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Serendipity and the Impact of Tiny Innovations

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I have been struck recently by the role that coincidence has in classroom innovation, and by the impact of even minor innovations; I have come to see the need for me to recognize and embrace both of these realities.

For many years, I have asked the undergraduate students in one of my modules to give formal seminar presentations, with handouts and presentation slides. The module is entitled 'Packaging Literature', and it is a third year module with three hours teaching per week. The module looks at the ways in which literature is packaged – physically, cultural and socially – through the ages and asks questions about the value and use of literature in society.

These presentations were, until recently, formative exercises, and so students would receive feedback sheets and a mark from me, but this would not count towards their final mark for the module. Students start to give presentations from Week Two of the term, with two student presentations per week. This early start can be daunting, but it gives each student the chance to present during the term.

Year after year, student seminar groups for this module became increasingly keen on these presentations. I think this was in part because I become more adept at supporting them in the art of giving presentations, but I think it was also because I challenged them more as time went on. For the last five years, I have been asking these students not just to give a presentation,

but also to finish with three questions that they would like the seminar group to discuss. Leading this discussion now forms part of the task of presenting.

I developed the student role in each seminar in this way partly in response to their career goals (many of them aspire to careers in which they could be expected to instruct, or lead group discussions) and partly as a way to test the depth of their knowledge. It is tough, but they really need to know their material well in order to facilitate part of the seminar discussions.

It took me far too long to realize that this level of work deserved more credit, but I did finally work out, three years ago, that these seminar presentations should be marked as summative, so that the mark would count as 20% of the module mark for each student. This seemed to me an opportunity to reward the effort that students put into the presentations, and so achieve a better work/reward balance within the module. I weighted the assessment criteria so that the majority of that 20% mark was given for the preparation and written material that supported the presentation.

By the time this level of demand had been place on students, they had moved from giving ten minute presentations in a seminar to leading perhaps 40-50 minutes of the event. This was partly because something unexpected was happening: I stopped teaching only *after* the presentation and instead began to teach *through* the presentation. That is, I interrupted frequently throughout each presentation so as to expand on the points being made, or to ask the group to comment for a moment on one aspect of the material. I warned students that I would do this, and they were generous in sharing the space, with no complaints despite the challenge that this must have given the presenter.

This interrupting during each presentation was, to some extent, the result of every educator's apparently inherent need to get a word in at every possible point in a learning event,

but it was also, I decided, a useful way to ‘join up’ the teaching and learning experience. Rather than a separate ‘teaching’ experience after a student presentation, that was in some way validated above the student presentation, I was able to share the time with the presenter and have us both teach and both learn at the same time, along with the rest of the group.

The only problem I faced was that, the more the student at the front of the room was doing, the less those students in the rest of the room seemed to want to do. I had not expected this at all. So, my first innovation led to a problem of passivity that required another innovation. This is a pattern I think we all recognize in many areas of teaching and learning: it is what makes innovation exciting but also demanding. In this case, the student was working hard to present interesting material, I was working hard to expand on it, and nobody seemed to want to take notes...

...and this is where the serendipity came in...

I happened to notice that a colleague with whom I am friendly was to give a staff training session on active learning. For more on this topic, please see the article “Active Learning” from the Higher Education Academy.

I might not have attended (old dog, new tricks and so on) but I wanted to be supportive and so I went along...and everything changed. She showed the group how to use active learning sheets, very simple bubble charts or flow charts that are produced blank by the lecturer or seminar leader for students to fill out during an event. It was not hard to do, it would not perhaps even have been especially striking, if I had not been about to give a ‘Packaging Literature’ seminar that afternoon.

As my colleague spoke I could suddenly see quite clearly how I could solve my problem. I made ‘active learning sheets’ for my group (just eight blank circles around a central circle), and

I told them to put in the central circle the title of the presentation and then to jot down any notes, keywords, or ideas that came to them as they watched that afternoon's presentation. It is tiny, I know, but it transformed their learning experience. The lure of a blank page, with tempting circles to fill out, was too much for them, and each student had filled out an active learning sheet by the end of the seminar (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Example of active learning sheets from the seminar group

What had been a busy learning event, but with hardly any lasting record to show at the end of it, is now a far more productive place to be. I give students active learning sheets for every presentation, and also additional sheets for them to record connections they notice between theories discussed in seminars; they also all begin the term with an active learning sheet for their essay: now their essay preparation begins with the first presentation.

During the first few presentations, students tend to include in these active learning sheets for essays any ideas that spark their imagination. They work with me (usually sometime during weeks four to six of the term) to decide on an essay title, and we use their active learning sheets to explore the ideas they have for that title. From that point, the active learning sheets for essays become more focused, resembling an outline plan of the essay.

As I wrote at the opening of this personal essay, this innovation is a tiny change, entirely the result of coincidence, but it has made the module a pleasure to teach. I used to believe that innovation was all about large projects, step changes, and challenging the norm. It is those things, but now I am also actively on the lookout for small scale change.

I have been reflecting on this journey in innovation because I was surprised that it was so gradual and responsive. I would more usually introduce innovation at the start of a new learning activity, but here the innovation was incremental, and more reflective as a result of this. I was able to make the changes as I progressed because of the latitude allowed to academics within their seminar groups in my institution: the expectation is that I know best how to facilitate the learning within my modules.

The innovation was sustained – and developed – because the students were leading the way. Each step in this innovation journey, from the introduction of seminar presentations, to allowing them to count for module credit, to extending them to include a discussion, through to introducing active learning sheets, whilst learning with the students how best to use them. All of this relied on one key activity: listening to my students. Not just what they wrote in formal feedback, but what they chatted about in breaks, and the friendly opinions they shared with me about assessment during our seminars. I wish I had been quicker to hear properly what they needed in order to make the module more responsive and rewarding as a learning experience. That is what I will take from this: innovation works best when I listen well and innovate sensitively...especially with the help of a tap on the shoulder from serendipity.

References

“Active Learning” *The Higher Education Academy*. Retrieved from

<https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/active-learning.pdf>