

Challenging ideas and developing critical thinking through peer debate

Dr Helen Beckett
Institute of Applied Social Research, Department of Applied Social Science



Context

I deliver a Masters unit (Understanding the sexual exploitation of children and young people), as a stand-alone four day short course for practitioners and managers, many of whom have been out of academia for some period of time. The 'fears and expectations' exercise I undertake with students at the start repeatedly reveals the strong anxieties they have about the expectation that they critique work academically and produce a written assignment on the basis of this. For this course, students come together twice in a five week period for intense two-day teaching sessions and submit a written assessment approximately one month after these end.

What we did

Given the anxieties of students – and preparing them with the skills required for their written assignment – I integrate a training session on critical evaluation at the end of day. This is followed by a practical task for day 3 in which students are allocated one of six articles to read and review, identifying the:

1. Type of publication and source of data;
2. Key points being made and evidence basis of these (or lack thereof);
3. Theoretical positioning of author and any potential biases;
4. Questions arising, for other students to consider.

The six articles are selected to represent a range of publication type and theoretical positions and a mix of commentary and primary-based work. Students are organised into discussion groups (ensuring that there is a mix of students so that they can learn about the other articles). Each student presents an informal five-minute oral presentation on their article to their group and facilitates a small group discussion around this.

It is clearly articulated that this is a learning experience (assessment of this oral exercise is simply based on the fact that they took part, not how well they did) and clear ground rules are set about mutual respect and maintaining a safe learning environment.

Resources used

PowerPoint slide introduction to critical reviewing and the contrasting research papers.

What was the impact?

The use of a variety of contradictory articles means that students have to represent/argue conflicting perspectives which generates very interesting intellectual debates. Students, who initially express anxiety about the task, reflect very positively on the experience, finding presenting and discussing their perspective on their article with other students and a tutor empowering (without being graded on how well they do this) and reassuring. They also note that listening to the review of their peers helps their learning. They report that their confidence increases in tackling their written graded assignments. This is particularly important since these students complete these at a distance from the university, without the benefit of face-to-face interactions with tutors.

What I learnt?

When I first undertook this exercise, the papers I chose had less diversity and people were making similar points, which became repetitive after a few reports, and didn't lend itself to subsequent informed debate. The exercise works much better when papers are purposively chosen to include contradictory views. It also works particularly well when there are enough tutors or a small enough group to facilitate the group feedback and throw in questions to spark debate, where this is not naturally occurring.

Potential for adaptation for other units:

1. The development of a range of academic skills that takes place during this course, including critical thinking and synthesis, are consistent with Level 7 descriptors and relevant for most subject areas.
2. The combination of activities (oral presentations, collaborative work and debating) develop key skills which are relevant for most subject areas.
3. The selection of articles which are polemic and distinct challenges students to develop research skills of value to most subject areas.