



**Flinders Foundation of University
Teaching**

Personal Learning Portfolio

Ben Habib

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ATT: *Deanne Gannaway (FFOUT Guide)*

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(1) Personal Teaching Philosophy

Skill I'd like my students to learn these higher level thinking skills...

- ✦ **Creative thinking:** To see and make things in a new and different way.
- ✦ **Critical thinking:** To make judgements about the value of things based on a body of evidence.
- ✦ **Analytical thinking:** To examine something in terms of its parts and how they are related to each other.
- ✦ **Multi-disciplinary thinking:** To incorporate information from a variety of disciplines when engaging in creative, critical or analytical thinking.
- ✦ To **apply** higher level thinking skills to practical problems in academia, professionally, and in everyday life.

Why I believe my students should learn these skills...

I believe that our society can be made better if people learn more effective decision-making strategies. International Relations is essentially the study of decisions and their consequences at the international level. One must be able to take a data set, consider variable factors, historical precedents and predictions of likely outcomes, analyse potential courses of action, arrive at an appropriate course of action, and executing the appropriate course of action. If the thinking informing the decision-making process is flawed, it is harder to arrive at wise decisions.

International Relations is a complex field which occupies a crossroads of different academic disciplines, such as history, politics, economics, psychology, sociology, philosophy, cultural studies, strategy etc.

To succeed academically in International Relations, students understand these complex inter-relationships, make judgements based on information from these diverse disciplines, and arrive at new ways of viewing given problems based on their understanding and judgements.

To succeed professionally in International Relations, graduates need well developed multi-disciplinary higher level thinking skills. Our graduates often go on to work in environments such as the public service, the business community, or other non-government organisations. These are professional environments where they will be in a position to make important decisions that will dramatically affect people's lives.

I implement the learning of higher thinking skills in tutorials by...

- ✦ **Analytical:** Encourage students to explain relationships between ideas, with an emphasis in class discussion on the word "why" as an explanatory tool.
- ✦ **Critical:** Encourage students to make judgements on given ideas, citing justifications for their judgement.
- ✦ **Creative:** Encourage students to propose solutions to current problems, or to make prognostications about future events.
- ✦ **Application:** Students apply their higher level thinking skills in tutorials and in written assessment tasks. Written work consists of two essays, where they have the space to fully explore their topic in more detail. In tutorials, I use different discussion activities to

get the students to utilise higher thinking skills in lots of different ways.¹ Activities include...

- **Whole class discussion:** Students discuss topics as a whole group. This is our most informal class activity.
- **Group work:** Students get into pairs or 3's to discuss set questions or statements. I often use group work as a warm up activity to get everyone comfortable, participating immediately and thinking about the basics of the topic at hand.
- **Role play:** Students analyse a problem from the point of view of another person, such as a politician or a combatant in war. This activity is useful late in a topic, when students can demonstrate that they have acquired a substantial body of knowledge from the topic.
- **Structured debate:** Students argue their viewpoints in a formal debate setting. This activity combines argumentation with public speaking, which can be more stressful. Structured debates are best conducted later in the topic, when students have acquired a body of knowledge and have more developed higher thinking skills.
- **Question & Answer:** Students prepare a question for class discussion each week. The questions that students ask are often an indicator of their progress in integrating higher thinking skills into their learning process.

¹ In utilising different activities I hope to encourage more of my students to become what Biggs (1999, p. 57-58) calls "deep learners." See: Biggs, J, "What the Student Does: Teaching for Enhanced Learning, 1999, HERDSA, Vol. 18, No. 1, pp. 57-75.

(2) Peer Review of Teaching

Peer Review for Ben Habib

(by David Green, Education Designer, Flexible Delivery)

Pre Observation

I met with Ben to discuss his peer review a couple of days before the tutorial which I was to observe.

He explained that he wanted feedback on

- (1) the structure of class activities and
- (2) his ability to regulate classroom discussion.

This would include criteria such as whether every person is given the chance to participate, the level of comfort of the students and whether the discussion was on task and efficient.

He explained that Regulating Tutorials was the subject of his FFOUT Learning Project. Introductory activities have occurred in the first tutorial, and there is a short paired activity to begin each tutorial and each student prepares a question for class discussion.

The tutorial topic was "Terrorism" and was part of the "Peace and War" topic which was a second year theory topic.

In establishing whether he was successful in a tutorial, he indicated that his key criteria were that every student participated and that they seemed to understand the key ideas for the tutorial. Students' understanding could be assessed by the questions they asked and their comments in class.

The key ideas for understanding in this tutorial were

- (1) Can the "War on Terror" be won?
- (2) Fear: the psychological impact of terrorism beyond the immediate victims.
- (3) The terrorist label as moral judgment vs. descriptive term (does the terrorist label allow one to overlook political motivations?)
- (4) Root causes of terrorism.

Observation

There was relaxed conversation as the students entered the room. When I conversed with the students it was clear they were aware of expectations of the topic, and the individual tutorial.

