The Student as Producer: Experimenting with a student-led lecture

Danielle Mortimer discusses a recent project where students produce a lecture through the employment of Peer, Team and Project-Based Learning in an attempt to challenge the typical student-teacher dynamic.

Students seldom think of their university assessments as research. When they look in books or attack Google (or, even more terrifyingly, absorb Wikipedia or SparkNotes), it is in the hope that it will either inspire them to transcend their writer's block, or will help convince their tutor to give them a higher grade. Research for assessment is not considered research on a par with the work undertaken by tutors. As with most attitudes adopted by students who aim to learn knowledge at university, rather than students who aim to produce research at university, this is encouraged by:

> …the traditional image of the teacher standing before a class of students expounding the mysteries of knowledge about which the teacher is an expert…the conventional images of the students sitting at the feet of the guru awaiting with patience to receive the pearls of wisdom that he is prepared to cast forth, or of the apprentice looking over the master's shoulder watching the expert at work and thereby hoping to acquire sufficient knowledge to emulate his feats or expertise. (Jarvis and Gibson, 1997, p21)

Most students acquire ideas about this model of the teacher–student relationship at school, despite recent alterations to school policies and to the National Curriculum that reflect a more student-centred ethos. This model relies on the teacher's independent discovery of and effective communication of knowledge. The teacher therefore avoids the anxiety and vulnerability associated with waiting for students to learn enough from independent study to pass their coursework and exams. One question university tutors must ask: are we doing enough to undermine the students' image of the teacher-as-expert-as-guru-as-master? More importantly – are we doing enough to eradicate the image this causes the student to have of her-or-himself?

Mike Neary believes that a strong adherence to this type of teacher-learner relationship in university teaching opens a lacuna between lecturers' research and teaching practices. One is based on the production of knowledge through individual radical critical thinking practices, the other on the one-directional passing of knowledge from lecturer to student. (2012a) The concept that students should now experience a higher level of engagement and investment during their degree, (particularly with employability levels a

raised stake in the game), resulting in work-ready, accomplished and independent thinkers, is undermined by the lack of opportunities for students to engage with *processes* of research. Neary argues that this constitutes a fundamental inconsistency within the university system. The university was designed primarily as a place of research; the *process* of research should lead its teaching and learning practices.

Taking on board Neary's arguments, more questions need to be raised. How can we rethink the ways in which academic research can be poured back into the students' academic production? How can we avoid the hypodermic needle type of research-teaching, in which lecturers perform solo research and then inject already-produced and analysed knowledge into students? How can we employ methods of research dissemination that involve students *in* the production and process of generating knowledge through research? This paper does not purport to answer these questions. It instead provides a case-study about a project designed to undo the restrictions between the role of researcher and student; to conflate them and make the students aware of their own university output as contributing to academic research.

<div align="center">The project</div>

I was asked to deliver a lecture on gender and sexuality for second-year US Literature students. As this topic had a more open format than most, I decided to ask third-year and Masters students to research, write and deliver it. I emailed third-year and Masters students taking modules on gender or US fiction (around seventy students). I received seven replies. After further email correspondence to ascertain interest, enthusiasm, and commitment levels, I asked five students to participate on the project. Four were third-year students and one a Masters student. The Masters student only committed to the writing of the lecture, rather than both its writing and its delivery. The lecture was not based on the rote reiteration of facts the students had learnt previously. The students decided on different aspects of the topic to focus on (masculinity, motherhood, female representation) and produced original research on it.

<div align="center">The theory behind the project</div>

The main aim behind the project was to enhance the participating students' confidence and investment in their research skills and degree topic. In tandem with this, it aimed to enhance skills that would be useful to them in post-university employment and/or for postgraduate

level study. These included research, collaboration, presentation and communication skills. The structure of the group project was based on ideas from Team-Based Learning. In Team-Based Learning, trust is given that every individual will contribute fairly to the final product produced by the group. The team leads itself and is driven by the commitment to team-mates, rather than the grade-oriented goals of formal assessment. (Roberson and Reimers, 2012, p130) I also integrated ideas from Problem-Based Learning. This is an interactive brainstorming-based learning technique, pioneered with medical students. Groups are set a problem, asked to brainstorm answers without judgement (opening pathways to free-association), then evaluate and discuss the brainstormed ideas with critical awareness.

Team-Based Learning and Problem-Based Learning encourage students to create and apply knowledge. Gerard Majoor (2012) argues, "The world of today is increasingly dependent on knowledge and therefore on people who are capable of generating and applying knowledge." (p249) Successful learning includes the ability to generate knowledge and apply a flexible critical approach to it, in order to relate it critically to the world at large. These skills can be enhanced through Team-Based Learning and Problem-Based Learning techniques.

