

CLUSTER 5 COMMENTARY

ENHANCING STUDENT MOTIVATION, INTEREST AND PARTICIPATION: YOUNG ACADEMICS' EXPERIMENTS WITH ACTIVE LEARNING

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Stimulating interest is vital to education, as the level of a student's interest influences their attention, goals, ability to self-regulate, study strategies, and learning outcomes (Renninger and Hidi 2016). Despite its importance, there is little higher education research on how different forms of instruction promote students' interest. Therefore, it is gratifying to see these early career academics experimenting with ways to capture students' interest and promote participation.

Kašpárková hypothesised that active learning, connecting theory to practice, and real-world group activities would be motivating to students. Her evaluation supported these assumptions. She revised the objectives, learning activities and assessment in a personnel psychology course to highlight relevance to all students, not just those who intended a career in human resources. Introducing learning material before seminars reduced in-class lecturing and allowed time for discussions with peers, role plays, and facilitated problem-solving. Continuous assessments involved projects, presentations, and application of principles to real life scenarios. By framing her work in terms of Biggs' (1996) theory of constructive alignment, she explicitly recognised that students' behaviour is shaped not just by their interest in the subject, but by how they will be assessed. Thus, aligning assessments to revised objectives is an important principle for supporting student engagement. While I would have liked to have seen more detail of the revised objectives, as the revised objectives capture what she assumes will interest students, her attention to the overall system of alignment in a short report is commendable.

Padrtová also assumed that active learning would stimulate students' interest and, in turn, learning. She designed three activities for each ninety-minute session: a Skype call with an expert on the subject, student discussions in pairs, and interactive mini-lectures. Bringing in expert speakers by Skype is an unusual and promising innovation. While guest lectures are not new, technology now makes it easier to bring in experts from around the world for short interactions with students. Using peer observation, she was able to document the extent and nature of interaction in each of the three types of activities, showing that teacher-to-student interaction was most frequent, followed by student-to-teacher and student-to-student. She surveyed both students' interest and knowledge to assess the extent to which students were interested in and learned from each of the three types of activities.

While the pair work generated lively discussion between peers, students found the expert mini-lectures via Skype and the interactive, teacher-led mini-lectures to be most interesting. They also learned the most from those activities they found most interesting, consistent with research on interest (Renninger and Hidi 2016). However, higher degrees of interaction alone were not

associated with higher interest or learning. Again, this finding, though counter to Padrtová's hypothesis, is consistent with the literature on interest (Bergin 1999; Rotgans and Schmidt 2011). The nature of the task set for students (i.e. the extent to which it is novel, prompts thinking and questioning, is controversial or surprising, and relevant and important) seems to matter more than the classroom format itself (e.g. whether it is paired discussions, or interactive lectures).

Voca also focused on interaction, though the stated and evaluated goals were to enhance interaction and higher order cognitive learning, rather than interest or motivation per se. To overcome student passivity in lectures, he introduced two four-minute pair-work discussions per lecture. The innovation was successful in that students engaged easily and reported that the activities were useful for their learning. The learning outcomes were more positive for the group who engaged in pair-work during six of the fifteen lectures than the control group who did not. Although the pair work seemed to contribute to more participation in the plenary session, students were generally focused on comprehension and understanding, rather than higher order questions. This result may be because of the nature of the task set for the pair work, which required students to share their lecture notes to fill in gaps and ask questions that clarified concepts. As with Padrtová, attending to interaction alone is not sufficient. One also needs to attend to the cognitive demands of the tasks (e.g. are they focusing on comprehension, application, evaluation or synthesis). To the extent that Voca is not fully satisfied that students engaged at higher levels of thinking, it is also worth reconsidering the assessments, by setting the innovation within the wider framework of constructive alignment (Biggs 1996), as Kašpárková did.

Each of the three cases represent impressive accomplishments for early career educators. All three teachers succeeded at designing thoughtful innovations that supported student interaction, participation and learning. The authors clearly stated the goals of their innovations, developed appropriate teaching methods to address those goals, designed bespoke evaluation tools, and reflected thoughtfully on the outcomes. These innovations offer lessons for all educators about how to increase student interaction and how to use cognitively stimulating activities that capture students' interest, such as applications to the real world and interactions with leading experts on the topic. Taken together, they also remind readers to consider the whole system of instruction and how teaching activities are aligned with objectives and assessment.

References

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