Active Lectures: Using Reflective Activities To Enhance Engagement And Learning

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Introduction

This paper explores the use of active and reflective learning within UG and PGT modules, focusing on benefits gained using reflective activities within a traditional lecture-seminar format; a constraint many HE practitioners still have to work within.   The place, and value, of instructor-led lectures in HE has been debated for many years now, and since Covid many have seen a fall in attendance rates and lack of engagement with these both in person and as resources supplied for hybrid, distance, or asynchronous learning, which seems to undermine their value further. I suggest here that large-class lectures can still be a valuable tool for effective learning and engagement when combined with an open and reflective approach, rather than being seen as a method for content transmission.

I believe that lectures still have an important role to play in fostering a sense of a community of learning in our institutions, and that this traditional structure can give us a useful model within which to innovate, exposing students to enough risk to allow for engaged learning and ownership of knowledge. I present here one approach to doing so which has succeeded in increasing student engagement and learning outcomes with intellectually, and at times emotionally, challenging content in modules in International Relations, Security Studies, and Philosophy, in class sizes ranging from 40 to 400 students. Each of these disciplines traditionally operates on a model of content-delivery lecture followed by a discursive seminar, supported by guided further readings.

Approach

When students struggle with complex materials, there is a natural tendency to explain more. Where our explanations fail, we seek to explain more, to explain differently, to explain better. There are serious risks associated with adopting any other approach, for our students

learning outcomes and experience, and for our careers in an environment where our performance is judged against a series of metrics.

My use of reflective activities began in something close to desperation. Students were struggling to understand, and more worryingly to see the point of trying to understand IR theory on a large core second year module. Listening to various scholars adopt seemingly entrenched positions which they must learn-off and apply in a for and against tick-box fashion to a case study can feel like a waste of time to many students, particularly in the face of largescale human suffering which is often the meat of IR. To think this is to miss a large portion of the value of engaging with politics at the level of theory, where the critical, analytical and strategic thinking needed to understand and address real world problems is developed and practised. It is harder to see this value when content is delivered to be learned-off, rather than ideas presented to be engaged with.

The extent of this disengagement allowed me to try something different; explaining less. In creating an intentional gap in the information that students had to fill for themselves I hoped to allow them the space to think, reflect, understand and have ownership of these materials. This turned out to work. It worked particularly well by drawing on my experience teaching Philosophy to students disappointed to discover that, rather than the meaning of life, they would learn how to think and to argue well. It worked so well that it became central to my teaching in subsequent years in modules as diverse as Security Studies, Philosophy of War, Philosophy of Art and Metaphysics and Epistemology.

Reflective activities is a deliberately broad term, and it's impossible to provide a formula or template for these. They mark a point in a lecture where the presentation of information stops, and a different kind of work begins. Students may be asked to think through a series of examples, which are designed to test their intuitions and draw out their own thinking (see fig 1), or to give them different ways in which to test materials (or challenges to these) that they have been presented with (figs 3,4,5), or to simply make clear that the next step is for them to think for themselves about the ideas they have been presented with (figs 2 and 6) in order to centre the importance of engaging with these as part of an active and ongoing conversation rather than as a passive recipient of information.

This is not in itself a revolution in lecturing, introducing activities and encouraging reflection has been around for many years. What marks the difference here I think is the centrality and extent of the subtraction of explanation in a genuine embracing of learning as risk-taking with a safety-net, accepting that 'Some solutions to some problems are attainable by

pondering; all the more so when the ponderer is cunningly and persistently barked at by a Socratic sheepdog who already knows the way.' (Ryle, 1971, Pg 222).

Reflective activity

Is saying

'You stole that money' in a particular tone of voice

Equivalent to me typing

You stole that money

in terms of the effect that the change to the sentence has on its **factual** content?

Figure 1: Hitchen S., (2021), Emotivism: Are ethical 'statements' just expression of emotion PPR 206 'Values and Objectivity' Second year UG Metaethics module [PowerPoint slides]

Takeaway task 1

PHIL 100: EPISTEMOLOGY AND METAPHYSICS

Before we explore Descartes' way out of this scenario

Can **you** think of any way forwards from this point?

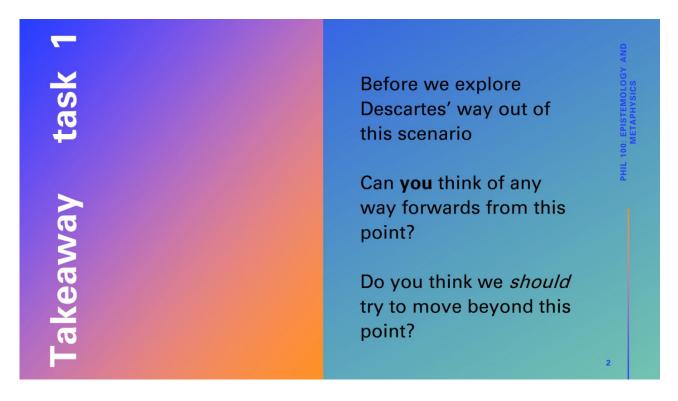Do you think we *should* try to move beyond this point?

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Figure 2: Hitchen S., (2024), Doubt and Descartes PHIL 100 'Knowledge and Reality', 10 lecture section Epistemology and Metaphysic on First Year UG module [PowerPoint slides]

Reflective activity

What would we need to be able to do, or to demonstrate, in order to show that we have knowledge of these various types?

Is there a difference between saying we **know** something, and that we have a **sense** of something?