When the tutorial began, students were asked to reflect on where they were when they heard of the September 11 attacks, and what they felt. This generated discussion and a variety of responses. Ben asked meaningful questions of the students to help clarify what they were saying. He also contributed his own memories. All students seemed to be contributing (although 2 were noticeably quieter than the rest.)

After considerable discussion, individual students were asked to contribute their own questions from the reading. Ben selected the 2 quieter students plus one other to contribute their questions.

Students seemed genuinely interested with the task at hand, and when discussion wandered from the point, Ben quickly brought them back on task. He also asked interesting questions which challenged students' understanding.

The tutorial was the last one for the year, and Ben asked students to reflect on their most memorable moment of the semester. All students contributed and all were positive about the relaxed style, the fact they were all given the chance to contribute, and that they were not required to passively sit there and just take in more information.

Conclusion

Ben has fostered an environment within the tutorial where all the students were adequately prepared (by doing their reading and preparing their question for discussion), and wanted to contribute. This is a very positive achievement.

All students were engaged, seemed to enjoy the tutorial, and were motivated to contribute in friendly, open dialogue. This is a credit to Ben for his structuring of the tutorials to this point, as well as for respecting student views and asking meaningful questions. Also, he made a point of keeping students on task, and in helping the quieter students to contribute.

Students appeared to come to an understanding of the major points for discussion.

My only constructive criticisms are that

- (1) it may be useful to put a little more structure to the whole tutorial by giving it a beginning, middle, and end, where the beginning may explicitly state the key themes to be talked about, and the end is to restate those themes (and perhaps relating the middle discussion to the themes as appropriate).
- (2) Playing devil advocate role a little more often to try to promote cognitive conflict in the participants, to allow them to question the usefulness and motivation of their own constructed understandings.

All in all, Ben showed he is a very capable tutor who provided a very positive and enjoyable learning experience for all his students.

(3) Workshops

✦ Thesis Preparation (05/06/2006)

We identified potential problem areas in production of a research thesis, and how to lay out the thesis in accordance with University and Department of Social Science guidelines.

✦ Planning Your Research (21/03/2006)

An overview of project management. We discussed research design (including the use of mind mapping), project life-cycles, resource allocation, and time management strategies.

(4) Project: Identifying Learning Challenges

Identify Learning Challenge: Regulating Tutorial Participation

Tutorials in International Relations topics are largely discussion based. Students often have two main complaints about their tutorials:

1. They don't get a chance to speak in tutorials because one or two students dominate the class.
2. The tutor ends up doing most of the talking.

The main challenge in tutorials is thus threefold:

- (1) To get the less confident students to participate in class discussion,
- (2) Managing the monopolisation of discussion time by more dominant students, and
- (3) Avoid the tutorial becoming a lecture by getting the students to take responsibility for their efforts in class.

What does the literature suggest about this learning challenge?

My aim in addressing this learning challenge is to utilise Lublin's (1987, p. 6) model of a tutorial built around class discussion.² I want my students to clarify their opinions themselves through group discussion. Bertola and Murphy (1994, p. 8, 10) describe this as a matter of process: students can develop these skills within an appropriate facilitative framework.³ Gibbs (1995, p. 23) similarly suggests group discussions can be regulated more effectively if they are conducted within structured process.⁴

My response to this learning challenge...

My strategy involved three different things to build structure within my tutorials, in line with my *Personal Teaching Philosophy*. I've implemented these activities with three different tutorial groups and have found the results to be pretty similar, even though the three groups are have very different personalities.

(1) Introductory activities in the first tutorial

Students generally need to get to know each other before they feel comfortable in sharing their opinions and taking intellectual risks. A safe environment needs to be set up in the class which gives students the confidence to share, to view the class discussion as a collaboration of ideas as opposed to a submission to judgement.

² Lublin (1987, p. 6) writes: "In this format the tutor retreats from being the central focus of the tutorial group in order to become leader or facilitator rather than arbiter or director. In this format the tutor has given up significant aspects of control, and has invited students to assume some power, take initiatives, and begin to take active responsibility for their own learning within the tutorial."

³ Bertola and Murphy (1994, p. 8) note: "Most tutors concentrate on the content (what is learnt) and fail to plan for better process (how learning is facilitated). Identifying and prioritising your goals will provide you with a clear focus."

⁴ Gibbs (1995, p. 23) adds that structure is important and attention should be paid to setting up seminar groups in a structured way to avoid problems later on.

In the first tutorial I got the students to do three introductory activities in pairs. First off, students were given time to learn about their partner. They also had to divulge one positive tutorial experience from previous topics. Then each student got to introduce their partner to the class, including sharing the positive tute experience. It is often easier to introduce someone else to a group rather than yourself, due to a reluctance to talk ourselves up, or for fear judgement. These fears are lessened somewhat by describing yourself to someone else and getting them to introduce you. This activity also gets the students acculturated to listening to their peers, and makes them more aware of the diversity of the group.

In each of the next two paired activities, students were asked to find a new partner and discuss with each other a new set of questions. First, they were asked to come up with a list of what they thought were the three most important issues in contemporary international relations. After swapping partners again, students were asked to discuss their expectations for the topic and what they hoped to get out of it. Answers were discussed with the whole group.

