Tackling the Tumbleweed: Reflections on increasing seminar engagement from an introverted GTA

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Abstract

Pedagogical literature identifies established links between student engagement with learning and subsequent academic attainment. During my first year as a GTA, the main challenge I experienced was getting students to verbally engage in seminars, both with myself and their peers. I was surprised by how challenging I found teaching a seminar with limited verbal engagement, and how difficult it was encouraging this during seminar discussions. In this piece, I critically reflect on my experiences as an introverted GTA trying to 'tackle the tumbleweed'. To commence, I consider the preconceptions I had about what constituted an 'engaged' seminar group, and examine varied definitions of (verbal and non-verbal) 'student engagement' within the seminar context. Then, I reflect on the techniques I used to encourage both verbal and non-verbal engagement in practice, plus further approaches I will trial in future teaching. In the concluding section, I provide advice for other GTAs and raise wider, external factors likely impacting engagement that lie beyond GTA control.

Keywords: student engagement; seminar teaching; GTA challenges; teacher reflections.

Introduction

When I accepted the Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) role, my main concern was of not knowing 'enough'. Would I really be able to answer the diverse questions students would have about the module content? To manage this concern, I prepared for a seminar group containing a diverse range of learning styles and was braced to answer questions from and be challenged by vocal students. In practice, however, the main challenge I encountered was getting students to ask questions and verbally engage with myself and their peers. As a quiet, introverted learner myself, I was surprised by how challenging I found teaching a seminar where verbal engagement was limited, and how difficult it was encouraging this during seminar discussions.

In this article, I focus primarily on the verbal engagement of students in seminars through participation in activities and assessments. Concurrently, I grapple with my own preconceptions about what an 'engaged' seminar group constitutes. Going into teaching, I was focussed on maximising verbal engagement in my seminars. Yet, this contradicts how most of my own engagement as an introverted learner occurs through non-verbal methods, such as note-taking and independent thought. Correspondingly, I also detail how I increasingly utilised non-verbal engagement methods to benefit student learning and increase my confidence in my teaching abilities. After outlining theories of student engagement, I critically reflect on the approaches I utilised to increase engagement, considering what worked well and where in hindsight I would do things differently.

Theories of student engagement in the seminar room

Pedagogical literature notes there are established links between student engagement and attainment (Finn & Zimmer, 2012), alongside the need to assess student engagement to enhance the learning process (Das & Dev, 2024). Yet, the term 'student engagement' lacks consistent definition and application (Bryson & Hand, 2007; Robinson, 2012). In the broader Higher Education (HE) context, student

engagement is associated with improving student experience, with Robinson (2012, p. 98) defining it as "the active involvement of listening to individual and collective perspectives of students". This need to actively listen to students has clear resonance within the seminar room. Furthermore, Bryson & Hand (2007) theorise that engagement spans a multi-levelled spectrum, whereby students range from engaged to disengaged at the levels of: the task set, the module, the course, and the university.

Focusing on the task and module, student engagement can be viewed as "the active participation, involvement, and interest demonstrated by students in the learning process", which fluctuates over a teaching session as levels of student interest and concentration vary (Das & Dev, 2024, p. 2261). This includes an emphasis on the verbal participation of students with the teacher such as by asking questions, and with their peers in group discussions (Ahlfeldt et al., 2005). Other conceptualisations of engagement do not rest on the need for verbal engagement, instead centring on engagement "with the content of learning tasks in a way that is likely to enable them to reach understanding" (Ramsden, 2003, p. 97). Admittedly, however, determining the most suitable and inclusive methods to assess understanding itself is a contested topic (see McConlogue (2020)). Wider, non-verbal forms of engagement evident in the seminar room include attending the seminar, paying attention, completing assessments, and taking initiative such as seeking help when required (Finn & Zimmer, 2012).

Engagement in (my) Practice: Techniques to Tackle the Tumbleweed

Introductions: scene setting and ice breaking

For context, I taught the small-group seminars on a first-year undergraduate module for students external to my department, Global Sustainable Development (GSD).

From the start, I was aware this could create quiet seminars with students lacking familiarity both with the department and each other. With home departments ranging from mathematics to history, students were used to different signature pedagogies, "defin[ing] what counts as knowledge in a field and how things become known" (Shulman, 2005, p. 54). GSD, I would argue, has a very different signature pedagogy to many of these home departments, centring on student-led exploration and research-based teaching. Research-based teaching utilises inquiry-based seminars, with modules not about acquiring specific subject content but broad theories and key skills (Healey, 2005). Interestingly, such active, problem-based learning styles often benefit student engagement, including through giving students the independence to collaboratively explore areas they are interested in (Ahlfeldt et al., 2005; Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Ramsden, 2003).

