Relevance and red herrings

Collection: Small group teaching

Resource: Thinking about seminars

Approximate duration

1-2 hours

Learning outcomes

To be able to weigh up and think through your own assumptions about seminar teaching, and to focus on what it is you want to achieve.

Introduction

The subtle dynamic between members of the group, text, tutor, and circumstances means that every seminar is likely to come out different. That of course is part of the joy of learning. Difference, of course, might mean simply that some seminars are terrible, some workaday, some inspired. But while you as tutor are certainly not omnipotent, you do have a special role in trying to create and defend the conditions for a modicum of success.

The activity

1. Watch the video of a seminar on *Oliver Twist* run by Greg Tate (University of Surrey) for second-year students.
2. Write down your thoughts on how you would run a seminar on the same material for either first-year or third-year students. You may like to use the following headings:
    o Pre-seminar preparation
    o Structure of seminar

        o   Post-seminar tasks

Possible Approaches

We'd like to use this example to think about the matter of relevance. The strength of an agreed definition of relevance varies from subject to subject, and from one topic or method to another within the same subject. English Language has fairly sharply defined criteria for relevance, English Literature generally much more fuzzy ones. Students and academics are likely to have diverging views on what counts as relevant. We know from interviews and experience that students often say that what they value about English is the exchange of 'opinions', and even that all opinions are valid. How do you as tutor define or communicate your view of what is 'on topic'? And given that after all something students are doing in seminars is testing the sayable in their subject, how do you deal with what you perceive as irrelevance without making an individual feel put down, or the whole group clam up to avoid a similar implied rebuke? We think that - like Greg Tate here - tutors usually try to do it by welcoming and drawing out contributions that they value. But that of course leaves students drawing deductions from the fact that other contributions may be not so warmly welcomed or might be rapidly glossed over. Another thing tutors may do (not so visible in this example) is to rapidly re-phrase a point in such a way as to make it into the point that they, the tutor would prefer to have been made. There are no right or wrong answers: the important thing is a level of awareness of process and a level of self-awareness of your own licensed role as the enabler (or inhibitor) of the group conversation.

On a related point, you might care to think about the nature of the forces which make either for coherence or for incoherence in the seminar context. Both students and tutors are likely to have an interest in ensuring that something is felt to have happened or been rounded off by the end of a seminar. That is why some tutors habitually finish a seminar by summarising the discussion - it gives students something to write down and take away. But might we sometimes go too far in our attempts to ensure that level of closure? There could be a complicated double game happening here, students doing what they think tutors want, tutors doing what they think students want. Ought we as tutors sometimes to give the example of holding possibilities open? Or even giving time to something that might on the face of it seem peripheral to the task in hand?

Relationship to the Professional Standards Framework

- **Core Knowledge 2:** Appropriate methods for teaching and learning in the subject area and at the level of the academic programme
- **Professional Values 3:** Commitment to the development of learning communities
- **Professional Values 4:** Commitment to encouraging participation in higher education, acknowledging diversity and promoting equality of opportunity

More information about the Professional Standards Framework can be obtained from the summary factsheet in the *Subject & Pedagogy* collection in HumBox.
http://humbox.ac.uk/2731/

Resources in the Small group teaching collection

- Small group teaching: introduction to the collection
- Seminar design: resource overview
    - o Seminar design: individual activity
    - o Seminar design: group activity
- Peer reviewing a seminar: Oliver Twist : resource overview
    - o Peer review: individual activity
    - o Adjusting the level
- Peer reviewing a seminar: The Bonesetter's Daughter : resource overview
    - o A complex dialogue
    - o Negotiated authority
- Thinking about seminars: resource overview
    - o **Relevance and red herrings (*you are here)**
    - o Weighing up the elements
- Nightmare scenarios: resource overview
    - o Facing up to nightmares: group activity
    - o Comparing notes
- Transformative writing: resource overview
    - o Transformations: individual activity

- o Transformations: group activity