Most of the first tutorial was devoted to establishing a comfortable atmosphere in class, rather than spending too much time on the administrative details of the topic, which I've decided to address piecemeal throughout the course. I wanted the students to meet as many of their classmates as possible in the introductory activities and was extremely pleased with the class dynamic created as a result.

(2) Short paired activity to begin each tutorial

We begin each tute with a short five minute activity in pairs, in which the students discuss a set issue from the readings. The purpose of this activity is to re-establish a comfortable class atmosphere, to get everyone talking straight away, and to get the students intellectually warmed up for the class discussion to come. I skipped this activity during one tutorial recently and observed that the class, which is usually my most boisterous group, was really flat.

(3) Each student prepares a question for class discussion

I've instructed the students to each prepare a question for class discussion, based on the readings, that week's lecture, or a current event related to that week's tute topic. Each student gets to lead the discussion by asking their question and get the answers *THEY* were after from the group. The goal is to regulate class discussion to ensure that all students in the group get to participate.

I have observed over time that it is impossible to get students to contribute equally in class. However, this activity has decreased the disparity in class participation, giving the less confident students a space to contribute and be heard. The dominant class members still have a lot to say, but I often get them to present their questions to the group last, so that other students don't feel left out.

My students endorsed this activity in an informal questionnaire I put to them about their satisfaction with the tutorials. 87% of students strongly agreed that I encouraged them to participate in the tutorials (the other 13% agreed). Positive comments were also given supporting this activity, with particular emphasis on how they enjoyed everyone getting a chance to contribute.

My Findings

On the whole I've found these activities to be quite successful in addressing the stated learning challenges. Compared to previous tutorials that I have taught, students in my three groups this semester have appeared much more comfortable in contributing to class discussion. The reasons are related to the class structure established by the activities:

- ✦ Less confident students not only get a space to contribute to the class, but are compelled to do so by the nature of the activities. Paired activities get them interacting within a partner, while the prepared questions get them interacting with the group.
- ✦ Because of the structure of the activities, dominant students are compelled to allow space for the less confident students, without being told to do so by me. They don't have to compromise their natural flair to let others contribute.
- ✦ Through devising a question for discussion, the students implicitly have more input into what they want to get out of the tutorial.
- ✦ The prepared question activity has been successful in getting all students to participate in class, but the discussion is still too often directed at me, instead of throughout the whole group.⁵ By asking a specific question, the students often just look to me for an answer. Maybe a slight refinement in the activity is necessary, getting the students to prepare a specific topic for discussion, rather than a question.
- ✦ My class preparation time has been minimised by these activities, which allows me greater time to concentrate on my research.

⁵ Often our class discussions become more like Lublin's "tutorial built around questions and answers" than his group discussion model.

(5) Review of Teaching Forum: Friday 4th August

This forum had only three people in it and was focussed on group work, from which I learnt the following:

Establishing a group dynamic and strategies for inclusive participation. I talked about my efforts in tutorials (as described in the Learning Challenges Project) to get maximum participation from my students. Other speakers confirmed beliefs I already had.

The usefulness of group PBL exercises. This discussion was related to a hands-on drama topic. Though I like the idea of group PBL exercises, limitations on time and space in my tutorials limit what I can do.

Team teaching. We discussed the importance of coordinating content and message when teaching with someone else.

Dealing with difficult/emotional topics in class discussion. We talked about class reactions to September 11 as an illustrative example.

(6) Review of Teaching Forum: Monday 6th November

This forum took place with a large group, within which many issues were discussed:

Communicating the importance of a given class structure to students. It's important to make expectation clear to students, and to explain to them the relevance of class activities to the desired course outcomes: "this is *why* I want you to do this."

Call student counselling if tricky issues arise with students.

Referring ESL students to the Student Learning Centre if they need help with academic writing.

Dealing with difficult and emotional topics in class discussion was raised again in this forum. Pre-warning students that difficult material will be discussed was one suggestion, as was giving students the option of leaving the room if they felt uncomfortable.

Teacher-student professional boundaries. We discussed how to set limits on out-of-hours contact and how to reject inappropriate social advances.

Integrating students of varying cultural backgrounds and abilities. One suggestion was for students to work in pairs, to help them overcome nervousness over linguistic difficulties. Also, getting students to plan how they'll use the knowledge gained from the course in 6 months time, to make the content relevant to their own experience.

Managing mature-age students. As mature-age students often have a streamlined way of doing things, it is important to be clear on the relevance of class tasks to the learning objectives.

(7) References

- ✦ Bertola, P, & Murphy, E, 1994, "Tutoring at university," Paradigm Books, pp. 6-33.
- ✦ Biggs, J, "What the Student Does: Teaching for Enhanced Learning, 1999, HERDSA, Vol. 18, No. 1, pp. 57-75.
- ✦ Gibbs, G, 1995, "Discussions with more students," Oxford Centre for Staff Development, pp. 21-30.
- ✦ Lublin, J (ed.), 1987, "Conducting tutorials (Vol. 6)," HERDSA Green Guide, pp. 4-7.