The project was also built round the premise of Peer-Led Team Learning, "an instructional model that advances student achievement through active learning in a peer-led workshop". (Gafney and Varma-Nelson, 2008, p1) Students work with peers from their classes, and also with a peer-leader, who may be slightly above them in years of study, but is still presumed to be on the same university strata as them. The student-led lecture allowed for an appropriate fit with these criteria. The third-year and Masters students worked together to learn from one another. Ostensibly I was mooted as the leader of the group. However, the students were always aware of my post-doctoral, rather than lectureship status, and were also encouraged to work in an informal atmosphere; we were all known by our given names, and everyone was involved in organising the meetings.

Problem-Based, Team-Led, and Peer-Led Team Learning techniques were chosen because each creates a learning environment that "challenges the paradigm of teaching in which knowledge is transferred from teacher to students." (Majoor, 2012, p250) Students were encouraged not simply to think about the information they were dealing with as a series of facts they could learn from their tutor. Instead they were to consider it as knowledge which was attached to all the epistemological implications of what it means to "know" knowledge, the processes of learning knowledge, and, because a lecture had to be given at the end, the

communication of knowledge. This explicit thinking about knowledge has the potential to form "the basis of the reorganisation of intellectual labour" as students are now considered to be "the subject rather than the object of the teaching and learning process, ie the student as producer not consumer." (Neary, 2012a) This allowed the students to produce a level of "self-education". (Neary, 2012a)

The sessions (see Appendix 1)

During our first meeting we brainstormed ideas. I expected to have to initiate discussion, as it was the first time the group had worked together. However, I modelled the structure of the session on Problem-Based brainstorming. The discussion therefore centred on producing a list of essential topics to be covered in the lecture. One student wrote up all the suggestions made on the board. This is common practice in brainstorming sessions and ensures the group is self-sufficient – they have no need to ask the supposed authority-figure in the room for anything. Since nothing is evaluated, only recorded, it also takes away the fear that the authority-figure or another member of the group will pass judgement on what is said. The belief is that, freed from the shackles of sentence structure, the need to validate an argument, evidence to support each idea, and the rhetoric of logic, the students come up "with as many ideas and answers as they could, without any criticism of their responses." (Geuna and Giacobini-Robecchi, 2002, p215) After the brainstorming stage, the students were asked to evaluate the ideas, striking off those that were unhelpful and expanding on those that they thought had value. The success of the session (evaluated by the high level of participation of the students within it) was due to the enthusiasm of the students involved and the interactive set-up of the session. During the brainstorming session the students decided that the most effective way to construct the lecture was for the group to choose the most important topics that had arisen from the session and each do individual research on one topic.

After each member completed their independent research they read it to the rest of the group. The group (with no input from me) decided the order in which topics would be presented in the lecture and which texts from the module could be used to illustrate the different topics. The group also decided that the fifty minute lecture would not be delivered in ten minute blocks by the individual author of each section. Instead, each section would be presented as a conversation or dialogue between all the participants. The latter point was decided on by the group since some nervousness had been expressed about the fact that three

of the four students would be standing doing nothing while the other delivered their ten minute block of research.

I pieced together the research the students had written up into a dialogic lecture (see Appendix 2). The group then decided who should speak each line and readjusted things I had broken up – either to break them down further or to make them into longer sentences. This process enhanced the clarity of the overall lecture. We did three practice readings, and then delivered the lecture to the second-year US Literature students. At the end of the lecture, I invited the second-year students to ask the third-years anything about the lecture topic or about US Literature third-year study. One second-year picked up on a point made in relation to motherhood. Two of the third-years answered this question confidently and coherently. Two second-years then asked about third-year study, and two third-year students offered their opinion.

Evaluation by the third-year students taking part

Three of the five students were able to offer substantial feedback. This feedback suggested most of the goals of the project had been met.

