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Highlight:

USING KOLB'S LEARNING CYCLE AS A BASIS FOR SEMINAR-STRUCTURING IN ENGLISH
LITERATURE

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SHORT TITLE

Using Kolb's learning cycle in English literature teaching

ABSTRACT

This paper explores how Kolb's experiential learning cycle can be used as a way of structuring seminars in English literature in order to bring students towards a greater understanding of literary texts. Using the example of teaching Lord Byron's poem 'The Island', it explains how both students' understanding of a specific text and their core skills can be developed through a series of structured activities that relate to specific stages of the learning cycle.

KEYWORDS

Kolb, English literature, Byron, Biggs

In this short paper, I wish to reflect on how I have used Kolb's experiential learning cycle¹ as a way of structuring my seminars, in order to lead students towards a deeper understanding of literary texts. As an example, I will discuss a seminar I taught for the core Level 5 English module *Reading Literature*, which focused on Byron's 'The Island': a long poem which tells a story based on the mutiny on the Bounty in 1789. This is a text that first year students often find challenging, and when I first taught it, shortly after I began working at Keele, I did not feel that they had really come to grips with it by the end of the session. I therefore decided to

¹ Described in Marilla Svinicki and Nancy Dixon, 'The Kolb Model Modified for Classroom Activities,' *College Teaching* 35.4 (1987): 141-3.

revise my approach and try to find new ways of helping students to engage with the material.

My Intended Learning Outcomes for this seminar were:

- To give students practice in close reading texts
- To get students to think about the way in which ideas taken from close reading can work as a way of illuminating larger thematic issues in texts.
- To get students to reflect on the concepts of gender and heroism, as they relate to Byron's 'The Island'.

Given the structure of Kolb's experiential learning cycle, I decided that we would start from the students' concrete experiences, which in this case were both their experiences of having read the text for that day, and also their experiences of having read or watched other literary or filmic texts in the past. At the start of the seminar, I asked them to tell me what their reactions to the poem were. Several reported that they had had difficulties in understanding the plot and structure of 'The Island'. They felt that Byron did not seem to be interested in telling a clear, easily comprehensible story. Instead, they complained, his narrative tended to jump around, moving from one scene and set of characters to another without explaining what the connection (thematic or temporal) between these scenes might be. Once the students had shared their responses with me and the rest of the class, I encouraged them to move on from this stage to the next stage of Kolb's Cycle – that of reflective observation. My aim was to help them to turn their initial, largely instinctual and emotional responses to the text into more considered, intellectual ones. We discussed their reactions, and I encouraged them to try to think of the text not as flawed (i.e. not doing what a text 'should' do) but rather as simply contrary to their expectations. We discussed why Byron might have wanted to tell his story in this manner and, if telling a clear story was not his main objective, what that objective might have been instead. During this part of the class, we moved on to the Kolb's stage of abstract conceptualisation, suggesting theories for what Byron's motives might have been, and what effect on the reader he might have wanted his poem to have, given the techniques that he employed. After this discussion, we moved on to active experimentation, as students moved into pairs for a close reading exercise, and tried to apply the theories we had come up with to a specific passage of the text itself.

As well as considering Kolb when structuring the class, I also took into consideration the ideas put forward in Biggs' 'Approaches to the Enhancement of Tertiary Teaching'

(1989).² In that article, Biggs argues that for the most successful ‘deep’ learning to take place, the following four components must be in place:

1) Motivational context.

It is important that students are motivated to learn. To add to this, studies have suggested³ that students learn best when they have a sense of intrinsic motivation, rather than merely extrinsic. In other words, they need to find their studies inherently interesting and satisfying, and understand the relevance of both learning goals and learning processes, in order to achieve their fullest potential.

2) Learner Activity.

Biggs suggests that students learn best when they are active rather than passive. Surface learning may be acquired by simply listening; deep learning begins to occur when students begin to be actively involved, analysing and testing out their own ideas and theories.

3) Interaction with others.

Discussing their thoughts, both with peers and with a tutor, requires students to clarify their ideas and to justify and defend them to others. This, in turn, helps them to improve their own thinking.

4) A well-structured knowledge base.

New learning should begin where previous learning ended. New ideas need to be built upon the foundations of established ideas in the student’s mind, and so learning programmes should aim to relate new knowledge to previous knowledge.

