Empowering Students to Self-learn

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Abstract
This article describes two approaches to learning and teaching used in the module “Evaluating Academic Arguments.” Both approaches address how learners independently process information on topics discussed in the module and then work with that information. In one approach, learners study logical fallacies and then peer teach aspects of that. In the other, learners are given input to explore related to a position paper, which they need to work with and eventually write. In both approaches, the emphasis is on learners making their own discoveries about a pertinent topic as opposed to being explicitly taught.

In its broadest sense, empowerment is about enabling. Empowering in education refers to “equipping and raising the confidence of individuals” (Jarvis, 1990) so they can become more successful learners. Although empowerment in education is a large construct, this paper uses the term to mean achieving “increased confidence and competence, greater self-direction… through active engagement in tasks of meaning and relevance to the individual” (Land & Gilbert, 1997, p.507).

This paper describes two tasks used in a university general education module (GEM) entitled Evaluating Academic Arguments (EAA) that subscribes to the principle of empowering, with the main objective of allowing learners to learn concepts by discovering facts about the concepts themselves. One task involves independent student research, the output of which is presented in a peer lecture, while the other involves a guided discovery of notable features of position papers.

About Evaluating Academic Arguments (EAA)
EAA is a 36-hour module taught over 12 weeks, whose objective is to introduce students to basic concepts in informal logic to help them apply these to arguments in academic reading
and writing. More specifically, the module teaches students to evaluate arguments from a variety of sources to help them apply the skills of evaluation and analysis in academic reading. The module teaches students to summarize arguments and to write critical and logical responses to arguments in formats such as critiques and position papers.

Course content includes the argument structure, informal fallacies, types of support, and the relationship between language and thought, while assignments include a summary of arguments, a critique and a position paper. The latter two are genres that require students to respond critically to and craft arguments on a variety of contemporary topics.

**Peer ‘lecture’ through independent research**

As the module places a premium on critical thought, one of the methods found to promote this is the peer lecture. Here is how it works:

After being engaged in lectures and tutorials on argument structure, students form their own groups and are set the task of discovering facts they ought to learn about fallacies, an integral component of the module. This is preparatory to their giving a lecture on the topic.

The choice of the topic, fallacies, is based on its importance in the module: fallacies are something they need to consider in evaluating an argument, the learning materials are easy to source for, and the topic is one that students have typically found difficult to master. For these reasons, it was felt that it would be more beneficial for students to explore the topic on their own rather than being taught it.

**Process & Outcomes:**

The task requires them to cover/include these aspects:

- what fallacies do to arguments (how they are used for a particular effect in, say, advertisements)
- how they might be categorized
- the origin of fallacies (e.g. red herring)
- examples found in texts and visuals around them (e.g. advertisements, cartoons, etc.)
Two weeks of preparation are given for research as well as getting materials ready for presentation. Then, during one three-hour tutorial, all of the student groups peer teach by presenting their findings with the use of PowerPoint slides and other multimedia (very often Youtube snippets are used). To discourage students from simply presenting a lesson using cut-and-paste techniques with information drawn closely from sources, they are required to quote examples from local newspapers, posters and advertisements in order to show their understanding of the facts learnt. Each group’s teaching session is also followed by a question-answer period, with questions posed by the instructor as well.

After the lesson, all PowerPoint slides are revised and uploaded into an online workbin (a facility of the university’s Integrated Virtual Learning Environment platform) so that they can be studied for an end-of-course test, in which the topic of fallacies is tested. Other than a discussion clarifying points incorrectly or inadequately treated during each group’s presentation and a summary of all the fallacy types at the session’s end, this topic is not taught anywhere else in the course. The following are benefits that have been observed:

- Students know that a premium is placed on their ‘teaching’ each other. The requirement to ‘teach’ implies that both the research and the presentation need to be thorough and organized, and facts need to be accurately conveyed.
- Students understand that they need to apply what they learn and that such applications are probably the most valuable learning outcome of this exercise. Employing local examples seems to exemplify this understanding, or in some cases, the lack of understanding of some fallacies (if the latter case is detected, the instructor immediately corrects the mistakes made).

