How can students become people who ask questions (instead of people who answer questions)?

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Most undergraduate students are experienced in a traditional pedagogical culture in which it is the teacher's role to ask questions which the students then have to answer. If we think that a fundamental aim of university teaching is to enable students to become autonomous learners, this presents a dilemma for both teachers and students. The following paper reports on a project undertaken at the Western Australian School of Visual Arts during 1996, which aimed to introduce independent learning practices in the school's Visual Art Theory program by means of syndicate group learning. Research into the ways in which students responded to this initiative, in particular their perceptions of the opportunities and problems it presented to them in terms of their learning, are reported in the following paper, the particular focus of which is an analysis of the extent to which the students were enabled to raise their own questions. We also suggest some possible strategies to address the problems identified in this paper.

Some assumptions about teaching and learning

As university teachers we all have, and act upon, certain assumptions about the teaching and learning process. Some assumptions will be about what we think are successful and unsuccessful strategies for teaching and learning; some will be about the teaching and learning experiences with which our students are familiar; some will be about what kinds of learners we would like our students to become. This paper will explore just some of the many assumptions which seem to underpin teaching practices at universities: these are assumptions about who should ask the questions in the teaching / learning process.

To begin at the beginning, we can safely assume that new students are skilled in answering *other people's* questions. This process will have been the main focus of their previous experience of learning, especially if they are school leavers or TAFE graduates. Success in the TEE relies not only on students having the ability to answer other people's questions, but also on the ability to answer them in ways which are (to examiners) recognisably answers. Studies of the learning process in schools, particularly in primary and early high school years, confirm the assumption that teachers' questions are central to the learning process in classrooms, and that the questions come in a variety of forms; they might be 'live', present in the teacher's talk; they might be on worksheets or in textbooks; in tests or in examinations.

In school, teachers' questions serve many functions, not only checking and extending knowledge, but also establishing and reinforcing social control. Because of this latter function, the distinction between the 'control' and 'learning' functions of questions becomes blurred, leading to dependence on the authority of the teacher to determine the content and process of learning. Encouraging school students to ask their own questions, whereby they might take some control in decisions about learning, happens rarely. Students' questions can be seen as threatening to the teacher's authority and run the risk of being actively discouraged. Instead, interaction between teachers and students becomes rigid and predictable, with students only willing to provide an answer if they're sure it's the one which the teacher wants, and developing an awareness that only 'right' answers count.

When students arrive at university, they are confronted with new assumptions about learning. One is that at university you are supposed to develop the capacity to think critically; to work independently; to analyse and reflect; to form judgements and make reasoned evaluations; in other words, to develop the ability to be an independent learner and be able to ask your own questions. For example, Entwhistle (1996) describes research which indicates that lecturers in all disciplines in higher education value certain 'attitudes and habits of mind' in their students, among which are 'adopting a *distinctive* way of thinking .... taking a *distanced, critical* stance ..... examining the *adequacy* of evidence .... being able to set and solve problems..' (our emphasis) (Entwhistle, 1996: 99). This new assumption, clearly requiring the ability to ask questions independently, presents a range of problems for students, some of which are easier to solve than others. When we as university teachers make assumptions that students' experience as learners will automatically enable them to become independent learners, how aware are we of our students' embedded orthodoxy: that teachers' questions are more important than students', and that the main function of a learner is to get the right answer? To what extent do we take this orthodoxy into account when planning learning?

Students' responses to a program of independent learning

Research into the attitudes and responses of undergraduate students in visual arts to a particular attempt to encourage them to ask their own questions, undertaken at the WA School of Visual Arts during this academic year, provides clear evidence of the nature of the difficulties experienced at this interface between dependent and independent learning. The context in which moves towards independence were initiated was during the second year core study program in Visual Art Theory. Students worked in 'syndicate groups', critically examining texts and preparing them for presentation to a wider tutorial group. The ability of students to interpret texts and reflect critically on them, to engage in theorising about other people's art practice as well as their own, are the key processes which this program aims to develop. Success in this program required students to work collectively to *raise their own questions*, since as well as taking a critical stance in order to analyse the texts, students had to synthesise and evaluate the material in order to present it to he rest of the group. As the information generated during group discussion was used as the basis for an individually assessed assignment, students were also engaged in raising questions at a pragmatic level ('How can I write a good assignment when I have to generate ideas myself?')

