EXPLORING STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE INFLUENCE OF ACTION LEARNING SETS, FOR LARGE LECTURE GROUPS, ON ENGAGEMENT WITH LEARNING

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Abstract

During early module health checks, students indicated they were less engaged in learning when in a large lecture format, leading to a negative influence on their module experience and achievement. Consequently, taking an Action Research approach, intervention took place to alter the mode of delivery from a large lecture to Action Learning Sets (ALS) with pre-lecture online content provided.

The notion of ALS as a tool of delivery aimed to facilitate student involvement and active learning. This offered a collaborative platform providing students with the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and learn from others (Head and McGill 2002). This Action Research study explored student perceptions of the influence of ALS on their engagement with learning, via a questionnaire and focus group interviews.

Preliminary findings suggest that students welcomed the idea of ALS and they ultimately felt more engaged with the module in a variety of ways. These included; positive engagement with lecture content, improved engagement in assessment and positive relationships with both lecturers and peers. Additionally, students highlighted limitations to the ALS approach to include; decreased contact time and frustration when commuting. Findings indicate several considerations for the use of ALS as an alternative to large group lectures and discussed further during the presentation.

Keywords: Action-Learning-Sets, pre-lecture, achievement, engagement, delivery.

1 INTRODUCTION

The engagement of larger cohorts is challenging at times for even the most experienced practitioners in Higher Education (Purcell 2011, p1). However, being new to the profession and having been fresh from teaching in secondary schools, meant the concept and reality of delivering to these large cohorts and ensuring that they had a positive learning experience was daunting initially.

Delivered as one large third-year cohort in a lecture, followed by seminars in the initial phases of the cross-semester module, these concerns came to fruition. After mid-module evaluation, students declared some concerns about the large lectures stating that they found it difficult to engage with the content. During delivery of the sessions, lecturers sensed that some students were not as involved as they perhaps ought to be. Many students appeared overly passive and it was difficult to gauge their understanding. These were thoughts echoed by both the module leader and another lecturer in the module team and research suggests this notion is not unique to this institution and increased lecture sizes mean students can become far from active participants (Biggs, 1999).

Teaching large groups successfully needs the same amount of commitment to teaching as smaller cohorts, with a requirement for lectures to be stimulating, motivating and engaging, with an enhanced need for lecturers to find ways to support student learning on a personalised and individual basis (Exeter et al. 2010; Kinsella, Mahon and Lillis 2017). More recently in education the attention has migrated towards an emphasis on the learning experience, with educators aiming to provide a conducive environment that caters for the diverse set of student needs and demands and; consequently, engagement in large lecture groups is an increasing area of concern (Coppola and Krajaik 2014; Carini 2006). Recent research suggests how active learning strategies are being used to engage but also support learners (Galleogos and Nakashima, 2017; Hudson et al. 2015; Kinsella, Mahon and Lillis 2017).

Teaching in smaller groups has become a popular strategy that lecturers are keen to undertake, partly due to the disparity that has formulated in opinions, surrounding the success of large lectures and their effectiveness in terms of student learning (Light and Cox 2001; Surgenor 2010). The debate has centred around many aspects including how lecturers can create a positive learning environment in large classes and the focus on the distinction between student-led versus lecturer-led sessions. Student-centred
approaches adopt the notion of assisting the students and how they perceive and understand concepts (Cannon and Newble 2002; Surgenor 2010).

Earlier research (Laurillard 2002; Brookfield and Preskill 1999) identifies the learning benefits of working in smaller groups and the interaction that can be obtained from this process. It is suggested that allowing dialogue between students, particularly in Higher Education, broadens their knowledge base, allows for higher order and higher level thinking to occur and allows students to formulate new ideas and opinions from collaborating with each other; particularly when linking theory to practice. The concept is not new as Vygotsky (1986) and Bruner (1996) identified that improved learning takes place when students socially interact and construct meaning themselves.

