



While they were learning, what was I doing?

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Abstract: *Language and Academic Skills (LAS) Units offer a range of programs and classes to support student learning. These can include individual consultations, adjunct classes and specific assignment preparation seminars. Alongside these focused offerings, there is often a conversation and discussion class. In times of stretched resources, is there still a place for this provision? What teaching and learning environments could be created around conversation and discussion classes that would complement and enhance the learning offered in other LAS programs? To address these questions, this paper uses reflective practice to identify the rationale for the development of such a conversation and discussion class. The reflection traces the work of an LAS adviser in this environment and examines the methodology that informs the teaching. It explores an environment in which students participate in conversations and discussions which promote critical thinking, relationships in learning (Brockfield & McGill, 1998) and pleasure in the classroom (Prendergast & McWilliam, 1999). While this paper makes claims about one particular teaching and learning setting, it also suggests that conversation and discussion classes which develop what is taught in other LAS programs are also worthwhile, particularly when they model attitudes and dispositions appropriate to higher education learning.*

Key words: *teaching, learning, pleasure*

Introduction

As a Language and Academic skills advisor, I work with students in the Faculty of Business and Economics. Some classes are initiated after consultation with faculty staff about where they want to concentrate student development, while others are offered after consultation with an LAS colleague with substantial experience in the faculty. But there remains some latitude at the margins, in a week otherwise dedicated to one to one consultation and lectures targeting particular units. If a group of students shows interest in a particular class, then it seems appropriate to determine whether steps can be taken to meet that request. This is the genesis of the Conversation/Newspaper Discussion class around which this study is located. But on what grounds can we justify small group teaching more particularly in the case of Conversation/Newspaper Discussion classes, which seems to be very much at the margins of our work, when there are increasing demands on us to provide adjunct classes, and collaborative assistance to many more students? Clerehan (1996) and Chanock (1999) ask a similar question about one to one teaching and argue for a place for it among our core LAS provision because of what that relationship can mean for learning. In this paper then, I argue for space for Conversation/Newspaper Discussion classes where they aim to develop relationships for learning and encourage students to see themselves as critical thinkers.

Background to the study

My stance

This paper aims to communicate a dimension of the work of an LAS advisor in a small group setting and to determine its contribution to students learning. My intentions in wanting to take part in and provide a Conversation/Newspaper Discussion class are in line with my belief in the importance of critical citizenship (Giroux & McLaren, 1996) relationships in learning (Brockfield & McGill, 1998) and pleasure in the classroom (Pendergast & McWilliam, 1999). Salmon (as cited in Brockfield & McGill, 1998, p.67) makes the point that 'how we *place ourselves* within any given context...is fundamental'. My involvement in this research can be seen in three ways: as lecturer, participant and researcher.

Positions and Allegiances

As a lecturer, with interests in life long learning and critical pedagogy and a background in secondary schools and Access Education in the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) sector, I am now working in a Business and Economics Faculty which aims to contribute to business and the professions and positions itself as a leader in providing employees for the broad disciplines of business. At the same time, I am part of an LAS unit that aims to develop student learning and specially targets first year students through Transition Support Programs (Language and Learning Services Operational Plan 2005). This intention is shared elsewhere in the university and is summed up by Ward, Crosling & Marangos (2000) who see what happens in the early stages of transition to be important factors in students' attitudes to and values within higher education and beyond. My own rationale for wanting to include a conversation and discussion class can be seen as reflecting these multiple allegiances while meeting the needs of the students.

The students and their intentions

The students involved in this study were two male and two female first year Business and Economics students. One was a local Non English Speaking Background (NESB) student whose first language is Chinese. The other three International Students arrived in 2002 and completed the Victorian Certificate in Education (VCE) in different schools while the local student completed most of his secondary schooling in Australia. All four students completed English as a Second Language (ESL) in Year 12 and met for the first time in this Conversation/Newspaper Discussion class setting.

Student intention was instrumental in the formation of the class and from the evaluations of this small group, it is clear their intentions in participating in retrospect remained the same: to speak English and to socialise. For a semester, these students planned to meet weekly using newspaper readings as the stimulus for conversation and discussion. The sessions were advertised and open to any students, but attendance patterns in previous years suggested that they would attract only NESB students and this semester was no exception. Some postgraduate students came to a few classes. Although their intentions may have been similar to

the undergraduates, they did not become anything other than occasional participants and I did not include them in the evaluation.