Given that visual art practice is assumed to be a process calling for creativity and the expression of individuality, it might be expected that visual arts students would be particularly well placed for dealing effectively with the move to independence, given that the need for autonomy

is considered pre-eminent in this discipline. However, research conducted into the ways these students dealt with the demands of independent learning, their views about the problems and opportunities it presented to them, reveals different levels of confidence and expertise in managing aspects of the learning. In particular, students seem more adept at asking their own questions in some contexts than in others; the more pragmatic, environmental elements of this process (to do with planning and organisation, identifying goals, choosing learning strategies, group interaction) appear to be less problematic, whereas questions about higher order processes (such as reflection, interpretation, evaluation) appear much more difficult. The former are practical questions, little different generically from any number of questions applied routinely by adults learning and solving problems in their daily lives. They are markedly different from the latter questions, which are process specific to higher education. (See Laurillard (1993) for a discussion of the distinctions between academic and everyday learning.)

Some difficult questions for students and teachers

The research into the students' response to the workings of syndicate groups revealed the following three broad areas of student concern.

Firstly, students were concerned with a number of instrumental issues. How to work efficiently? What information, out of all that is available to them, do they actually need ? How do they determine this? The added dimension of collaborative learning makes this particularly hard, since a variety of needs will have to be addressed in finding answers for these questions. Furthermore, the possible damaging impact of a predominantly uncommitted group on a conscientious student cannot be overlooked. It is difficult for an individual to resist a group consensus that efficient working is achievable by meeting in the pub each Thursday and exchanging photocopied summaries of the texts. In a culture in which learning is tutor-led, these problems (not just of efficiency but also of selection of information) are less likely to arise. Yet students cannot begin to become autonomous unless they can begin to answer these kinds of questions.

Problems to do with the selection of information are not just instrumental. Aspects of this first question lead onto the second broad area, which touches on values and equity. A number of students referred to the limitations (described by one as a 'danger') of relying on a lecturer with a single point of view. This issue goes beyond that of an individual with particular biases or pet theories, and confronts the prescriptive nature of the written word. Syndicate groups can go some way to solving the problem of bias, by providing a number of alternative interpretations and perspectives, and by providing a 'safe' environment in which to challenge a tutor's orthodoxy. But there are more subtle dangers. For example when students have a deadline for reading and interpreting a complex, multi-layered text, problematic undertones (such as implicit ideological viewpoints) can be undetected. Further than this, the written word itself (on which academic culture bases its existence) can threaten to swamp students by its all-pervasive authority. The question raised is challenging: to what extent can (should?) students be allowed to become autonomous learners? Part of an answer, for us, is that at least in collaborative groups students have the freedom from tutor authority to raise individual questions and develop individual voices. But as long as the learning revolves round discussion of a given text then boundaries remain. We need to be clear about the inherent contradiction which exists when we say we want students to be autonomous learners within an academic ecology.

The third area of concern dealt with the contextualisation of knowledge. Students had problems with understanding and interpreting ideas, recognising different perspectives, identifying and clarifying their own interpretations. How does the student learn to frame questions that enable them to understand key concepts? Learn to distinguish that which is valuable from that which is not? It was in these ares that students found most difficulty, and here that students felt the most need for tutor involvement. Given the students' previous experience of learning, described earlier, this should not be surprising. Morgan & Saxton (1991:16), when writing about the kinds of questions which teachers ask, indicate that teachers have problems asking the "higher order" questions which give rise to conceptual understanding (those about analysing/reasoning; synthesising/creating; evaluating/judging, according to Bloom's Taxonomy). If students are unused not only to asking their own questions but also inexperienced in the right kind of questions, then it would seem that their pleas for help should be heard. How can a tutor provide this guidance without compromising the students' growing autonomy?

