Investigation into the Efficacy of Dialogic Learning on Non-Vocal Classroom Participants

Background and Use of the Resource

This resource has been developed to aid Higher Education (HE) professionals who are engaged in teaching. It is aimed at those who teach both undergraduate and postgraduate taught students.

Dialogic learning is a proven and effective method of learning support. It cultivates both better subject comprehension, as well as essential peripheral skills such as critical reasoning and argumentation (Alexander, 2020). Thus, inclusion in HE pedagogy could prove highly beneficial for students and lecturers alike.

The resource is designed to be non-exhaustive and flexible. The techniques and ideas contained within are to be picked, chosen and experimented with by the lecturer or tutor. You may find that what works for one class, will not work for another and vice versa. This is a natural part of the process.

What is absolutely critical for HE is that students must take responsibility for their own learning. Dialogic learning can help cultivate this through cross-class discussion, as shall be seen below.

When to Implement the Techniques

It is recommended that the techniques are utilised early so that students adapt to the learning modality early. It also gives time for the lecturer to find the techniques that work best with their students.

However, it is recommended that the first step to undertake is the creation and embedding of ground rules for talk in the classroom. For example, these rules may include full discussion in group work, respectful challenge and building upon others' ideas. This enables students to elaborate both upon their own - and others' – thinking, creating dynamic, deep and analytical discussions. (Hardman, 2019)

One resource for ground rules for talk is in the following link from CEDiR:

https://www.edudialogue.org/resources/ground-rules/

While the rules included there are child-focused, they are adaptable for an older audience also. A further link to a video discussing these points is included here:

https://www.edudialogue.org/resources/introductory-video-series/

This may help the practitioner to understand the "spirit" of the rules and adapt them to their class accordingly.

Techniques for Lecture Groups (or Large Group Sessions)

The challenge for these groups is that with groups the size of lecture groups (the author defines this as anything over 30 students), there may appear to be little opportunity for openly dialogic learning. This is simply down to the distanced interaction between lecturer and student, as well as student and peers.

However, this is not to say that dialogic interaction cannot happen. Indeed, research suggests that silent students do not necessarily equate to passive students. (Engin, 2016) Therefore, it is possible for the lecturer to engage the student in internalised dialogic learning through the provision of open questions or thought experiments. This enables students to begin to create the dialogic learning process internally. For example, Alexander notes the idea of "learning talk" and that such talk includes, *inter alia*, "Imagine, Explore, Analyse, Evaluate, Question…" (Alexander, 2018). While these are practised primarily outwardly, these activities can be conducted within the mind of the student. It also helps to internally model the dialogic classroom so that students are prepared to engage in small group sessions such as seminars.

The question remains therefore, how does a lecturer of HE professional begin the internalised dialogic process in large group sessions? One technique used successfully by this author is that of the "open question." In this technique, the lecturer puts an open question to the students for them to consider. The author's experience is in the area of law, specifically corporate and financial law. Thus, an example in this context would be:

> "Should International Investment Law be involved in any way with Anti Money Laundering/Counter Terror Finance efforts, or should they be mutually exclusive?"

This is given in a lecture and so an answer at that point is unexpected, and also unnecessary. What is beneficial here is that students can begin to explore, analyse and evaluate the question using their internal dialogue. Revisiting this question in small group sessions will then enable the student to externalise the dialogue and test their reasoning against others'.

A further technique to stimulate dialogue and dialogic learning is that of Talking Points. These are provocative statements given to students who must, in turn, discuss and present their standpoint. The points are not closed questions in that they have a "right" answer. They are deliberately open so that students learn how to reason, formulate an argument and articulate that argument. This is a very helpful technique for HE students where a great emphasis is placed on development of these skills. See this link for a video on Talking Points:

https://www.edudialogue.org/resources/introductory-video-series/

Seminar and Small Group Techniques

In some sense, cultivating dialogic learning in small groups is easier than the challenge HE professionals face in lectures and large group sessions. After all, small groups allow lecturers to, *inter alia*, gauge verbal and non-verbal cues as to the efficacy of the dialogic (and indeed non-dialogic) learning process on the students. (Harrison et al, 2018) It also allows them to engage students in teacher-led dialogic learning. (T-SEDA pack)

However, the challenge is to pitch such techniques appropriately for use in an HE classroom. In great part, these techniques are adaptive to the level of content taught. Thus, if you are teaching first year undergraduates and taught masters students, the techniques will not differ greatly, but will mould around the level of content provided.