The relationship between teaching and learning

Entwistle, N., Skinner, Entwistle, D., & Orr (2000), reporting on phenomenological analyses, suggest that the way a lecturer thinks about knowledge is reflected in the ways that she teaches. While there is certainly no consensus within the research community, there is a body of research that suggests there is a close relationship between one, what a lecturer believes about teaching and learning and the ways those beliefs are translated into approaches to teaching (Trigwell & Prosser, as cited in Bright, 2002) and secondly between the ways he/she approaches teaching and the ways he/she sees the teaching environment. (Prosser & Trigwell, as cited in Bright, 2002). Heidegger (as cited in Gibbs, Angelidis, & Michaelides, 2004, p. 183) sees teaching as 'even more difficult than learning'..... The real teacher, in fact, lets nothing else be learned than learning.'

Heidegger's (as cited in Gibbs et al. 2004) definition moves this survey of the literature into the arena where the teacher is no longer equated with expert and abandons the claim that the teacher has the final word about what constitutes subject knowledge. A view which sees the teacher sharing responsibility for learning necessitates a shift to including the self, peers and experts in learning (Bennet, as cited in Fry, Ketteridge & Marshall, 2003) and emphasises the role of structuring information to make it accessible and useable (Biggs, as cited in Fry et al. 2003). The onus is however, according to Fry et al. (2003), on teachers to select methods of teaching, course design and evaluation to bring about the learning we desire. A typology of teaching from several researchers identifies three theories of teaching: as transmission, as organising student activity and as making learning possible (Fry et al. 2003).

The research

To determine what I was doing in my role as Language and Academic Skills Advisor when a group of students chose to attend a number of Conversation/Newspaper

Discussion classes, I answered a number of questions aimed at evaluating my intention, activities and interaction.

The three themes that emerge from my evaluation show me taking two distinct, but necessarily integrated positions. The first theme is participation characterised by moderate pleasure and the other two positions are teaching and leadership characterised by a moral imperative to facilitate learning on behalf of the Unit I am employed by and the Faculty I work in. Participation also includes leading the group to meet our shared expectations of speaking, reading and socialising.

Discussion of Pleasure and ethics

From this point, I take the discussion into Foucault's (1985) understanding of pleasure and ethics to see how they can inform my work. To investigate what I was doing in taking moderate pleasure, I follow Pendergast and Mc William (1999) in using Foucault's distinction between moderate and immoderate pleasure. According to Foucault (1985), an individual's rationale for behaviour is not a simple matter of acting from received knowledge, but from reasoned principles, hence Foucault understands the relationship between pleasure and ethics in a particular way. Foucault (1985) shows how the texts of Plato, Aristotle and others can be seen as training their readership in knowledge about the limits of taking proper pleasure and so provides the individual with tools to 'question their own conduct to watch over and give shape to it and to shape themselves as ethical subjects' (Foucault, 1985, p.13). As Pendergast and Mc William (1999) note, pleasure, according to these descriptors is neither about emotional outpourings nor about immediate gratification.

For me, the taking of moderate pleasure as participant in the class sits within an ethics that is mindful of my other positions of leader and teacher and the rationale for the establishment of the group, namely the development of critical citizenship, relating for learning and student intention to speak English and to socialise. Therefore these relationships and positions reflect my rationale for the class and the students' intention in participating. In turn, these intentions fit within the Faculty's interest in the transition of students into higher education. The Faculty's understandings generated from research (Crosling & Ward 2000) are expressed in the claim that developing oral

communication and interpersonal skills in first year, is the basis for social interaction both at peer and staff levels.

But my aim to show pleasure in learning, leads students away from a setting in which the practices fostered by the Faculty of critical thinking, reading and group work are held as serious and mostly examinable. From an environment where the relationship with the lecturer may be one to some hundred and where the tutor is marker, students move to a setting which is necessarily *not* serious in tone and students find themselves in a relationship with the lecturer which may be one to four and where the lecturer is never the examiner. In this place, the aim is always to engage in discussion using critical questioning of texts and to interpret positions (all of which is encouraged by the Faculty), but also to be able to laugh and share snacks and get to know each other as learners, teacher and people and to extend our reading into a critical reading of the world as text (Comber & Kamler, 1997).