Limitations and challenges to smaller group teaching may arise, as some of the skills required to teach small groups are different to those that would be used in larger lectures (Surgenor 2010); particularly in terms of facilitation of learning, that is more constructivist in nature perhaps, than behaviourist traditional methods. Previously the lecturer would have been the font of all knowledge with the large lecture format being synonymous with university learning (Light and Cox 2001). Conversely, in recent times there is evidence to suggest that these large lectures are unfavourable by students, where fewer opinions and ideas are shared. Students come from a diverse range of experiences that shape their viewpoints and where it may be deemed that by having larger numbers it is more difficult for students to understand everyone’s perspectives or even want to give them in the first place (Brookfield and Preskill 1999).

Despite this, research-informed evidence demonstrates some benefits of group work in academic settings that supersede the disadvantages indicating that performance levels can increase over time (Gregory and Thorley 2013, Lavy 2017). Such success can be the result of group methods that encourage deeper learning, such as with action learning (Exley and Dennick 2009), as the groups initiate discussion and this has been shown to; “positively influence college students’ problem solving and critical thinking skills, as well as encourage persistence in their studies” (Galleogos and Nakashima 2017, p170).

An interesting way of organising academic group work is through ALS and is derived from the Action Learning model. Action Learning was first introduced by Revans in the early 1980’s, who was the founder of this type of activity, whereby knowledge and subsequent learning was gained through reflecting on actions and looking for future actions (Weinstein 1999, Maddison and Strang 2018). It is offered that this method of Action Learning is more student-centred allowing for transformative learning (Gibbs 1992) as students are more engaged, more self-aware and there is the promotion of experiential learning (Weinstein 1999).

Consequently, this action research focuses on this specific Level 6 cohort who are following the BSc Physical Education course. The aim is to determine whether students’ learning experiences changed because of the interventions made to explore the use of Action Learning Sets (ALS).

2 METHODOLOGY

Action research is a term to describe “research that will help the practitioner” (Baumfield, Hall and Wall 2013, p3) and is seen as powerful and valuable in forming professional awareness and ability to reflect on their practice within the working environment, from a local perspective (Taylor, Wilkie and Basar, 2008; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). It is perceived as being the most effective when the entire cycle can be completed, continued to develop and then another cycle begins (McTaggart 1996), however time restraints for this project were problematic due to students completing their studies imminently and therefore it was a challenge to achieve a full cycle and be able to fully implement change.

Data collection methods were triangulated with the use of a short questionnaire, followed up with two focus groups. An observation was conducted of an Action Learning Set session with a specific focus on the engagement of students.

Considerations of the use of questionnaires were identified prior to the study commencing as research suggests that questionnaires that are too long incite fatigue in the participants (Denscombe 2014, Thomas 2017) and as a result they were purposely made to be minimal in length and completed at the start of a session, where the researcher was temporarily out of the room, to avoid issues with power-relations.

The short questionnaire included a series of Likert-style questions and open ended questions. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2017, p480) find Likert Scales are “useful devices for the researcher, as they build in a degree of sensitivity and differentiation of response whilst still generating numbers” and
"provides a range of responses to a given question or statement" (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2017, p480). Some caution is offered in the use of a Likert Scale whereby the interpretation of results can be challenging and therefore the notion of how to word the questions so that they might appear more straightforward was considered, as was the idea that the scale should only focus on one thing at a time (Oppenheim 1992; Punch 2009; Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2017).

The open-ended questions added to the questionnaire were suitable for small-scale research such as this as they allow for a comment as well as ticking boxes (Oppenheim 1992). Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2017, p475) offer "open-ended responses might contain 'gems' of information that otherwise might not be caught in the questionnaire. Further it puts the responsibility for, and the ownership of, the data much more firmly to the respondents' hands". Hennink (2013) highlights a limitation to using solely the questionnaire method is that some clarity and depth may be missing from this approach. Therefore, a qualitative approach of focus groups was chosen as a second method to try and ensure this detail can be provided (Kreugar and Casey 2015). The topics for discussion were facilitated by asking three key questions and allowing for discussion to occur, enabling the approach to remain student-driven (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011).

The observation conducted in this study was qualitative and unstructured in nature; this is because the observation was conducted in a "more natural open-ended way" (Punch 2009, p154). The key observational aspect was focus on student engagement however the behaviour and events were documented as they unfolded in the session.