One point to note is the transition point from secondary or further education to HE. Secondary education in the UK, rightly or wrongly, focuses heavily upon teacher-led pedagogy, as noted by Nick Gibb MP (Department of Education, 2017). However, as students enter HE they are expected to begin to bear the onus for their own learning (self-directed learning). (Garrison, 1997) Therefore, the level of teacher led intervention in these modalities may well be greater where students have not yet appreciated that the learning is in their own hands and still expect to be "spoon-fed" information. This is not to say, however, that these techniques are inappropriate at the initial stages of HE. Indeed, using these techniques early could help students to more quickly grasp the key skills involved in self-directed learning methodologies such as critical thinking. (Garrison, 1997) However, it may be that lecturers will need to help students with engaging with dialogic techniques through the use of greater interventionist techniques such as tutor prompts (see below.)

A further point to note is that small groups provide the greatest opportunity for cultivating the cross-class discussion noted above, and helping students take charge of their own learning. The following techniques will help HE practitioners to create this kind of student-led learning.

Technique A – Group Work (Small Groups and Plenaries)

This technique is perhaps the "bread and butter" of dialogic teaching. (T-SEDA Pack) The method is simple, the tutor assigns the groups a task, whether that is the discussion of, and preparing an answer for, a question posed to the class. This then allows the students to explore the ideas and rehearse them in a safe and supportive environment prior to sharing with the wider class.

The tutor must remind students of the ground rules for talk (discussed above). In particular they must remind students to fully participate in the group discussion and build upon each other's ideas.

In some circumstances, it can be prudent for the tutor to assign roles within the group (e.g leader, presenter, scribe etc.) However, it is important again that this is pitched appropriately. The author has found in his own practice that it is more effective, certainly at

more advanced stages of HE, to let students work this out among themselves. Again, this helps to promote the self-led learning skills in HE.

It is important to monitor the groups in order to ensure dialogic discussion is happening. If it is not, some tutor led intervention may be required to stimulate conversation. It is critical, however, that the lecturer does not just give the answer and instead encourages discussion and evaluation using prompting questions (see below).

Either at the end of group work sessions, or instead of group work sessions, the lecturer reconvenes the class for a plenary discussion. Where small groups have been utilised, they act as a microcosm of a large group plenary. In the plenary each group's thoughts can be articulated, challenged and built upon to consolidate understanding.

What is desirable – indeed preferable – is that the tutor or lecturer takes a back seat in these interactions. In HE, students take charge of their own learning. This should be encouraged within the group discussions so that students discuss the topic amongst themselves. One modality of encouraging this could be set within the ground rules for talk. For example, the rules could stipulate that when engaging in group discussion, students must take responsibility for the learning of all group members, helping those members who may have less of an understanding of the material to gain a better comprehension.

However, if needed, the tutor also engages as well as encourages engagement. The lecturer, being the expert in the subject, is best placed to challenge, build and encourage discussion around the key materials. They must remember thought, that as well as acting as an expert guide they are a facilitator of dialogue. The lecturer clarifies and articulates points, but does not simply give the correct answer. Instead they guide the students' discussion and reasoning to the logical endpoint.

Technique B – Tutor Prompts

This technique has been alluded to several times above and is useful to encourage student engagement, as well as elicit the correct course of discourse. Again, the method is simple but requires the lecturer to be in command of the material and have an endpoint they wish the students to reach.

Simply, the tutor, rather than giving answers, uses interjections and interrogatives to prompt students. For example, where students do not participate, a tutor can engage sections of the class, particular groups or, in a last resort, individual students, through opening a question such as:

> *"Group A, what were your thoughts on the topic?"*

Or perhaps:

> (Motioning to a side of the room) *"This side of the class, what did you think of Group A's idea?"*

However, tutor prompts serve more purposes than simply encouraging class participation. The prompting process help to clarify ideas for the whole class and indeed the student who offered the idea. For example, you could say:

"Ok, that's an interesting idea. Could you elaborate upon…"

The usefulness is threefold. First, it helps the student to clarify their own logic and understanding. Secondly, it helps the class to understand the point, providing a base on which to build, concur, challenge etc. Thirdly, it helps the tutor to gauge how the student is understanding and synthesising the materials.