Discussion of 'place' in learning

Learning, that takes account of the affective as well as cognitive domains, according to Fry et al. (2003), provides the conditions for effective learning. Jamieson (2003) sees place to be important in the teaching and learning process because it plays a vital role in how the process is experienced. Edwards (as cited in Jamieson, 2003, p. 121) claims that 'the university environment is part of the learning experience and buildings need to be silent teachers'. Following from this, Jamieson (2003) argues the importance of the physical setting in the educational debate because 'place' is experienced both functionally and viscerally.

The learners in the Conversation/Newspaper Discussion class enjoyed a space of physical comfort. Let me put you in the picture. The room used to be a professor's room. It's big! It's my room now. The door is always open and one window is open (as far as it will) weather permitting. It's got a large table in the middle that can seat ten comfortably. There are always books and papers on the table just where I am using them, (not neatly piled) and then there is the large cookie jar with the lid off filled with assorted wrapped lollies and lollypops. There is a lived in feel about the place. Tables lining the perimeter bring the room in a little closer. When

there are no students, I sit at my computer on one of the tables around the perimeter, or sit at the table, reading. Windows make up one side of the room with a view of the lawns and campus below and away far into the distance are the Dandenong Ranges. There are pictures on another wall and notices opposite that one. The final wall is a book case with books arranged sparsely along its shelves. Some are leftovers from the professor. The room has a 'make yourself at home feel.' (Wilson, 2004).

It is to this space that students came once a week for conversation and snacks, to move out of formal learning situations into something which they chose to attend. The physical comfort and the way we arrange the learning environment has implications for teaching and learning (Radloff & Radloff, 1999). A space such as this which allows freer movement, where students can sit around a table is conducive to conversation and to 'getting to know each other'. It invokes convivial situations of people who gather freely to spend time, talking and eating. My participation may be 'a playful (sub) version of academic work' (Morgan & Mc William, 1995, p.122) but it is only so because of the way it allows moderate pleasure for learning. By modelling pleasure in my work and allowing others to take part in it, I break from commonsense understandings of academic work. This (sub) version should not be interpreted as counterhegemonic although it may be argued that by encouraging learning in a different environment I implicitly question why learning has become routinely and unnecessarily serious in many settings.

How moderate pleasure and teaching work together

To interrogate the positions of leadership and teacher in this setting I need to ask how my position of leader and teacher, (which I group together) plays out when I am also prizing moderate pleasure. I need to consider how leader and teacher work in this context. To do this I intend to address three issues.

Firstly what teaching styles were privileged in this class? To do this I stress that students' stated reason for attending the class was to speak English and to socialise. This indicator together with my intention to use critical questions and coupled with my desire for methods which fit with a critical stance (Giroux & McLean 1996), suggest

the beginnings of a community similar to that described by Gibbs et al. (2004, p.184).) as one that 'practises the scholastic processes of conversation, involvement and engagement as modes of revealing knowledge' But just how did we engage in this work?

Working with questions that I have used over many years in Access Education and which have become part of my everyday teaching as an LAS advisor, I was surprised to find how closely they sit alongside the questions given to students to assist them to critically analyse articles in a first year Management unit. An example of one such questions is: 'What are the underlying assumptions in the article?' Argument about the relative merit of the different positions the Faculty takes up or LAS units adopt towards student learning, would seem to be put to one side, when it appears that using critical questions aligns Faculty, Conversation/Newspaper Discussion class and the rest of the Las unit in questioning the neutrality of texts. In this way the work of this class seems closely aligned to what may be seen as 'core LAS business'.

In our readings from *The Age* (Letters to the Editor and Issues in the News) and other texts, I made deliberate connections about how the questions we asked ourselves about the text and the world, were related to questions students are asked to use in analysing articles in a first year compulsory Management unit. This was a way of ensuring that the students saw a connection and also the differences between 'doing the same work' of analysing an article for an assignment under some pressure and may be at the eleventh hour, compared with sitting together around the table.

This leads to the second question of how relationships for learning were fostered. Students involved in the class evaluations explained that when they felt comfortable they were prepared to study together, but when they were still getting to know each other they felt some reserve about sharing their vulnerabilities and their ideas. The academic and the social forms the interactivity (Tinto, 1997) which Smart, Volet and Ang (2000) claim as the crossroads and the site at which to look for clues to student persistence and retention. According to Fry et al. (2003, p.23), 'what we do as teachers must take into account what we know about how students learn'. Like Lawson (2003), I think that this suggests that creating an environment of comfort, made up of a suitable physical setting and shared understandings, is likely to be

beneficial. It mirrors the same supportive environments described by Jones, Bonnano and Scouller (2001) that LAS advisors create in similar and in more formal teaching and learning programs.