Recognising the GSD teaching approach was likely unfamiliar to students, I started the first seminar with a clear outline of how seminars would run. This included informing students that seminars provide a safe space to explore ideas and develop learning, and that they should constructively and respectfully challenge and question each other. This outline reflects Mann's (2001) argument that learning environments should be respectful, target alienation, and welcome unclear, unformed ideas that nurture student learning. Equally, I emphasised that the only stupid questions are those not asked, and from my own experiences when one person is stuck others likely are too. I told students that I would never pick on them as I do not think it is conducive with creating an effective learning environment. As an introverted learner, I used to dread seminars where there was a possibility I would be picked on.

This first seminar included time for students to introduce themselves. We went around the room sharing names, preferred pronouns, home departments, and the reason for choosing the module. I thought this would help students feel comfortable talking to each other – especially important given the significant amount of group work to come. Upon reflection, however, I would trial a different approach I encountered as an undergraduate that could be more beneficial. Rather than putting students 'on the spot', we were instead given two minutes to find out the name and

an interesting fact about the person sat next to us, then introducing our partner to the wider group. I feel this approach could be better by removing the immediate expectation to engage with the wider group. Plus, it means students have a familiar face to work with in future discussions.

Reflecting at different scales

Continually reflecting on my teaching during and after sessions helped me identify activities and content facilitating greater engagement, and how I could amend future teaching to build on these successes. For example, after one debate was quiet and required lots of prompting to get groups talking, I considered alternative seminar activities that could vary sessions and enhance engagement. I had recently read an article by Kempston (2023) discussing approaches she used to increase engagement and empower students, including incorporating apps with the dual benefit of non-verbally assessing student understanding. In the next session, I trialled this using a Kahoot quiz after a mini lecture. The competitive element resulted in students engaging with each other, while I could assess levels of comprehension and recap areas the group were less sure on. For future teaching, I am keen to continue using Kahoot alongside other technologies, including Vevox, to facilitate non-verbal engagement whilst potentially simulating verbal engagement.

Over the ten-week term, I increasingly realised the importance of discussions with and seeking guidance from colleagues. Especially in the early weeks of teaching, I felt alone in tackling the tumbleweed and was convinced I was a 'bad' teacher. Hearing that lecturers on the module were having similar challenges reassured me that the issue could not solely be my teaching. The lecturers also gave me tips for increasing verbal engagement, including not being afraid of waiting a few minutes for a response to a whole-group question. Additionally, participating in the microteaching exercise during a teaching course I undertook was helpful for gaining external feedback on my teaching from fellow GTAs. Although microteaching can cause initial

anxiety, Donnelly & Fitzmaurice (2011) found it gave participants greater confidence and self-awareness of their abilities – which I believe to be true.

In all honesty, I was nervous for the end of module evaluation feedback from students. The extent of positive feedback received genuinely shocked me – particularly of multiple students saying they enjoyed the seminars. This reaffirms that while verbal engagement is important, engagement extends beyond the verbal, including attendance and completing assessments (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). It reiterated to me that such non-verbal forms of engagement are equally valid for facilitating learning and student enjoyment of seminars.

Technology: helpful and a hinderance?

In some ways, technology hindered verbal engagement in seminars. In one small-group task, groups were initially quiet, having created shared Google documents to collate their thoughts rather that have a verbal discussion. After 15 minutes, I spoke to each group about what they had discussed and was pleasantly surprised by the amount of content they had covered. Their use of technology had prevented me visibly seeing and hearing learning occurring, however from talking to students it was clear they had identified a plethora of pertinent points. This made me reflect on how I relied on 'reading the room' to assess extent of engagement, and that these students had chosen an alternative, no less valid, non-verbal engagement approach. Plus, after this check-in, I was pleased that students started verbally engaging with each other about the debate and how to divide points up for the wider group discussion. As discussed above, I also found technology such as Kahoot valuable for diversifying seminar activities to facilitate greater engagement.

Students were more likely to ask questions after a seminar by email than face-to-face in or just after a seminar. For future teaching, I am going to trial offering flexible office hours with some on Microsoft Teams alongside fixed, in-person hours. This

virtual option can enable students to be engaged with a module when they may be unable to get onto campus and when the in-person times may not be suitable (Wolf, 2023).

