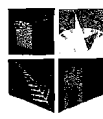# NUI MAYNOOTH

Ollscoil na hÉireann Má Nuad

Large group teaching – the local context:

reflections on practice in the

National University of Ireland, Maynooth

Engaging students in the assessment process in large groups

Alison Hood

Department of Music

'Involving students throughout the assessment process, from initially setting the criteria right through to self-assessing their work, reduces student passivity and increases their self-confidence'

Introduction

The course is an optional second-year undergraduate module in 16th-century counterpoint writing, with approximately 85 students.

I wanted to give students more sense of control and responsibility over their own learning by engaging them more fully in assessment and helping them to understand the principles behind assessment criteria.

Biography

Alison Hood graduated from Trinity College Dublin in 2003 with a PhD entitled 'Chopin's Strategic Integration of Rhythm and Pitch: a Schenkerian Perspective'. She lectured part-time in Trinity from 1997 to 2003 and was appointed visiting lecturer at the University of Oregon for the autumn term of 2001. She began lecturing in the National University of Ireland, Maynooth in 2003, completing the NUI Certificate in Counselling Skills in 2006 and the Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education in 2009.

Alison is a pianist and cellist engaged in both classical and popular performing and recording. As a cellist, Alison has performed with many well-known recording artists in solo and group studio recordings, and in television and concert hall appearances.. She has also performed solo piano to audiences throughout Europe and in America. Her debut album of John Field's music was released by RCA Victor, New York, in 1999 and she has recently finished recording her second solo piano album, which is due to be released in 2011.

Details of the innovation

In the past I gave weekly assignments for this module. In the previous year, encouraged by my Head of Department, in an effort to reduce the workload, I changed to two marked assignments and a class test. However, I felt that the success rates fell and that the non-graded weekly assignments, designed to assist in learning, were not completed by many students.

I decided to attempt to improve student success by communicating the rules behind these assessments so that weaker students would also benefit.

Assessment and Group Work

I focused on how students are assessed and how they respond to that assessment. I tried to involve them throughout the assessment process from forming assessment criteria through to self-assessing their work, and I used group work to encourage the students to explore potential assessment criteria. Initially groups were asked to assess examples provided by the lecturer, identifying points which should be avoided or viewed with caution and those which contributed to a good assignment. Following this, ideas were shared with the whole class. The criteria provided were used to produce a self-assessment sheet that students completed when submitting the relevant assignment. The group contributions and the self-assessment sheet were made available using Moodle.

I monitored the success of the innovation through recording and collecting various kinds of data. This included: detailed analysis of trends in assessment results; a video and peer review of the class that implemented the first use of the technique; regular analysis and
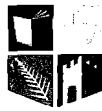
reflection on student feedback forms/ questionnaires (including both written and verbal comments); and capturing my reflections on the process using a personal journal.

Student response

I noted the following effects on student work in class

- Group work went really well and the students enjoyed it;
- There was a high level of student interaction and participation in the group work sessions;
- There was positive feedback from students;
- The students demonstrated real learning and understanding;
- The students fulfilled the intended learning outcomes;
- A higher level of student engagement developed generally, shown by questions/ comments made in class.

Effects on student learning

The following extract is taken from my personal journal and captures what I considered to be the main effects that this approach had on student learning.

Personal Journal Entry: 8 April 2009: Thoughts following corrections of fourth assignment

Thirty one students obtained a first class with 18 receiving 100%. This is an incredible statistic; I have not seen the number of high firsts even come close to this since beginning the course 6 years ago. 1 student failed (compared to 10 for the firsr assignment); so the number of students at the lower end of marks has significantly reduced.

Three students told me they wished other lecturers would adopt the self-assessment sheets as they found them invaluable for understanding where they were making mistakes and they were then able to correct them in advance of submission.

One student told me she has doubled her grade as a result of this approach.

Another student with learning difficulties has told me she is finding them extremely helpful, as she needs more time to process new ideas and she can go through the checklist in her own time. Her grade has risen from a fail to a 2i.

What I learned

My initial reservations were that class time might be too limited to allow feedback to be collected from so many groups and that students might be reluctant to work in groups, as they are not used to this. These reservations both proved to be unfounded. Although there were one or two negative comments from students regarding group work, on the whole students found it very enjoyable and extremely beneficial. The allocation of time

in class to group work did not reduce the content I was able to cover; in fact I believe it significantly increased how much and how deeply they learned. It will ultimately enable me to cover even more content in future.

Implications for Students' Learning

Positive Outcomes

- There was a significant increase in grades across the board.
- There was an increase in engagement and participation in class.
- Classes were more fun and enjoyable!
- Students seemed to gain confidence in their abilities and in relation to the exam.
- Students became more self-critical.
- They seemed to learn at a deeper level and retain the information for longer.
- I found I didn't have to repeat myself so much in class.
- Group work and increased responsibility is socially beneficial and practical for future work situations.

Unexpected (and positive) outcomes

- The level of enjoyment that students got from group work.
- How much they learned from other students.
- How much they appreciated being given more responsibility.
- How much they appreciated specific learning outcomes and detailed lesson plans.
- Relinquishing some control on my part can lead to unforeseen and worthwhile discussion.
- There was a stronger sense of constructive alignment through the teaching, learning, and assessment.
- The use of self-assessment sheets seemed to be particularly beneficial to those students with learning difficulties, as it gave them more time and control over their work.

Potential future developments

Assessment load

The students did five assignments during 2008-09, which was more than in the previous year. However, it is still significantly less than the weekly assignments they used to do in this course. It may even be possible with this approach to reduce the assessment load to four assignments or even implement selective marking of two chosen assignments and give generic feedback on the others (particularly in light of the positive results obtained by giving generic feedback on the first assignment).

Further developments

Given the improved percentage of first class results, I might progress further in this module next time, thereby raising the standard. This could also address some of the feedback from stronger students that it might be made more challenging.

I learned not to shy away from greater class interaction and group work as this experience showed that more content can be communicated more effectively by their implementation.

Lecturing alone is extremely limited in its potential to reach students. Adopting a social constructivist approach to teaching with a less formal and more interactive class environment encourages students to ask questions and to interact with each other in a much more enjoyable atmosphere; one that promotes deeper learning and engagement with the subject.

What others may learn from this innovation

I presented some conclusions from this work to my colleagues, focussing on alternative assessment methods. The response was extremely positive, as other members of staff were interested in adopting a similar approach in implementing self-assessment and group work, particularly in light of student comments and results. This led me to compile generic self-assessment sheets for essays that all lecturers might then adopt in their own modules. These sheets are now available and are used by colleagues in my Department

Involving students throughout the assessment process, from initially setting the criteria right through to self-assessing their work, reduces student passivity and increases their self-confidence. This increased confidence has the potential to influence other aspects of their personal and professional lives, giving them an increased sense of ownership and control over their academic future.