Thematic analysis was used for the open-ended questions and focus group data. This constant comparative method means that elements from were compared with other elements whilst coding in the form of colours was used as “the essential building blocks” (Thomas 2017, p245) in the analysis, with the concept deriving from an interpretive stance, with themes emerging from participants. However, a personal concern was whether the most important themes would be drawn out from the immense amount of data that had been collected for what is a relatively small scale action research project and where future considerations should go into selecting the most appropriate methods of data collection for the type of study (Lomax, 1994; McNiff and Whitehead, 2010; McNiff, 2016).

3 RESULTS/DISCUSSION

The discussions seek to complete the final stage of this action learning cycle based around reflection and evaluation. The means of data collection led to far more data than expected. Consequently, there were many themes that emerged from student’s perceptions, that highlight benefits and limitations to the use of ALS. The two key findings from the data have been selected to discuss in more detail that appear paramount to the notion of ALS as tool for engagement with learning, when teaching larger lecture groups specifically, and have an impact on personal future practice.

3.1 Improvements in learning, engagement and assessment from ALS group work and peer collaboration

This area has been selected as the focus for discussion as the notion of ALS centres around the collaboration of people working together to solve problems and develop learning (Revans 1998; Pedler 2005) which is essentially the aim of engaging students within this module content.

Participants found that bringing theory into practice, as part of the discussions through the group, was a valuable aspect and an area of strength of ALS, particularly where students gave examples from placemen that were echoed or challenged by others. This is a sentiment that is supported by research where there is the perception that a group environment becomes a support network, which is not usually replicated when students work individually and where a range of different opinions are put forward (Pfaff and Huddleston 2013, Lavy 2017;). Participants found this true for the ALS delivered as part of the module, with quotations centred around the group becoming a knowledge platform and where students build on one another’s perspectives.

There are challenges to the group work identified by the participants, where they suggested that there might be students who make more of an effort to offer input than others. Feedback suggested that it could be a highly frustrating aspect to be in an ALS with people who have perspectives that they do not agree with. Research identifies that not all individuals view groups as supportive and some students may not benefit from completing tasks in a group (Belbin, 2012; Bradley et al 2013). These findings impact on lecturers as it demonstrates the need to consider the way in which groups are formulated, which can
be challenging with large groups, and there is a need to be aware that some group dynamics have a negative connotation to learning (Gibbs 1992).

However, research reveals that with the high presence of group work undertaken in Higher Education, improved attainment levels are indicated when compared to the performance achieved individually (Johnson and Johnson, 2009; Gregory and Thorley 2013; Lavy 2017). It appears that students in this study felt the use of ALS were key to success and readiness for assessment. 100% of participants in the questionnaire indicated they feel more prepared for their assessment from ALS than in the larger lectures. This is supported by further comments in the focus groups; participants stated,

“you find going to lectures it’s almost like this lecture is not relevant to our assessment and that’s ultimately what we came to university for, is to get good grades and get a decent degree, it’s what like the learning sets are specifically catered for doing well in your assessments and doing well in regards to the specific learning outcome”.

Other participants agreed,

“I do believe that ALS will improve grades as well, I do believe that if we were in those lecture halls that we started with at the beginning of the year to where we are now then I don’t think the grades that I would have got would have been anything to what they are now…I feel like that is due to having smaller ALS definitely”.

Griffiths, Houston and Lazenbart (1995) convey that students engage and benefit from small groups and they provide value, as it allows concepts to be expanded on whilst complementing the content from lecture material. Additionally, it develops the student’s ability to reflect, collaborate with others and enhance life-long learning.

3.2 Lecture contact time

Students expressed in questionnaire responses that a limitation associated with running ALS in the module was time. “I found it easier to engage although sessions felt rushed at times and would benefit from being longer”. However, others in the focus groups found that reduced time was positive; and stated; “my engagement levels were so much higher in the Action Learning Sets, than in the lectures so for me it is a perfect way of learning. I know as we have said its only for a short amount of time but for me they are so worthwhile”.