Please look at the painting on the following slide, and then answer the question that follows…

Figure 3: Hitchen S., (2022), Art as Statement? PPR 301 'Philosophy of Art', Second year and MA option [PowerPoint slide]

Figure 4: Hitchen S., (2022), Art as Statement? PPR 301 'Philosophy of Art', Second year and MA option [PowerPoint slide]. Image credit: Titian 'The Rape of Europa' (1559-1562)

Figure 5: Hitchen S., (2022), Art as Statement? PPR 301 'Philosophy of Art', Second year and MA option [PowerPoint slide]
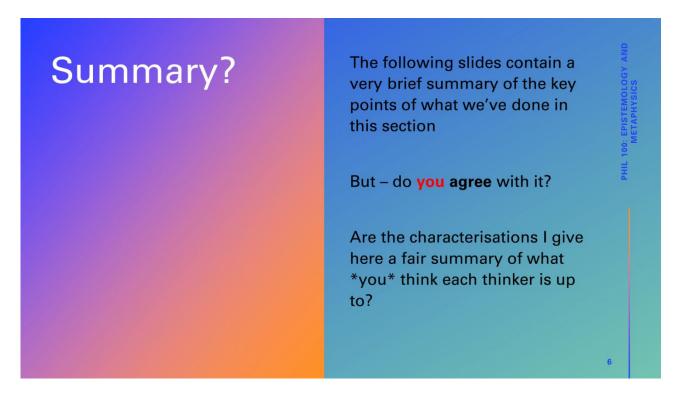

Figure 6: Hitchen S., (2024), A Return to Common Sense? The Real and the Perceived PHIL 100 'Knowledge and Reality' [PowerPoint slides]

Reflective activities allow for a simultaneous gap in content and scaffolding that reduces the risks implicit in this. Students are free to explore, but with the reassurance that they cannot go too far wrong, and that, though they may take different routes to get there, they will end

better than they started. They fulfil this role when first approached asynchronously within shared lecture notes, and take on a new purpose when revisited for revision purposes (a time where the temptation of learning as only-rote is particularly clear).

Whilst the decision to include reflective activities drew from past successes in seminar-group teaching and sought to bring some of the benefits of these into lectures, I have been pleased to discover that in some ways Ryle (1971, 2009) got there first, arguing that 'Thinking is trying to make up for a gap in one's education (1971, pg 217)… To ponder is to try to make up for un-instruction' (1971, pg 220) I think Ryle's reflections on teaching, learning, and thinking help to explain why creating clear gaps in provision can be a more successful approach to (engaged) learning than trying to ensure students have an artificially smooth or seemingly complete route to pursue through 'content delivery'. Such an approach may prove counter-productive where we seek to engage students with what we know to be the vivacity of a living-body of study as too much explanation stifles the possibility of exploration.

It is noticeable that Ryle and Midgeley both use particularly active metaphors in discussing learning and research that remind us of the opening up of new routes, vistas and experiences, rather than a route march along well-trodden paths. This contrast is drawn clearly in Mill's claim (quoted in Midgeley, 2018) that

> [Without…discussion] not only the grounds of the opinion are forgotten but too often the meaning of the opinion itself. Thus words which convey it cease to suggest ideas… Instead of a vivid conception and a living belief, there remain only a few phrases retained by rote; or, if any part, the shell and husk only of the meaning is retained, the finer essence being lost. (pg 62)

Indeed Midgeley proves inspirational in few words, pinning down the importance of teaching to understanding and developing expertise for academics themselves, as well as differing conceptions of the nature and value of research. Rather than thinking of knowing and researching as-like-to mining for nuggets of gold, she instead characterises gaining knowledge as an active chase, and one whose eventual outcome is, importantly, unclear:

> I try to follow the argument (as Plato said) wherever it runs, and I may finally catch it in a territory quite far from the one where it started. In fact arguments are altogether much more like rabbits than they are like lumps of gold. They can never be depended on to stay still (pg 16-17)

Real progress through and beyond a body of learning becomes possible where both lecturer and student accept the risk that, for a while at least, they may be in uncharted territory, and that navigating this is a shared task.

Conclusion

Including time for reflection, explicitly within the lecture-space, by removing some explanatory and descriptive content has proved to be effective for many students within the modules where I have included this. Students consistently mention these activities and their value in end of module evaluations (particularly noticeable is a feeling of inclusion, engagement and ownership produced by these), recruitment to these modules remains strong and attendance tends to be more consistent across the term, and the quality of work produced on these modules is often remarked upon by colleagues. It is a low cost intervention, in terms of lecturer time and university resources, with a largely positive outcome. It comes with risks for lecturers and students. These should not be ignored, nor downplayed. However, these are risks that I feel we should embrace. Many can be offset by ensuring that the activities themselves are clearly structured and have an important place in the module by adopting a holistic reflective approach across all materials and teaching spaces, and ensuring that students feel safe to take risks.

Embracing risk is challenging for students who already face a high-odds environment and for lecturers and institutions who must aim at particular measurable outcomes. But real learning requires real risk. As lecturers we should ideally be in a position to embrace this ourselves and prepare our students for this. In a non-ideal world, I have found that including reflective activities within a traditional lecture-seminar format is one way to do this in relative safety.

References

Midgely M., (2018). What Is Philosophy For?, Bloomsbury Academic

Ryle G., (2009) 'Teaching and Training', 'Thinking and Reflecting', Collected Papers Vol 2. Collected Essays 1929-1968, Tanney J (ed), Routledge

Ryle G., Thinking and Self-Teaching, Journal of Philosophy of Education, Vol5, Issue 2, 1971, pgs 216-228