**Genre analysis through guided discovery**

On EAA, the position paper is one of three continual assessment assignments. The position paper is a piece of writing in which “the writer presents his opinion of events, facts, experiences and defends that interpretation with arguments” (Sanders, Tingloo & Verhulst, 2005, p. 11). It is a genre that students are not familiar with, both in the terms used and in its form, given that students in the university write mainly essays and reports in which the argument does not take center stage.
Since this assignment requires an orchestration of all the skills learnt in the module, it is necessary for students to revise what they have learnt about arguments as well as the features of position papers. To facilitate this, the module uses the discovery approach, one that helps students to obtain knowledge for themselves (Bruner, 1961). Since it is recommended that discovery be best handled as a “directed” activity (Schunk, 2000, p. 170), the instructor arranges an activity in which students uncover what there is to know about position papers by analyzing texts. Here is how it works:

In groups of four, students work with two sets of materials: a table (See Appendix) categorizing pertinent features of position papers (PP) and a set of four real world position papers. They take turns reading all four PP samples and fill in the table based on their group discussion. The instructor uses the table as the basis for scaffolding and uses questions to prompt students, reviewing concepts such as conclusion (central to argument structure), reader, support and evidence. Finally, one table is drawn on the board and individual students are called upon to come up and fill in the details. Members of the entire class check what has been written on the board to confirm the answers. The instructor then goes through the information and corrects and/or adds on to it.

Process & Outcomes:

- Close reading of the samples enables students to
- learn about the characteristics of PPs and become familiar with terms like legislative abstract, case histories, references, and recommendations, all of which should help them to identify document type and its relation to the intended reader.
- discover aspects about the argument that matters: main claim and support, both of which were learnt earlier.
- By first filling in the table first in their respective small groups and then reviewing it as a class enables students to
- discover aspects about PPs that will matter in their writing: intended reader, purpose of writing and document type or genre, all elements of writing that are pertinent for students to learn about if they want to achieve audience-centeredness in the PP.
compare the different types of real world PPs and use these as counterpoints to the one which they will eventually write.

Benefits of this approach for students:

- They discover facts about PPs through collaborative learning on their own and from each other.
- They ‘own’ the new-found knowledge as opposed to being exposed to it passively, as in the case of lecture materials.
- They are motivated to assess their own answers against the information written on the board. This allows them to receive immediate confirmation and/or make any corrections even before the instructor gives relevant feedback on the expected answers.
- They have the opportunity to be exposed to genres of PPs such as legislative abstracts, medical case histories and so on. These genres might be foreign to them prior to this module.
- This course facilitates reinforcement of their knowledge on highly relevant concepts like references, in-text citations and citing of studies routinely done in research reports.
- They learn to identify the purpose of writing and how to write to an intended audience, both of which are valuable concepts given that much undergraduate writing is addressed to the instructor/lecturer setting the writing task.
- This approach reinforces the learning about key elements of this module learnt at the beginning of the course. Some of the key elements include main claim/conclusion, support type and so on. This will help students see the connectedness of elements taught earlier or emphasized at different parts of the module.

Conclusion
There is a particular freshness to the activities. The peer ‘lecture’ is always characterized by enthusiasm in the presentations and by the quality of the output. In the other activity, students induce features of a PP by discovering those by themselves rather than by being taught by the instructor. As such, learners would recognize a difference in the teaching approach and are motivated to be more proactive in their learning.
The output of the peer ‘lecture’ is usually very creative: being responsible for a sub-topic, members of the group usually take the effort to introduce depth and breadth to their presentation. A similar lecture/presentation with such an in-depth scope would have been exhausting if it were prepared and covered by a single instructor.

The approaches described above are grounded in the belief that students will learn more effectively if they are given a more hands-on approach in their learning of a skill, and they derive confidence in learning when they see themselves as “shareholders” in the learning (Freiberg and Driscoll, 1996, p.298).

Both activities described above are about empowering students for their own learning. The positive outcomes of these activities are testimonies to the fact that students embrace the notion of being involved and, with guidance, are capable of productive independent learning.

References

Appendix
Analysis of Position Papers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample No</th>
<th>Main claim/conclusion</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Reader Document type</th>
<th>Support type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
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About the Author

Peggie Chan is Senior Lecturer in the Centre for English Language Communication at the National University of Singapore. She teaches critical thinking and writing to Faculty of Engineering students, professional communication to the Faculty of Design and Environment students and a cross-faculty general education module entitled “Evaluating Academic Arguments.” Her research interests are in the teaching and assessment of thinking, critical reading and writing, and independent learning.