Indeed, the tutor's intervention could be more akin to playing *advocatus diaboli* and offer students a different perspective through respectful challenge. Thus, for example a tutor can ask:

"That's one way to look at it. But have you thought about the ramifications of…"

This again solidifies the critical analytical skills of the student by presenting them with a challenging opinion. The nature of HE is that different opinions and contexts are presented to students and it is their job to consider all sides and formulate their own, reasoned opinion (again different to regular secondary education which is often a simple dichotomy between a right and wrong answer.)

Of course, the way that a tutor prompts will vary, the above are mere examples. The T-SEDA pack provides a set of prompt responses, of which it is of the author's opinion that in the context of HE, Invitation to Build, Challenge and Invitation of Reasoning are the most critical (T-SEDA). What is particularly important is that the *students* challenge and build etc. The tutor may need to prompt this, being quite explicit in what is being asked. For example, the tutor could say:

"Who agrees that the point X just made is indeed the case and why? Does anyone disagree and what are the reasons for disagreeing?"

The reason for this is the nature of HE once again, being a place where students take responsibility for their learning and develop the skills of critical thought. These prompt bases form a sound core which allow tutor interventions to uphold and promote the values of HE.

Technique C – Incremental Evaluative Feedback

Perhaps this is less of a technique and more a point of good practice. However, utilisation of incremental evaluative feedback is critical to gauge how students are finding your dialogic techniques and reasons why students may not be engaging as fully as they could.

HE tutors are in the position of being able to engage with reasoning adults who can give thoughtful opinions on their experience. They are also free to engage in such feedback with relative autonomy, thus tailoring their questionnaires to the data requirement. This freedom is something that is often taken for granted yet can prove hugely fruitful for improving dialogic practice.

Therefore, the final technique is the suggestion that lecturers capitalise on this freedom. This does not have to be in the form of a lengthy questionnaire (as is found for example in mid-module evaluations). Indeed, it can be as simple as a quick question after group work such as:

"How did everyone find that group work? Did it help your understanding?"

Alternatively, it can be through anonymous feedback at the end of a session such as through a suggestion box or a sticky note with a piece of feedback attached to a table at the exit.

What is critical, however, is that the tutor sufficiently bounds the feedback requested. For dialogic learning, the lecturer could ask a single, specific question for short feedback such as:

"Has the plenary discussion today helped your understanding of…"

Or for a litmus test of student participation in groups:

"Would you say you engaged as much as you could have in the group task today? If not, why not? Could you resolve to contribute more next time"

One useful resource for helping with this kind of feedback is the groupwork self-rating scale found in the T-SEDA pack 2C and 2D (T-SEDA). These are useful for students, both individually and as a group, to consider their participation critically and encourage deeper introspection.

Targeting feedback to specific areas of dialogic learning helps the tutors to make incremental adaptations to their dialogic technique. This helps their use of the techniques to improve, as well as adapting their techniques to the needs of the class more effectively.

Conclusion and the "Golden Rule"

This pack has sought to outline some fundamental techniques for HE professionals to utilise in their practice. The author has tested these on his own students with good results. Therefore, it is reasonable to say that these will have some traction in other areas of HE (outside of the author's own expertise in law.) However, there are a plethora of dialogic techniques available outside of the ones highlighted here which may be more or less effective for HE contexts.

This brings us to the "Golden Rule":

Be flexible and adaptive.

Just because one or two of the techniques do not work immediately for your class does not mean that dialogic learning techniques are of no use. It may just be that your students do not respond to that particular technique or that they are not yet used to new ways of interacting – change takes time. Thus, persevere, try another one or adapt the technique to the students' needs.

However, always bear in mind the goal of HE: the development of self-led learners and critical thinkers. Dialogic learning, used properly, can certainly help with this. Avoid the temptation to simply give answers and instead help guide the discussion to either its logical endpoint (if there is one) or to a natural close (where students have exhausted their lines of thought and questioning).

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