Motivation is a potentially contentious issue in pedagogic theory. Critics have debated⁴ over the extent to which it is possible to create a sense of intrinsic, as opposed to extrinsic, motivation in someone else. Nevertheless, I hoped to boost the students’ intrinsic motivation by encouraging them at the start of the class to think of the set text as a kind of puzzle that needed to be solved (or, at least, investigated further). I asked them, ‘Why has Byron written the poem in this way? What effect does he create, and why?’ Through this, I

² ‘Teaching that gave evidence of deep learning contained in sharp form one or more of the following: an appropriate motivational context; a high degree of learner activity; interaction with others, both peers and teachers; a well structured knowledge base.’ John Biggs, ‘Approaches to the Enhancement of Tertiary Teaching,’ *Higher Education Research and Development*, 8.1 (1989): 17.

³ See Maarten Vansteenkiste, Willy Lens and Edward Deci, ‘Intrinsic Versus Extrinsic Goal Contents in Self-Determination Theory: Another Look at the Quality of Academic Motivation,’ *Educational Psychologist* 41.1 (2006): 19–31.

⁴ See, for example, Kentaro Fujita and Karen E. MacGregor, ‘Basic Goals Distinctions,’ which argues that ‘intrinsic motivation cannot be created where none exists.’ In *Goal-Directed Behaviour*, ed. Henk Aarts and Andrew Elliot (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2012): 100.

hoped to increase their sense of curiosity and desire to know and understand the text more fully.

I took learner activity into account by building in exercises which required active thought and engagement with the text. In the latter half of the seminar I set students a close reading passage to analyse with a partner, which required them to find links between the close reading and the larger thematic issues in the text that we had previously been discussing. This activity also brought in interaction – both between each student and his or her close reading partner and between the students and me, and the students and the rest of the class - in the whole-group discussion period that followed the close reading. Students had to explain and rationalise the ideas they had developed in the close reading exercise to the rest of the group.

Given the importance of building upon the students' established knowledge-base, I tried throughout the class to emphasise the way in which that week's text might be linked to other texts that the students had encountered, both on this module and more generally. For example, I showed them a clip of the 1962 film of *The Mutiny on the Bounty*, and encouraged them to compare that film text with Byron's poetic one. I asked, what kind of effect did the film aim to create? How did that compare or contrast with the kind of effect that Byron aimed to create? This was an effective approach, as it got students thinking and talking about the way in which the same basic story can be told in a number of different ways. They discussed how the film version emphasised action, adventure and excitement, whereas Byron's poem seemed to deliberately leave out the more action-orientated sequences, preferring to concentrate on establishing a sense of the island paradise and an alternative to heroic martial action in its depiction of the desirability of a state of peace, love and harmony. In this way, we built on the students' own knowledge of action-themed films and books, and explored how Byron seems deliberately to reject the approach to his subject that he might have been expected to take.

Overall, the session seemed to go very well. The students started from a position of some confusion and, in one or two cases, even resentment towards the text, which they complained was 'boring', 'slow' and 'hard to follow'. However, as the class proceeded they began to find ways of moving beyond this initial position. Through group discussion, guided by focused questions from me, they came to realise that it was not that they were failing to read the poem 'correctly', or that the poem was 'bad', but that it was simply that the poem did not fit their mental model of how a story about a mutiny 'should' be told. This realisation

represented a threshold concept⁵: once the students had grasped the idea that the meaning of a text comes not just from the story it tells but also from *how* the story is told, they were able to use this knowledge to develop a much more satisfactory understanding of the text. By the end of the class, they were engaged in ‘deep’ learning: rather than merely ‘skat[ing] along the surface of the text’⁶, as they had been doing to start with, they were showing their understanding of the text’s larger issues and themes through their ability to engage in close textual analysis that supported the theories about the text that they had developed previously. Their responses showed that the ILOs for the session had been achieved: the students gained more experience at close reading and were able to make links between their close reading activity and the larger thematic issues in the poem, ultimately coming to interesting conclusions about Byron’s treatment of the themes of gender and heroism.

⁵ This is defined by Jan H.F. Meyer and Ray Land in ‘Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge (2): Epistemological considerations and a conceptual framework for teaching and learning,’ *Higher Education* 49 (2005): 373–388

⁶ Marton and Säljö (1976), quoted in John Biggs, ‘What the Student Does: Teaching for Enhanced Learning’, *Higher Education Research and Development* 18.1 (1999) 59.