

Reflections about challenges of constructive alignment amongst heterogeneous masters' students

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Aims

This paper addresses and reflects upon a number of problems experienced in attaining constructive alignment in courses taken by social science masters' students who have a wide variety of disciplinary, cultural, and educational backgrounds. This is deemed worthy of attention because an implicit assumption of many university courses is that students have similar, if not identical points of departure. This can be observed from such things as descriptions of course material, course objectives, and formulations of outcomes demanded from students, as well as expected levels of student participation. This paper does not question the need for formulating explicit course objectives and demands. It does however question and problematize some assumptions concerning students found in description of course objectives and demands. My experiences of teaching question the underlying assumption. This is based on recognition that although students generally share a benchmark level entry qualification, they nevertheless are very mixed – in terms of academic ability, but also, their expectations of teachers and teaching, their aspirations concerning learning methods, their experiences with different pedagogic styles and didactic methods, and not least, the role they assign themselves as students, as well as their understandings of good and bad teachers and teaching methods. In this paper I therefore present and problematize student heterogeneity as evident across a number of student-student and student-teacher interactions and I discuss

challenges and possible solutions, based on my own teaching experience, in order to fulfil constructive alignment.

Disciplinary background and case base

I teach and supervise BA and MA level students in social science. Theoretically, I have mainly taught qualitative methods, theory, and case based courses in international development studies, which typically focuses on a variety of social, economic, and political challenges experienced in developing countries. A key characteristic of the courses taught and students I have supervised are that they come from all over the world. In this paper I focus specifically on experiences of teaching a methods course – Qualitative Methods in Agricultural Development (QMAD), at the Institute for Food and Resource Economics (IFRO). I have had a central role in QMAD the last 2 years and will teach it again in the autumn. Typically, I am responsible for three times three hour lectures, and three times six hour lectures. Besides, I normally supervise about three or four student groups and the writing of a group based report.

Structure

The paper is composed in the following way; first I give a brief description of the course these experiences are based upon, its objectives and composition. Then I characterise the students in terms of different disciplinary, cultural and academic backgrounds and I present concrete examples of problems experienced with constructive alignment and the “near impossibility of teaching”. Thereafter I reflect on how I have endeavoured to overcome the challenges experienced, what I do when planning and teaching such a course, and reflections about adapting teaching to suit heterogeneous backgrounds of students.

The course: QMAD

QMAD aims to provide students with the skills in undertake qualitative data collection through field work related to agricultural development in developing countries. Primarily, QMAD is about learning to acknowledge

the importance of explaining precisely what data you want to collect, how you will collect it, and how the collection of data may influence the object of research. Thus, the course is very much about recognising the dynamic relationships between the researcher and the researched and how the two can influence each other in often unforeseen ways. Students are expected to be active during the 12 lecture days, and they have to submit a group based written assignment that has to be presented to the class, and which has to be passed for the students to go to an individual oral exam, which marks the end of the course. Teaching is in English and the course normally attracts 45-60 students. In 2015 some 28 countries were represented. About half of the master's students were from countries outside of Europe. Additionally there are usually a handful of guest PhDs students in attendance from Africa and Asia. Teaching comprises 6 sessions of 3 hours, and 6 sessions of 6 hours which means a relatively long time spent in classrooms. Teaching comprises a range of methods including traditional lecturing, lecturing with intermittent short exercises, longer group based exercises, class based exercises, open discussions, student presentations, film showing and discussion, open Q & A sessions, and sessions of project based group work with teacher supervision. The idea with offering and planning a range of different teaching and learning environments is to stimulate student activity and encourage participation across different types of teaching forum.

Student heterogeneity

The course attracts students from four different master programmes that, as noted above come from a large number of different countries. From experience this means the teacher has to constantly manoeuvre within and between the different academic and cultural backgrounds of the students. This is in order to strike a suitable and comfortable balance between, on the one hand, teaching "as if" all students stem from the same educational programme and are all, so to speak, on the same page, and on the other, to adapt the teaching methods to those which the types of students groups are familiar with, expect, work most productively with, or feel most comfortable with. I have found that a real challenge is to appropriately adapt the teaching methods to the heterogeneity of the class but without compromising the objectives. To shed light on these challenges I give below some concrete examples.

Ontological heterogeneity

The most noticeable difference between students can be defined in terms of ontological heterogeneity between “positivists” and “social constructivists”. The majority of students have a strong background in natural science based traditions with solid knowledge and skills of quantitative data collection and deductive methods. Simplified, this means they frequently come to expect the QMAD course to deliver clear cut, precise, measurable, and objective methods and “once and for all” answers to their methodological or method related queries. They may also expect clear cut theories to be introduced that can explain social realities. This group, which also cuts across geographical and ethnic boundaries, subsequently may meet up in class with unrealistic expectations of being taught “fool proof” methods that can accurately explain “real life” phenomena. It is not uncommon for members of this group to pass comments, or ask, in the following ways; ‘I understand most of it, but can you give me a specific answer?’ or, ‘What is the best thing to do in this situation?’ Consequently, student comments and questions reveal they are searching for singular and fixed answers. In reality however, the study of social phenomena and the role of the researcher means that there are rarely universal clear cut answers to social science investigations.