One goal was to enhance the confidence and investment of the students in their research skills and degree topic and another, related goal, was to improve certain skills (research, collaboration, communication and team-working). Student 1 wrote that "Having to listen to others opinions on subjects that I felt strongly about has been a very good thing for me as a student." She suggested the "brainstorming sessions" were "stimulating" and in the group sessions "we were able to work out how to put together individual ideas into a collective, coherent whole". In relation to "the research we personally conducted" she concluded that "Having to focus research on such a specific area was a brilliant task for developing my research skills." Overall she wrote that "I now have more confidence in my abilities as a researcher, my writing skills and ability to work as part of a group". Student 2 wrote that "The group dynamic" allowed students to "bounce ideas and develop them in ways that we would previously not have seen before." She added that "While there may be disagreements, because I was with other students who are just as impassioned by their area of interest as I am, I have learned to develop a strong argument in a very immediate way, rather than in the drawn out process I am used to in essay feedback. The high level of enthusiasm and conviction was also highly infectious." Student 3 wrote that the project "helped me

develop invaluable other skills such as the ability to work in a team in an academic environment and presentation skills." All agreed that it enhanced their ability to work in groups and navigate sometimes conflicting relationships with others. It also enhanced their research skills.

Another goal was to give students the opportunity to experience how it feels to work in research and to take them out of the pedagogical environment they are used to in the seminar rooms and lecture halls. Student 3 wrote that "Although research is the main focus of my degree, as, I am sure it also is for the vast majority of students on courses in the Faculty of Humanities and Comparative Studies, the research opportunities we are offered are deceptively scarce. As a matter of fact, the project Dani initiated was the first of such kind that I ever heard of, and it was a fantastic experience." She continued that "it allowed me to gain insight into a rather closed community, that is, academic research, and experience on a small scale what writing and delivering a paper to an audience entails". Student 2 wrote that "While my experience at university seems at times to be confined within the student-teacher dynamic, this experience meant that this hierarchy was no longer a factor, and for the first time, I felt as if my ideas as an almost academic could be recognised as such." The research project allowed them to experience a different type of learning, unshackled from the conventions Neary talks about when he writes that "the university as an institutional form remains unchallenged" and that "Student engagement takes place within the already established corporatised governance and management structures of higher education." (Neary, 2012a) This shift in perspective enabled the participating students to feel they had experienced the world of academia from a new perspective, which was not harnessed to the traditional roles of teacher-student. It also enabled them to re-label themselves, moving from the title of student, to an almost – or aspiring – academic.

A separate goal was to allow the students to produce independent research (independent from the pressures and constrictions of assessment and examination). Student 1 noted that her individual research topic "was not my preferred choice, but it turned out to be incredibly valuable – I had to think outside of my usual focus, and this developed many of my ideas in a more general way". Student 2 likewise wrote that "The casual environment in which we worked meant that we, the students, were allowed to dictate the area of interest and research topics outside our immediate modules." Student 2 wrote that, despite the fact the project contained no formal assessment, "The fact that we contributed to the revision lectures of second years was something that motivated me to pursue my personal area of interest in

the highest degree that was personally possible." For her, the project felt like a break from the examination and assessment-based pressures of her degree work. She wrote that, "The research group was something that I loved doing and was a greatly appreciated relief from the responsibilities that seem to dominate third year."

A final goal was to enhance the students' employability levels and/or make them stand out as postgraduate candidates. Student 1 wrote that "I did not expect to have such a great project to be working on alongside my regular studies, and it has definitely encouraged me to continue on to postgraduate studies." Student 3 likewise wrote that "As a student who is interested in postgraduate study and whose long-time goal is entering the academic sector, I found this research opportunity to be perfectly suited to my projects."

Only Student 2 reported a suggestion for improvement, writing that, "If there was anything that was worth improving I would say that perhaps this opportunity should be advertised earlier in the year. I almost didn't apply because of other obligations. Perhaps make it clear at the end of 2nd year, or just before the end of the Christmas vacation so that there is more time, and it doesn't coincide with impending third year deadlines." This was taken into account and will be rectified. Overall the project was deemed useful. Student 3 wrote that "I do hope this initiative will open the way for more similar research opportunities and will draw the attention of the Faculty to the fact that its students could benefit more from staff support. I can only hope the Faculty will see the project as a pilot and offer support in organizing it again."

Evaluation by the second-year students watching

The project was an unusual Peer-Led Team Learning exercise, as there was a second-stage beyond the workshop, where the third-year students disseminated the research undertaken in the workshop to students in the second year. Morrison, Burton, and O'Toole (2006) note that "Formal peer teaching, where older students teach classes or groups of younger ones in specific subject areas has been relatively uncommon." (p39) Feedback from the peer-teachers indicated that they had benefited from the experience. However, I also wanted to see how many of the benefits associated with Peer-Led Team Learning had also been experienced by the watching students, despite the fact that the lecture structure itself remained unchanged. The ideal version of this type of experiment would lead to the de/re-construction of the lecture format in order to enable higher-year students to research through

Peer-Led Team Learning and then disseminate material to those in the years below using active learning techniques, such as Peer-Led Team Learning. However, with this de/re-construction impossible in this instance, I was interested to discover whether the students watching the lecture, and who were not specifically taking part in a Peer-Led Team Learning workshop, would still report any of the benefits associated with Peer-Led Team Learning.

