Maximising Student Learning with Autonomous Group Projects in a Philosophy Honours Module

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Context: Philosophy of Art

- Optional Honours module with enrolment of 39 students

- Mix of Senior and Junior Hons students (ratio 3:1)

- Semester 1; 12 teaching weeks, 3 exam weeks

- Honours classes = 3 contact hours per week per student

- "Standard" assessment = 50% esssay; 50% exam

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I wanted to encourage:

- More student activity
- More student autonomy
- More variation in assessment
- More opportunity for peer learning
- More exploration of the subject

John Biggs (2003) *Teaching for Quality Learning at University. What the student does*. Buckingham. SRHE/ OUP.

- 'Learning is constructed as a result of the learner's activities … Good teaching supports those appropriate activities, thereby encouraging students to adopt a deep approach. Poor teaching and assessment result in a surface approach, where students use inappropriate and low-order learning activities. A good teaching system aligns teaching method and assessment to the learning activities stated in the objectives, so that all aspects of this system act in accord to support appropriate learning. This system is called *constructive alignment*, based as it is on the twin principles of constructivism in learning and alignment in teaching'.

Constructive alignment/the aligned curriculum:

- 'The "constructive" aspect refers to what the learner does, which is to *construct meaning* through relevant learning activities.

- The "alignment" aspect refers to what the teacher does, which is to set up a learning environment that supports the learning activities appropriate to achieving the desired learning outcomes.

- The key is that the components in the teaching system, especially the teaching methods used and the assessment tasks, are *aligned* to the learning activities assumed in the intended outcomes.'

Group projects:

- Groups of 4-5 students pursue research topic of own choosing over 11 weeks of semester, culminating in presentation to rest of class in week 12.

- Formally assessed; 25% of overall grade

- Research-led teaching; peer learning; aligned curriculum; employability skills

  - Analytical – Communication – Leadership – Teamwork

Challenges:

- How to organise/select groups
- How closely to monitor progress
- How to organise presentations
- How to arrive at a mark
- How to evaluate success of this method

Evaluating the overall project

- Interesting projects, good presentations
- Reflective journals revealed:
  - Almost all groups had positive experience working together
  - Liked autonomy
  - Liked studying, discussing, interacting intellectually with their peers
  - Liked learning from their peers
- General module evaluation forms revealed:
  - Of 20 who commented, 17 enjoyed it/were positive (3 gave some kind of negative appraisal)

Evaluating the overall project

- No horrible anomalies in marking
- No adverse costs (in terms of staff time)

Questions:

- Moderation method sufficient?
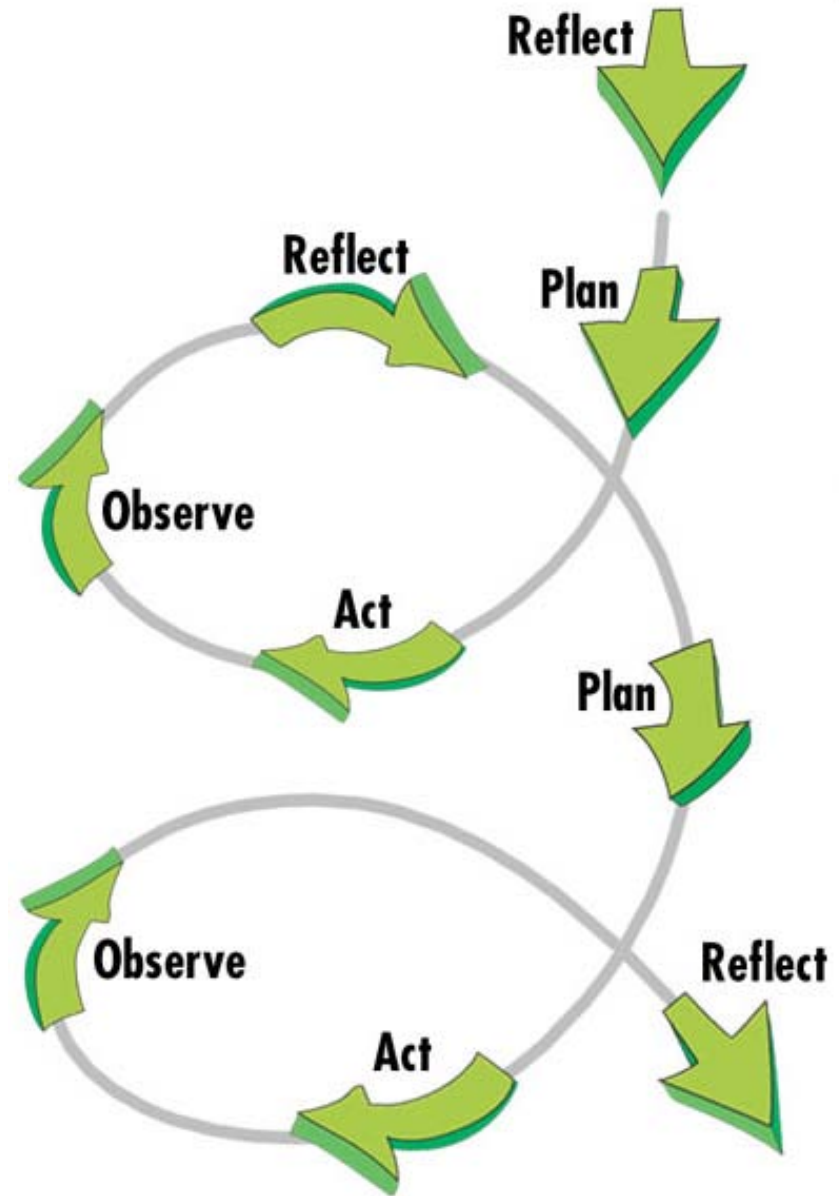- Do 'weaker' students benefit more than 'stronger' students? Does this matter??

+ NEXT:

Disseminate, and involve others

Use method again

Encourage colleagues to think about adopting similar teaching & assessment methods

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