

Classroom interaction and instructional design

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Reflections on course styles and instructional modes are presented. The author focused on the lecture course ‘Mind and Behaviour’ and the seminar course ‘Seminar in Psychological Readings’ in Hiroshima University. ‘Mind and Behaviour’ contained talk and group work. Opening with conversation helped the author relax and anticipate the appropriate pace and manner for the day’s lecture, and it encouraged students to have fun in the course. Group work made the lecture bidirectional and helped motivate students to be active, engaged, and attentive towards the course. ‘Seminar in Psychological Readings’ contained similar conversational interaction and attempted to employ appellative strategy. As in ‘Mind and Behaviour’, the author benefited from an initial period of informal talk and students found the conversational time pleasant and informative. The author’s observations of seminar activities suggest that conversation also supports good presentation performances and stimulates quality discussions. Although appellative strategy towards the author appeared to be more difficult than anticipated, students called each other using first-names or nicknames and the discussions were active and the participation was lively.

Key Words: course style, classroom interaction, instructional design

Introduction

As the higher education market in Japan grows (cf. Yoshimi, 2011), it seems to be desirable for young scholars to develop teaching strategies designed to appeal to students. Young university faculty often struggle to develop their own approach to teaching. Although teaching methods and contents depend in part on course styles (e.g., lecture, seminar) and rules for credentials or accreditation (e.g., teaching licenses), a great deal of teaching methodology is up to the discretion of teaching staff themselves. The type and quality of teaching varies according to each teaching staff’s devices: some courses are fascinating and engaging, and others put students to sleep. How can new teaching staff ensure that they belong to the former group and not the latter?

The author has been an assistant professor at Hiroshima University since 2011 and has been exploring course design and student participation. As part of a teaching team involving other assistant professors from the Department of Psychology in the Graduate School of Education at Hiroshima University, the author attended and observed other assistant professors' lectures and initiated discussions on class design and course development. In 2012, the author implemented some of the ideas that developed out of these observations and discussions.

Reflections of course styles and instructional modes

This research note deals with reflections on course styles and instructional modes offered in Hiroshima University during 2012. In particular, the author is concerned with two courses: a lecture course called 'Mind and Behaviour' and a seminar course entitled 'Seminar in Psychological Readings'.

The Lecture Course 'Mind and Behaviour'

Overview 'Mind and Behaviour' is a lecture course in liberal arts for students of the Faculty of Education, Medicine, and Pharmacy at Hiroshima University. It is offered in the second semester of students' first year, and it is taught by the assistant professors of the Department of Psychology, who share the lectures for Introductory Psychology. A total of 108 students took this course.

Author's Attempts The author was one of four assistant professors in charge of the course and gave an orientation and four subsequent lectures. 'Mind and Behaviour' was held in a relatively large lecture hall to make room for more than 100 students.

The author began each lecture with a few minutes of informal conversation, which helped to relax the author and allowed the author to gauge the students' mood and modulate the lecture accordingly. This informal talk was not restricted to psychology but instead touched on the daily lives of students, their experiences, opinions, and activities in Hiroshima University. For example, seasonal topics of Hiroshima University was assumed to be useful tips for students because almost of them were first-year undergraduates and had not experienced severe winter weather in Higashi-Hiroshima city.

The author engaged students in lecture sessions, reasoning that it may be beneficial to construct bilateral involvement in the lecture hall. Unilateral monologues from teaching staff can work to bore students and diffuse content. Students were required to take part in group work following each lecture. In small groups of six to ten, students discussed themes concerned with the lecture. After a period for discussion, students selected a delegate from each group to present the group's ideas. During group work, the author could walk around and ask individual students whether they made sense of the lecture and whether they had questions about it, since the large

lecture hall could limit some students' willingness or ability to ask questions.

On the last day of the author's lectures (i.e., the fourth lecture), the author asked students to submit their comments on the series of the author's lectures. This would be significant information for the author to develop for not only next year's 'Mind and Behaviour' course but also other courses.

Students' comments Students offered positive comments and the followings are some representative responses: 'The talks and narratives of the teaching staff were interesting enough to allow me to study psychology with delight'; 'I felt the ambition of the teaching staff towards the lectures'; 'It was significant for me to learn about other students' ideas through group work'; and 'Group work helped my active participation in the lectures'.

Discussion Informal discussion at the beginning of the lectures helped the author relax and adjust the tone of voice and physical condition of the author of the day. Moreover, the author could determine the students' atmosphere—that some students were feeling good and were motivated to pay attention to the lecture and that others were less interested in the lecture and appeared to be feeling sleepy. On a bad weather day, some students were late to the lecture because of the delayed arrival of public buses (i.e., the only public transit to Hiroshima University). The author could wait incoming students by chatting informally with attending students. These observations helped the author appropriately modulate the lecture pace and contents. It was also apparent from students' comments that humour could be especially helpful in motivating students to listen, indeed, it is possible to use jokes to actively attract students to attend lectures.

Group work helped students actively engage in lectures. One student observed, 'Although most of the courses at university seem to be passive and one-sided, this course is absolutely active and favourable'. The author walked around and asked students whether they understood the lecture and whether they needed to ask any clarifying questions. In addition to answering questions individually, the author shared the questions and answers with the entire class. Another feasible solution for handling questions in large lecture sessions is the use of comment cards, which teaching staff can use to assess students' understanding of each lecture. Collecting questions from students at the end of the lecture and answering them at the beginning of the next lecture is a useful way to encourage active participation in a context where many Japanese students may otherwise avoid asking direct questions.

