

Student Led Learning at UWS – It can work.

The Proposal:

For the Social Policy department to pilot a one hour long peer facilitated study/discussion group. Running in alternate weeks to seminars, third year students would steer discussion for second year students who want to explore issues raised in lectures and from their independent reading.

"There are many different ways of learning; teaching is only one of them. We learn a great deal on our own, in independent study or play. We learn a great deal interacting with others informally -- sharing what we are learning with others and vice versa."
(Ackoff and Greenberg - 'Turning Learning Right Side Up')

The Reason:

As a widening access university, UWS has a diverse student body. Adult returners who are getting to grips with academic life again, teenagers leaving an exam/knowledge retention based secondary curriculum and college leavers moving from a class of twenty to a class of two hundred. Many will be in work or have family commitments and their degree will be a part of their life but not the sole focus.

"There are some seminars that I enjoy more than others. Those that I enjoy are the ones where we actually have discussions! I feel that I gain far more knowledge from the subject matter in an informal setting."
(Fiona Robertson, Second Year Student)

Lectures and seminars are rightly the staple of Social Science at UWS. They are where academics set the tone for the trimester and guide students on reading and assessment.

An opt-in, student only discussion group would give second year students finding their own voice in academia the chance to reflect on course content, challenge their own assumptions and feel comfortable writing more challenging and dynamic essays in an academic, guided setting but with peers. If successful it is easily transferrable across modules and will add measurable value to the student experience.

"The ability to think critically about experiences is what is required for people to transcend their own boundaries and education could provide the necessary tools for this"
(Sinclair - "Barriers to adult education in the East End of Glasgow")

UWS is launching a new volunteer system in 2011/2012 which will see students who take on more academic activities recognised on their student transcript upon graduation in the form of modular attainment. This pilot, with input from Kim Macintyre (Quality Officer) will give facilitators the opportunity to gain skills and is an opportunity for the Social Policy department to lead the university in supporting the new scheme and students who want to do more.

The Criticism

"Students don't care"

A student wrote this proposal. The assertion that students don't care can only legitimately be made if students have been asked what they care about and the answer was 'nothing'. Assuming that UWS students are one homogenous group with a solitary set of needs and priorities is wrong.

"One student-centred approach to curriculum design, Problem-Based Learning (PBL), allows for some choice within a programme of areas that students may study. It allows students to set some of their own learning objectives/outcomes, dependent on prior knowledge."
(O'Neill and McMahon - Student Centred Learning: What does it mean for Lecturers and Students?)

Linda MacKay and Lynn Poole's Social Policy work is intellectually stimulating, inspiring, thought provoking and student award winning. The course content is relevant to people's lives now and this student led group would give people the chance to establish what they want out of the module.

People do and should leave the lecture hall with more questions than answers. Questions like:

"- The lecture about the Housing Act fascinated me - how did it affect people in East Kilbride?
- In the seminar we discussed the Third Way - I wonder what happened to the Socialist movement after the election?
- The reforms to the Welfare act sound harsh - who are we talking about when we discuss those on disability allowance?"

Supporting this proposal means encouraging people to follow up on those questions through discussion, independent reading and observation of the world as a social scientist.

The Class:

One hour in length made up of two thirty minute discussions, run by volunteer third year students.

The delivery method of the session is completely open for discussion and flexibility of content is imperative to allow access for those who buy in late. It should work to Brandes and Ginnis (1986) principles of student centred learning which states:

- The learner has full responsibility for her/his learning
- Involvement and participation are necessary for learning
- The relationship between learners is more equal, promoting growth, development
- The teacher becomes a facilitator and resource person
- The learner experiences confluence in their education (affective and cognitive domains flow together)
- The learners see themselves differently as a result of the learning experience.

The first half hour of group discussion would allow individual students the chance to raise their own questions and set their agenda for the coming weeks based on lecture and seminar content.

If a student decides they want to learn more about social housing stock in their area, the class would be the place for them to vocalise their ideas, expand them and be supported by peers in turning them into academic contributions.

Conversation for the first half hour would be stimulated by facilitators after guidance from Linda MacKay.

The second half hour would link learning to how students see themselves in society but move them towards evidenced based arguments and observations. Using selected newspapers, television and radio or articles they have brought as the basis for discussion, students would find the argument they

wanted to support/oppose in buzz groups and spend fifteen minutes the week after making the case, reflecting on the lecture content/seminars.
Rather than be directed to recommended reading in this instance, students would work together to find evidence and counter arguments.

"In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation."
(Friere - Pedagogy of the Oppressed)

Conclusion

The Social Policy department has the potential to make a positive change for students by piloting a method of teaching which is already used across disciplines at Glasgow, Stirling and Caledonian and will help a diverse student body progress as academic thinkers and members of society. Dedicating time to a new method of *learning* for students is progressive and in line with what many educational theorists think will make stronger graduates and more engaged students.

This is a no cost, low risk and time measured attempt to make a difference to the lives of students. If absolutely no one attends ever, then some people's time will have been wasted. That is the worst case scenario.

Time lost on an attempt to break the inertia of poor student engagement cannot be described as a waste at all.

Next Steps

- Feedback from Linda Mackay on the proposal.
- Discussion of viability with John Rodger.
- Structure/Outline of classes week by week.
- Identification of third years willing to participate in facilitation.
- Structure of an induction/guidance session for facilitators.

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