Interim Project Report

for

The Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research

Grant Holder: Professor Peter Ratcliffe (PR)

1. Project Title

'Race', Difference and the Inclusive Society: fusing research and teaching

[Period of Project Grant: 2007-2009]

2. Keywords

'Race', ethnicity, difference, diversity, inclusive society, sociological research

3. Summary

The final year undergraduate sociology module *'Race', Difference and the Inclusive Society* had, for a number of years, been taught on the basis of conventional assessed essays and (unseen) examination. This Reinvention Centre project permitted the tutors to move away from this model towards one that was much more explicitly student led. By introducing a research component, students were permitted to define their own agenda (especially in term 2). Crucially, however, their projects were based on the acquisition, in term 1, of key theoretical and historical analysis skills. In other words, students were involved in a 'joined-up' learning experience rather than one based on a separation of theory, substance and method.

4. Activities

The principal aims of this project were to develop an existing module in such a way that students would become much more actively involved in the process of learning and also appreciate much more what it means to be a researcher.

The module on which this project is based has been a highly successful one, attracting around 30 students a year, largely drawn from the Sociology degree programme (including joint and 'with' degrees) but also enrolling around 5 Visiting Students per year from overseas and occasional 'opt-ins' from degree programmes outside Sociology. Since its inception around 7 years ago, it has been developed gradually into a teaching vehicle that is increasingly research led, in the sense that the core material in the module features substantive research that is very close to the personal (international) research programmes of the convenor, her/his colleagues and the Centre for Rights, Equality and Diversity (CRED).

What was missing, however, was the more direct, active involvement of students in the process of knowledge generation. They were assessed by the conventional

means of unseen examination and essays. The agendas comprising all of these assessment components were, however, (as is the convention) determined by the teaching staff, but for a single exception: students were permitted to nominate an assessed essay topic (<u>subject to the agreement of the tutor/convenor</u>). Although module evaluations were always extremely positive, we felt that students would get even more out of the learning experience if they could choose their own research topic and work under the guidance of tutors. This would also provide them with key transferable skills, especially vital for students who were (but for a few exceptions) in their last year of study.

As this would require radical changes in the structure of the module, we felt it advisable to develop the revised module over a period of two years. This report covers the first year (2007-8).

Tutors felt from the outset that the core theoretical and historical components of the module needed to be retained. The concern here was that to jettison them in favour of a totally (student) research-led model would have resulted in a process of 'dumbing-down'. Students need the tools to do the job: most obviously they need to understand the highly contested conceptual/theoretical terrain that underlies the substantive area surrounding 'race' and ethnicity. They also need to understand the historical context in which these contestations have taken place. To have attempted to base the entire module on students' research would have been ill advised.

To make space for student research in an already extensive teaching agenda inevitably causes problems, however. The host department also needs to accept the principle of a change in assessment methods, as the removal of the examination component of a module inevitably has a knock-on effect on the percentage of non-examined work a student has submitted. [This would not be a problem, of course, in institutions that do not impose overarching rules in this respect.]

In this case, the Department of Sociology at Warwick would not sanction a move to an assessment scheme for the module based simply on two pieces of research based work. Tutors on the module therefore were compelled to accept a compromise that would permit students who wished (or needed) to take an examination to do so. Those who opted to be assessed by a mixture of examination and assessment were to be required to undertake a research project (50%) and a two hour examination (50%). For those electing to be 100% assessed the examination component was to be replaced by a conventional assessed essay covering the theoretical and historical material from term 1.

Much work went into the planning of the revised module. This was necessitated by the addition of the student-led research component (<u>compulsory for all students</u>). The original syllabus had been based on the (for Warwick) traditional mode of 22 weeks formal teaching of lectures and seminars. The model adopted resulted in a complete re-evaluation of the syllabus in which only 15 lecture slots were utilised. Furthermore, three of these were devoted to research related matters. For example, in the middle of term 1 an information officer from the Library (who also has a Masters degree from the department and has worked closely with CRED over the last few years) took a session on web-based research techniques. The other two sessions covered key research skills and the specific requirements of the research to be undertaken for this

module, including structuring their research report (the assessment component). The key point impressed on students was that <u>their research had to be theoretically sound and conceptually precise</u>: in other words, they were required to deploy the skills gained in term 1 <u>throughout</u> their project work. It was most definitely not to be a naïve, untheorised exercise in empirical enquiry.