The Seminar Course 'Seminar in Psychological Readings'

Overview 'Seminar in Psychological Readings' is a series of four seminar courses offered to students in the Department of Psychology in their second year. Four seminars are offered each academic year—two each semester—and students must take two of the four. In the courses, students review a major introductory psychology textbook and empirical articles, and

present reviews about them in the course. Assistant professors give supplemental explanations and feedback on the presentations. These notes pertain to ‘Seminar in Psychological Readings 3’, which the author offered in the second semester. A total of 14 students took this course.

Author’s Attempts As for ‘Mind and Behaviour’, the author began each class session with informal discussions to relax the author, settle students, and gauge their energy level and general mood. Topics were related to psychology research and events in the Department of Psychology at Hiroshima University, since, as second-year psychology students, it seemed that they might find such material both interesting and useful. A major part of this course consisted of students’ presentations and critical discussions about them. Creating a relaxed atmosphere could ease the minds of students, facilitate thoughtful presentations, and encourage lively and active discussions.

The author asked students to address each other and the author using first-names or nicknames. In 2011, as a visiting fellow at University of New South Wales (UNSW) in Australia, the author was exposed to alternative classroom models. In courses and academic meetings at UNSW, students were active participants in discussions. As is common in Western culture, the teaching staff and students at UNSW call each other with first-names or nicknames (Tanno, 2011). In Japan, faculty and students commonly use honorific titles with each other. The author speculated that whereas honorific titles may tend to discourage active students’ participation, addressing each other with first-names or nicknames might help teaching staff and students interact more closely, and might facilitate more active discussions.

On the last day of the course, the author asked students to provide their comments on the course, just as students had done for ‘Mind and Behaviour’. This information would help the author to develop next year’s ‘Seminar in Psychological Readings’ and would offer feedback applicable to the development of other courses.

Students’ Comment Typically, students’ comments demonstrated their appreciation and enjoyment of active and engaged atmosphere, for example, ‘I could make progress on Psychological knowledge with this interactive and communicative course’; ‘Although this course started after lunch and I usually feel sleepy at this time, the teaching staff’s talk kept me awake’; ‘It was fun to have presentations and join discussions and make high-spirited arguments about psychological themes’, and ‘It was significant that we could learn from other students’ ideas through discussions’.

Discussion As in ‘Mind and Behaviour’, the author began each class with some informal conversation, which helped to assess the tone of voice and physical condition of the author of the day. Moreover, talks developed into reciprocal conversations with students. The author and students had known each other since they entered Hiroshima University, and the seminar room was relatively small. In this relatively familiar environment, conversations helped

the author determine the pace of the day's activities and the manner of its discussions. Conversations helped students, too. Although the seminar started at 12:50 p.m., just after lunch, when students feel especially sleepy, they remained alert and active in the course, and their presentations and discussions were productive and collaborative. Several students later mentioned in comments that 'topics were very informative and represented a profitable advance in psychology'. It was fortunate that the talks had positive effects.

Students did not comment on the appellative strategy. In fact, students called the author using nickname only the first few times, and they eventually adopted 'Tanno-sensei', namely, a Japanese convention approximately equivalent to 'Mr. Tanno' or 'Dr. Tanno'. Although the author repeatedly asked students to call the author by nickname, students continued to choose the honorific titles. There are two feasible interpretations of this issue. First, students may have opted to use honorific titles towards the author because it is common sense to use them towards teaching staff in Japan. Students likely regard the courses in university as a relatively formal social context. Second, people use honorific titles to maintain an appropriate social distance (Kono & Uchida, 2010). Students may use honorific titles to show that their relationship is appropriately spaced, that is, to show they are not too familiar with the author (hopefully, this is not the case). Although students adopted 'Tanno-sensei', they called each other using first-names or nicknames and the discussions were active and participation was lively. It seems that appellative strategy among students have an effect on classroom discussions.

General Discussion

The author focused on the lecture course 'Mind and Behaviour' and the seminar course 'Seminar in Psychological Readings' in Hiroshima University and described some thoughts on course styles and instructional modes as a research note. The first-year psychology lecture course 'Mind and Behaviour' contained talk and group work. The incorporation of these elements proved beneficial. Opening with conversation helped the author relax and anticipate the appropriate pace and manner for the day's lecture, and it encouraged students to have fun in the course. Group work made the lecture bidirectional, even in the relatively large lecture hall, and helped motivate students to be active, engaged, and attentive towards the course. The seminar course 'Seminar in Psychological Readings' contained similar conversational interaction and attempted to employ first-names and nicknames usage. As in the lecture course, the author benefited from an initial period of informal talk with students, which allowed time to relax and gauge students' energy and attention levels and students found the conversational time pleasant and informative. The author's observations of seminar activities suggest that conversation also supports good presentation performances and stimulates quality discussions. Although appellative strategy towards the author

appeared to be more difficult than anticipated, students called each other using first-names or nicknames and the discussions were active and the participation was lively. It seems that appellative strategy among students have an effect on classroom discussions.

Teaching staff must balance their course preparation with attention to both essential and practical elements. Genda (2010) recollected his own lectures in his youth and mentioned that he had thoroughly prepared his lectures to be comprehensive and detailed in order to provide students with a correct knowledge of economics (his major), but he noted that the endeavour was actually motivated not by students' needs but rather by his own desire to avoid making mistakes or delivering erroneous information, and he paid insufficient attention to how students responded to his lectures. His recollection suggests the importance of paying attention to students' responses and gauging their participation and interest. As described above, short periods of informal conversation can be useful for teaching staff who modulate their teaching according to students' atmosphere.

These activities are peripheral when compared to the importance of the subject matter itself. That is, whether students enjoy course or not, the accuracy and significance of content and the effectiveness of delivery are essential and such essential issues must be balanced with practical innovations. But by interacting with students and watching them carefully, teaching staff may find that they can increase both the perceived and actual value of their lectures.

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