make it look so easy and I do some of it at home so didn't think it was going to be tough. I wish I listened more at the start now as that would have really helped." When asked if their approach to the lessons was different "Oh definitely, now I know I'm going to be doing what's demonstrated and use the theory, I better listen as I really want to become a pro at it"

Personal Reflection

Through mentor observation it become clear that the personality of the lecturer was important and that confidence in the session was there. Focusing less on the smaller micro elements of the session to make sure they work and instead taking a step back, making sure the lesson flows overall, and keeping the students engaged actively in their tasks.

Refs:
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Bonwell, C. C., & Eison, J. A. (1991). Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom. Washington DC:George Washington University.
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