The next steps

Our original intention when analysing the data gathered from students about their experiences was to explore each area of concern in relation to the assumptions about students' past experiences as people skilled at answering other people's questions. Could the difficulties experienced by students in devising their own analytical route through texts be traced back to their earlier dependency on the teacher's authority? The thought occurred that perhaps the solution was simply to initiate a structural and sequential process by which students were slowly weaned from the traditional practices that they were used to and introduced to new methods. Grow (1991) suggests that in order to help students move from dependence to independence, teachers need to adopt new roles which will enable learners to advance through a number of stages leading eventually to full independence (129) [1]. Was this a possible solution? How far might changes in the teacher's behaviour (ie becoming, over time, guide, then facilitator, and finally consultant) go in addressing this problem? On reflection, it seems that while part of the solution does lie in the tutor's ability to adopt new roles, the complete answer is more complex. The project at the Western Australian School of Visual Arts is ongoing: our plans are now to set in motion a process which is developmental, leading through small steps to increasing independence. At the heart of the process will be the expectation that students ask their own questions. The following will provide a framework for the next stage in the process.

First, it will be important to allow students to have space to find things difficult, and reassess and reconfigure their relationships with one another as fellow group members. There is also a clear need to maintain an explicit focus on group process, and enable students to question the nature of their group's working rather than accept it as it stands. Secondly, providing students with fewer texts will give them space to focus on developing critical skills rather than accumulating information and risk becoming swamped. The requirement might be to collect a list of key words and a set of questions relating to a reading, rather than to produce a summary. Next, it will be important to validate processes as well as products by distinguishing between formative and summative assessment and giving each a role in determining the overall grade which a student gains for the unit. Fourth, it will be essential to openly acknowledge the presence of an authoritative voice which is not just the tutor's but is also there in any written text. Finally, changes in the tutor's behaviour will be encouraged. If the temptation to always be the voice of authority can be resisted, and instead students can be allowed to witness the tutor actually engaged in the process of interpreting ideas, recognising different perspectives, identifying and clarifying interpretations, this might be a first step towards demystifying the process by which understanding grows. A further evaluation of syndicate learning will be conducted at the end of 1997.

We will conclude with three further thoughts. First, it seems clear that there are some questions which students will always find problematic, not because of a lack of ability but because of the nature of the academic ecology in which they find themselves. Second, it is clear that facilitating an awareness of process and thinking is applicable to other fields, and is trans-disciplinary. For example in Visual Arts, the thinking encouraged in theory has a direct influence upon studio practice. Third, while as members of an academic ecology we need to be realistic about the urgency of instrumental considerations, we shouldn't let these prevent us from having more wide-ranging, truly educational goals.

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Note [1]

Extremely useful guidance for anyone wanting to encourage students to learn independently is provided by Hiemstra (1994), who breaks down the teaching and learning process into 'a series of microcomponents', thereby providing a structured framework for teachers wanting to enable students to take more control of their learning. Hiemstra's framework is particularly valuable, since it distinguishes different types of activities germane to independent learning (he provides seventy eight 'microcomponents', grouped under nine broad headings). Using Hiemstra's framework to sort the responses of the Visual Arts students in our study, it appears that certain aspects of the learning process are more readily controlled by students than others - in other words (to return to our original dilemma) that there are some questions which students are able to ask themselves. However the list as he presents it, while it implies development, does not explicitly acknowledge developmental aspects; rather it describes what goes on as learning takes place, without fully addressing the fact that each student engaged in the move to independence will be at a given point on a developmental continuum, some more adept than others at managing learning independently.

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