Thirdly, I address the question of how I can determine that what I was doing created conditions for worthwhile pleasure. The themes which I established from the students' evaluation, suggest agency, understandings about their own learning and enthusiasm in the intention towards their own study. Responses to the question about what they liked about the class reveal some of the ingredients for worthwhile pleasure for these students. These can be summed up as: learning outside the curriculum, speaking English, meeting other students outside the formal classroom, seeing familiar faces and finding out about how other students think. These outcomes find echoes in the research of others including Volet (2003) and Lawson (2003).

There is value in learners being able to answer 'why' questions and explain their answers (Fry et al. 2003) and in teachers and learners taking responsibility for learning. Discussion about how learning takes place in a peer small group can be a powerful learning experience in itself. These learning 'moments' are not as 'dry' as they sound when they are brought to life by passionate participants struggling to make sense of 'the word and the world' (Friere & Macedo, 1987). Nor are they marginal activities because they are at the core of critical practices in the Faculty and adopted by LAS advisors in many classes.

Learning as change

The discussion environment which creates space for a short time each week is deliberately constructed free from content restrictions to open up wider understandings of the world through critical questioning of current affairs texts. An educational vocabulary for teacher to teacher dialogue about this teaching situation would include 'notions of being, value, self-understanding and dialogue' (Barnett 1997, as cited in Gibbs et al. 2004, p.186). If learning is defined in its broadest terms as change (Jamieson, 2003) therefore there should be the possibility of experiences that are transformative.

It is this concern about transformation and what students in the 21st century need to accommodate, that has lead Lambert (2002) to describe four models of learners and learning. My intention here is to map some of the practices which my teaching in this class might encourage students to exhibit.

Learner models

Collaborative Learners (Lambert 2002) find sources for learning among networks. They seek settings such as the Conversations/Newspaper discussion class because they provide a place to make and maintain links, to exchange ideas with others including experts, to develop people skills and a sense of personal value in a cooperative environment. Free Agents (Lambert 2002) are accommodated while wanting to link into open ended and life long possibilities. They find these needs met in discussion topics which can be free ranging while still meeting their objectives. They can learn to use questions to explore new ideas while developing transferable communication skills. They can come and go in a 'not for credit' class. Wise Analysers, (Lambert 2002) who are already keen to be reflective and critical have these needs met and legitimised while developing communications skills. They can look for connections between situations and contribute these insights. Creative Synthesisers (Lambert 2002) flourish in this class environment where complexity is explored and interrelatedness is made explicit.

One qualitative measure of a class such as this Conversation/ Newspaper Discussion class, can be achieved by mapping student behaviours onto the 21st Century Learner Model (Lambert 2002). These indicators are not discrete characteristics appearing in one individuals and therefore not another. Lambert (2002) makes the point that the skills in combination will be emergent in many learners, but it is clear that no matter the preference for learning, learners need conditions which enable these possibilities to become realities. While student behaviours, in the class under discussion, exhibited some aspects of the ideal model, the students are neophytes in academic life. Uneven performances are to be expected, as they learn what their discourse communities expect of them and they decide how they will accommodate those demands.

Conclusion

Drawing together what I set out to achieve in the paper, I was engaged in moderate pleasure, leadership and teaching to show my own enjoyment in collaboration with students, to model reading and thinking where academic and social lines are deliberately blurred in a room off a Faculty corridor. Fry, et al. (1999) make the point that the onus is on us to be discriminating about the types of teaching, and course design that will produce the kind of learning we want. I refer to the model of an epistemological continuum to further explain my intentions (Entwistle et al. 2000).

What I was doing was engaging students where they were along the continuum from dualism to relativism and attempting to encourage them to consider and reconsider their stance towards the world. I hope it will lead them to apply critical thinking in their own discipline and finally to integrate it into their personal and professional repertoire of graduate attributes. So then, I argue for a place for our more marginalised work where thinking and speaking and reading are a priority, not just for the sake of students' academic development, but for their development as citizens and future leaders and for their own pleasure.

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