Making the most of assessment

Student engagement was consistently greatest when discussing assessment. This is understandable – I know from my own experiences that my verbal seminar engagement peaked in discussions about assessment. This reflects Bryson & Hand (2007) finding that engagement increases around assessment, with many students focusing on achieving a good degree to obtain a good job post-graduation. Interestingly, they also found least engagement in the first year of an undergraduate degree which does not 'count' towards their final degree classification, coupled with wider challenges of transitioning into HE and navigating socialisation pressures. I did wonder if this was a factor influencing engagement in my seminars, in conjunction with students focusing on core modules they needed to pass in their home departments.

I was keen to reassure students about the summative assessments, which included a group presentation. I empathised with the students who found presenting difficult, sharing with them how much I struggled as an undergraduate and giving tips I used to settle my nerves. Utilising informal, low stakes presentations in seminars allowed students to develop their confidence presenting across the term. Plus, it enabled me to give verbal feedback based on the summative marking criteria. I focused on the positives of their presentations, constructively adding areas for improvement. For example, I would say "it was really powerful how you looked at the audience as you made this point, doing this more would further enhance your verbal communication". Nearer their presentations, I showed students examples of presentations I had done as an undergraduate so we could critically evaluate them. I was surprised by how much students engaged with this, asking questions including about my experiences.

I will certainly increase the use of exemplars in future teaching to stimulate discussions.

Given many students did not reach out to ask questions during the term, I found providing written feedback on summative assessments a valuable opportunity to provide personalised feedback – especially important given the continued massification of HE (Vardi, 2013). When providing formal, written feedback I value feeding forward. Rather than giving highly specific feedback about a piece of work the student is unlikely to rewrite, this instead focuses on general points such as conceptual knowledge, extent of analysis, and referencing that can be used in future assessments (ibid). My feedback from the group presentations included a focus on points for students to consider when writing their research projects, such as working on their referencing.

Concluding Thoughts and Advice

Having to 'tackle the tumbleweed' in my first year of teaching was an unexpected challenge. Positively, it provided me with many opportunities to reflect on my teaching and enhance my toolkit for teaching to come. To conclude, I provide advice for GTAs experiencing similar challenges, plus briefly acknowledge wider, external factors likely impacting engagement that lie beyond their control.

Advice for GTAs

The main piece of advice I have for GTAs faced with seminar silences is to talk about it with other GTAs, module leaders, and wider colleagues with teaching experience. It is more than likely you are not the only one dealing with quiet seminars. From my experience, discussing these challenges with colleagues made me feel less alone,

gave me reassurance, and provided me with guidance and approaches to trial in coming seminars.

Secondly, try changing up how you teach your seminars. I found that different activities yielded varied results with the group, with smaller group tasks often working better than big group debates. See what works for your group, as there is no single approach that suits all students (Bryson & Hand, 2007). Celebrate where an activity worked well and see how you can incorporate similar activities in the future. Equally, do not be hard on yourself when something does not work; reflect on it, learn from it, and then move on.

Finally, embrace non-verbal forms of engagement. They are no less valid than verbal forms of engagement. Overtime, I learnt to accept that not all seminars are going to be filled with verbal discussions and debates, but that does not mean students are not learning and enjoying the content. As an introverted learner, I must confess that some of the most valuable, interesting seminars I attended had little verbal engagement from myself or my peers. Equally, there is nothing wrong with using technology such as Kahoot or letting groups work quietly on shared online documents to facilitate learning.

Factors beyond GTA control

A range of wider factors impact student engagement. This includes the massification of HE which makes it challenging to individualise approaches for students (Bryson & Hand, 2007). While I was fortunate to have one small seminar group where I could vary teaching approaches across the weeks and conduct in-session modifications when needed, for GTAs teaching multiple seminars this is less possible. I was also lucky to be given flexibility in how I taught the content, something not all GTAs have. Furthermore, not all focus should be on the teacher; student engagement is the "shared responsibility" of students and staff (Robinson, 2012, p. 98). While I felt

responsible to engage learners, there may have been other factors impacting their engagement – from assessment stresses to personal circumstances. As GTAs, it is important we acknowledge these wider factors that lie beyond our control while making the most of what we can influence to improve student engagement.

Ethical Claim

There are no conflicts of interest to declare. All supervisors approve of this publication.

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