Other benefits included students feeling that they were fully engaged for the whole session due to the shorter amount of time. This is supported by the questionnaire results where 100% of participants felt their concentration levels and focus had improved in the ALS rather than in the large lectures.

Further factors centred around the contact time students were receiving. A common theme was that the large lectures were too long with comments in the open-ended questions such as “I seem to lose focus easy” and “sessions were too long and required a lot of independence”. However, it was noted several times that students who commuted in to university felt they spent longer travelling in than how long they were in the ALS for; “I am travelling for 30 minute session, so that’s why I think sometimes people didn’t turn up, as quite a lot of us commute and although it was worth it when you got there, and I always turned up because I like the ALS- those people were just turning up for a 2 hour lecture before and might not feel like they are getting anything else”.

This feedback was surprising and not an area that had been considered previously. The potential impact on students might mean that they are not getting the contact time they feel they should or they may feel that the sessions are rushed and they are on a conveyor belt style of delivery where they are rushed out for the next ALS group to come in. The learner experience could be affected which could have a negative impact on engagement and learning and ultimately on student satisfaction (Kahn 2017). It is also worth considering the concept of more recent developments where students are viewed consumers and expect value for money from the university experience and therefore contact time, particularly with the increase in tuition fees (Woodall, Hiller and Resnick 2014; Moore, McNeill and Halliday 2011). However, it can be argued that the value students place on their lectures derives from what they take from them and what their priorities are during certain stages and pinch points at university (French and Kennedy 2017). Students in the focus groups felt similar, where in such a high-pressured time of year and where there is work to continue with outside of lectures that a short session allows them to gather what they need quickly and then can get on independently with tasks.

Recommendations for future practice indicates that the time allocation for ALS needs to potentially be revised for future occurrences of the module. This is to ensure both the session content can be delivered
in sufficient detail and that students feel they are gaining the contact time they should have, whilst making the journey into university when commuting purposeful and worthwhile.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The findings from this study indicate that ALS have had a positive influence on this specific cohort of students as part of a placement module, in their third-year studies. Evidently, the group work enhanced engagement, facilitated learning and allowed for more ownership and responsibility to be placed on the students. The ALS environment created, enabled students to feel supported in a more personal manner and guided in their learning, particularly in relation to assessments. Students saw the value in working within the groups and felt more engaged as a result.

Time factors limited some engagement as students felt sessions were rushed and more time was required to get through the content. However, they were generally averse to doing this in large lectures and this is an area that would benefit from further enquiry; as findings indicated there is a compelling argument to suggest that the modern-day student does not engage with this traditional format.

This study has impacted on the researchers' own practice as it confirms that the ALS were successful and should be added to the module planning for next year as an alternative to large lectures. There are considerations that will need to be acted upon to improve this further, such as, ensuring the time allocated for the sessions is sufficient to explore all areas of content without students feeling rushed and that they are gaining value for money in terms of their contact time; whilst bearing in mind those students that commute. It could be beneficial, as was suggested by students in the focus groups, to join two groups together and allow for a longer time frame. Room allocations and staff deployment will also need to be managed to ensure the success of these sessions, as ordinarily research suggests that group work is a luxury for lecturers who have timetabling restraints (Kinsella, Mahon and Lillis 2017).

Additionally, the concept of pre-lecture task value and completion is an area that is a recommendation for further study as some student perceptions aligned to the fact that the pre-lecture tasks were not always linked to the ALS sessions and the observation notes from tutors highlighted the need for session to include further reference to literature and worked examples of assessments.

The challenges to conducting this research include several factors. Firstly, it seems that for a small-scale project the triangulation of methods of data collection, means there is a large amount of data that is inherently difficult to process. There is the requirement to complete some follow up action research cycles to explore these concepts further, as areas that could have been further discussed include student's enhanced engagement with the module content and the positive relationships with lecturers and its influence on their engagement.

Limitations or areas for research development include highlighting the importance of conducting pilot studies for future projects and the quality of questions being asked. This is an area that would be changed, as the type of questions asked could have offered elements of bias. This may have been down to the closeness of the research and how involved the lecturer was with teaching this cohort.

REFERENCES