This process ensured that students began thinking about the area of research they were interested in pursuing early in the academic session. Students were then required to submit short outlines of their intended research topic before the end of term 1. This formed the basis of discussions with tutors as to the feasibility of their plans and the academic value of the subject matter and content. Seminar sessions in term 1, although based around the lecture topics (as expected by the students themselves – see Footnote below) were also geared to thinking about how one might go about researching the subject involved.

Teaching in term 2 moved to the more relaxed, informal environment of the Reinvention Centre. This presented the opportunity for the lecturer (in this case PR) to modify the delivery style accordingly. Students were also encouraged to start thinking in more concrete ways about this new space as the base setting for their 'desk research'. They were therefore encouraged to bring their laptops into the Centre. When the lecture programme had been completed the combined teaching slots (three <u>continuous</u> hours) were entirely devoted to student projects. The teaching team here comprised PR and Dr. Teresa Staniewicz (TS).

Teaching delivery was based on one-to-one tuition, but the expectation was that students would assume the major role in defining the direction of their research. As noted earlier, a major aim of the new teaching model was to engender a sense of empowerment in their being able to take charge of the agenda. It was believed that this would stand them in good stead for the world of work, where they could expect to have to display considerable initiative, operating with the minimal amount of supervision. Despite this, tutors spent a much longer time with individual students than would normally be the case and were always there to provide support when this was needed.

Module evaluation was undertaken on a continuous basis as we wished to ensure that the radical changes in module structure constituted a positive learning experience for students. The results were extremely encouraging, with the vast majority of students appreciating the chance to express themselves more freely than they would have been able to under the old system of assessed essays. This is despite an initial nervousness (and possibly even disquiet) at the outset – a feeling detected even at the meeting with prospective students the previous May. Fortunately, we knew to expect this and planned accordingly by having a strategy geared to calming student nerves! This was overwhelmingly successful.

A number of minor glitches were experienced, but all were of a practical rather than pedagogic nature:

- The scheduling of seminars on main campus meant that students often had to rush backwards and forwards to the Reinvention Centre.

- We initially experienced problems with the 'hot wiring' facility in the Centre and there were not enough Ethernet cables to compensate.

- Although most of the students seemed to like the informal seating of the Centre, a few complained they were uncomfortable. A mature student who recently given birth experienced back problems and therefore had to prop herself up against a wall to relieve the pressure on her spine.

We have taken steps to ensure that the scheduling glitch is dealt with for next year. The hot-wiring issue now seems to have been resolved. We will ascertain from students in the first term of the 2008-9 session whether any student is likely to be affected by the seating issue so we can plan to address any problems before they arise.

The teaching team, expanded in 2008-9 to include Dr Stella Hart (SH), will continue the policy of reflexive evaluation on a continuous basis. This will form a major theme of the final report in 2009.

Footnote: Discussions were held with potential students in the summer term prior to the module re-write. This revealed some concerns about the volume of work entailed by the student research component. Others were nervous about the move away from a full lecture programme and wanted reassurance that there would be sufficient material to cover the requirements of the examined component. This sent a very clear message to the module team that they should tread carefully so as to ensure the correct balance of tutor-led and student-led work.

5. Outcomes

The issue of evaluation was dealt with in the previous section. Although not adopting a formal laid-out strategy to disseminate the results at this stage, we have discussed the changes in module structure and organisation with colleagues within Warwick and in other institutions and in particular those in which I (PR) hold External Examining positions (Leeds and Leicester). There is considerable interest whenever I discuss the changed teaching format.

I am also sure that these issues will be the subject of debate in the Teaching Forum context at Warwick.

6. Implications

There are a number of implications of the changes in teaching delivery mode involved in the current project:

- Knock-on effects on the balance and nature of assessment schemes on degree programmes

- Increased degree of responsibility on the student's part to display a 'sociological imagination' and work in a way that requires initiative and drive.

- A major bonus stems from the latter point, in that graduates need these skills in the workplace and in postgraduate study.

- Pedagogically, there are huge potential gains in that the subject matter comes alive and students learn to appreciate the link between substantive theorising, empirical research and the accumulation of knowledge.

7. Resources

A number of teaching aids were found useful for students:

- The use of the web in generating data: students therefore received formal training on this aspect of their work (as noted above).

- The dos and don'ts of academic report writing in the context of sociological research. Students received specific training and handouts to help them organise their work.

8. References

N/A

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