I approached three second years for feedback. Student A wrote, "I think it's good to hear things from fellow students…as it gives you the same information but perhaps worded slightly differently…. maybe in a simpler form." Gafney and Varma-Nelson (2008) argue that in a Peer-Led Team Learning environment, students are enabled to reach an "understanding of the concepts presented in the lectures and textbook in a non-threatening environment". (pp1-2) This is achieved because the workshop leaders "are recent learners of the material…and explain material in ways that connect with them". (pp1-2) This was how Student A felt in relation to the presentation of the material, "sometimes I get so panicky trying to write everything a lecturer is saying I remember nothing from the lecture. With the student led lecture it was easier to just relax and listen." Despite the sometimes complicated nature of the information being given, Student A felt that, because the language was "simpler" and "less formal", the material was explained in a way to which she could relate more closely, as Gafney and Varma-Nelson suggest Peer-Led Team Learning allows the student to do.

Gafney and Varma-Nelson (2008) note that the Peer-Led Team Learning "process encourages collaboration and builds confidence." (pp1-2) This effect could also be seen in the feedback given by the second-year students. For Student C the ability of speakers from the year ahead was a revelation and they were "surprised at the level of detail the students provided". Student C said the presenters were able to "give as much detail as a professional lecturer would". Student C added that, "I don't see any downsides to a one-off lecture by more experienced students to add another dimension to the module and perhaps encourage the younger students." For Student B, the process was inspirational. Student B wrote that, while they had previously "never really thought about writing an essay as research," the lecture by third-year students "showed the same sort of things I use when I write my essays – sources from books and the internet – and so the really good lecture and argument the students had made from their research made me think about how much effort and time I invest in the research for my essays". Student B added "I will invest more time in my third year essays, as the lecture showed me that it is possible to actually find out important

information through research and for it to have an impact on the ideas of others…it made me think of my essays as something that can be taken seriously as university research, rather than just things I write to get a mark."

Conclusion

As a humanities project, this experiment worked well. The students were encouraged, as Neary argues they should be, to see the possibilities they have for being involved at university in "production, not exchange". (2012a) Students were able to appropriate the product of the lecture under a new format: production, rather than consumption. As Walter Benjamin (1915) suggests, students were allowed to become "teachers and learners at the same time". This was brought about through "the reorganisation of intellectual labour". (Benjamin, 1915) In the contemporary university climate, humanities teaching needs to evolve to bolster student confidence, employability and their active involvement in the learning for their degree. Students have enthusiasm for research and collaborative projects because they feel they need to get the most they can from their degree, including practical experience.

Three factors could be further explored in relation to this project. The first is the integration of research projects like this into university modules, so this type of active research is promoted within tutorial or lecture groups. The second is the expansion of this type of active learning outside the sphere of the humanities. The third is increasing the number of students who benefit from it. The success of the project was due, in large part, to the enthusiasm and skill of the small group of students taking part. Would it work on a grander scale?

The easiest of these issues to approach, if not answer all the questions around, is the second. One of the most effective techniques employed in the project was Problem-Based Learning. This was originally designed as a teaching method for medical and science students, so it already grounds the project in a wider disciplinary web than the humanities. It is perhaps not implausible, in either humanities or scientific teaching, to add another dimension to Problem-Based Learning: peer-teaching. With driving questions posed, the students could brainstorm together and then perhaps share their answers and ideas with the rest of the tutor group, or even with lecture groups. This speaks to the issue of how this type of learning could be fitted into modules. Perhaps it would be possible, if the aim is to enlarge

the scope of this type of project, to produce a module where *all* seminars and lectures are run by students from the year(s) above, using Problem-Based Learning, Peer-Led Team Learning, and Team-Based Learning techniques. To maintain the research element of the idea as being independent from examination, these activities (perhaps undertaken in different weeks by different groups?) could remain un-assessed. Although this would demand more work on the part of the students (and a huge amount of organisational work on the part of the module supervisor), there is evidence that students are willing to take on extra roles in order to feel fully engaged with their degrees, and fully prepared for the worlds of work or research they wish to enter afterwards. Projects such as these would provide an opportunity to embrace what Benjamin stated as the original goal of university education: for "The organisation of the university", which includes its teaching methods, "to be grounded in the productivity of its students". (Benjamin, 1915)

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