DE-LECTURING. A CASE STUDY OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SMALL GROUP TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

Though many educationists have repeatedly advocated small group teaching in higher education, there are few reports of the implementation of such teaching. The use of small groups has been widely recommended as a means of developing higher cognitive skills. The introduction of such activity requires a substantial reduction in the conventional program of lectures and tutorials. It would be difficult for a university lecturer wishing to introduce small group activity to find a range of descriptive case studies to use as a model. To provide such a model is the aim here.

In the case at hand, the lecture component of a senior undergraduate course in political theory taught by M. W. Jackson was substantially reduced and replaced by small group sessions. The strategies developed were systematically evaluated, mainly but not exclusively for formative purposes, by M. T. Prosser. In this article we describe the background, structure, and evaluation of this innovation, suggesting a number of problems that others may anticipate. We hope that this account will be of use to others in de-lecturing.

I. Introduction

In recent years there has been considerable discussion of the use of small group teaching techniques in higher education (Abercrombie, 1970; Powell, 1973; Boud and Prosser, 1980; Prosser and Thorley, 1981; Moss and McMillen, 1980).

A distinction between the roles and the expectations of lectures, tutorials, and group work has been emphasized in this literature. For example, Aber-
Crombie has stated that lectures are particularly appropriate for the presentation of information while tutorials aid individuals in understanding such information. By contrast, group work is said to encourage the interaction of all participants and it is said to be especially useful for the development of higher order cognitive skills such as problem solving skills, analytical skills, etc. (Abercrombie, 1970: 4, 5 and 18).

It is this explicit, structured encouragement of interaction between students which distinguishes small group based activities from lectures or tutorial. This means that, unlike tutorials, students' mistakes are not corrected by the tutor. On the other hand, students are confronted by different interpretations from their peers, and learning proceeds by comparing, contrasting and criticising these interpretations. It is this idea of small group teaching that we are focussing on in this article.

Moss and McMillen (1980) have described the introduction of small group teaching in a tertiary course. They hold that traditional teaching methods based upon lectures emphasize "the content and knowledge of subject at the expense of process and the development of skills" (Moss and McMillen, 1980, p. 161). If higher cognitive skills like those involved in problem-solving, analysis and synthesis are to be fostered, then small group teaching must play a part in undergraduate teaching. Considering the limits of time and space, emphasis on group work must be at the expense of lecturing.

The development of such higher order skills is as important in political science as it is in any other discipline. Yet a recent survey of teaching methods in political science in the United States failed to include small group teaching. Instead, the survey ranged over audio-visual instruction, computer assisted instruction, personalized self-instruction, behavioral objectives, simulation games, and modular instruction (McCulloch, 1978). These techniques are very largely geared to the dissemination of information rather than to the nurturing of higher cognitive skills.

In the pages that follow we describe and evaluate the introduction of small group teaching to foster the development of higher order cognitive skills in a senior undergraduate course in political theory. The aim of the article is to use the case study to identify and discuss a number of practical problems and issues that others may meet when trying to implement small group activities. This course was taught by M. W. Jackson while the evaluation was conducted by M. T. Prosser. The authorship of this article derives from that division of labor. Part (II) Background and part (III) Structure were written by Jackson. Part (IV) Evaluation and part (V) Conclusion were written by Prosser with some comment by Jackson included. Needless to say, our collaboration throughout the project was extensive.

Curriculum studies on innovations such as that reported below may be considered to be practical studies focusing on studying problems arising from