As result of students’ ‘positivist’ ballast, there is therefore a risk they interpret the aims of QMAD and social science methods as confusing, together with the course objectives, content, and didactic methods employed by the lecturers - that point to acknowledging and conveying the complexity of social reality. Thus, problems experienced by students are based in assumptions about students upon which teaching is based. Overall, the differences between student backgrounds and course assumptions about students may be a cause of frustration for students from positivist traditions. This is especially the case when they are confronted with the strongly interpretative and phenomenological, process orientated traditions of much social science research.

Student uncertainty occasionally surfaces in course evaluations where they express the teaching did not provide the answers they were looking for, and that teacher explanations about ‘what to do and how to do it in the field’ were vague and non-committal. Similarly, lecturers may be described as indecisive or placing too much weight on research answers based on their own research experiences. Clearly, this set of problems is ontological in nature as it reveals students lack of understanding about the process of

social science research. Such challenges are also difficult to solve quickly, as they requires a back to basics teaching of different approaches to the accumulation of knowledge, as well as explanations as to what knowledge is, how it is produced in social science, and what role the researcher may play in producing knowledge.

National and continental heterogeneity

The challenges of the positivist bias depicted may overlap with the nationality of the students. Allowing for the affirmation of stereotypical images of non-European students, I have found that African, Asian, and especially Chinese students may have different expectations of what teaching and learning involves, compared to European and especially Scandinavian student groups. Basically, this is an ethnic and geographical divide and expresses itself with non-Western students groups wanting more teacher based instruction and traditional forms of teacher centred lecturing. European groups meanwhile may be less interested in teacher driven instruction and demand instead an assortment of different teaching styles that carry multiple possibilities for them to develop individual competences.

For example, Chinese students frequently express either an implicit or explicit unwillingness to engage in dialogue with teachers and other students and participate in oral presentations. When they do, there is a strong likelihood they will read up from a text, not have the skill to reflect on what they have done, and will be unwilling to give and receive feedback from other students. They may appear passive and search out concrete answers that are “spoon fed” to them by the teacher. They may also have little experience with interpreting or analysing a text independently of the teacher, and may be shy in forwarding their own views or critically discussing the interpretations of others. They may not understand that there can be a large difference between a teacher disagreeing with a student’s opinion, and a teacher thinking the student has produced good or poor work. Thus, this group aspires towards pleasing the teacher, not developing the skill to think independently. I have also experienced that Chinese students search out easily remembered facts and information so that it can be repeated at the exam. Hereby, they experience a dearth of deep learning commonly accompanied with an unwillingness, or an inability to participate actively in group based work. Finally, it is common that non-Western students do not have any experience with oral exams. The set of problems sketched here can

also overlap with, and be made worse by, student levels of oral and written language proficiency. The worst case scenario is where the class becomes divided between, on the one hand, students with an African and Asian positivist background that expect teacher centred instruction, lack experience with critical thinking, and have a poor level of English, and on the other, European and Western students with a social constructivist background. The latter demand dynamic teaching, interactive, and modern learning methods and are used to critically assessing research processes. Finally these will also have a high command of written and oral English. As such, Scandinavian students may occupy the other end of the spectrum to Chinese. From High School, they generally have experience with group based work as well as presenting, discussing, and sparring with others from the rest of the class. There are also used to developing independent points of view from those of the teacher and may be keen to share experiences that differ from those in textbooks. This divide may thereby be termed as “conformists” vs “interactionists”.

Solution – accept and engage with student heterogeneity

The “conformist” vs “interactionist” binary demands the teacher or supervisor recognises the heterogeneity of the class early on (which can be acknowledged with a basic survey of student backgrounds). Most important however is to develop a class culture where the students are encouraged and supported to express their concerns to the teacher about the direction and methods of teaching. Further, to open up for discussion I try and emphasise that there are no predefined correct answers to the topics we are discussing, and all thoughts are welcome. The aim is to create a space where students do not feel they are being judged but are encouraged to fill the space with their own views. No matter what they are, they thus provide material for broader classroom based discussions. It is also a good idea to construct heterogeneous groups and not allow either of the groupings to form homogeneous clusters. Hopefully in this way the students can learn more from each other. Having identified and discussed several challenges of attaining constructive alignment, I now present some solutions.

Solutions – focus on the process

To get around the above challenge I have found it useful to invest time in explaining the process of social science research as well as defining and presenting the specific methods. This means emphasising that social science research is very often, if not always, an iterative and intuitive process and the object of enquiry is not always clear from the very start, and it is common that the focus of attention and study changes as the research develops. At the same time, it is also necessary to devote quite a lot of time to explain that the answers to any set of social science research questions are very context specific. This means recognising and making explicit the consequences of making the choices regarding research angles, which become just as important facets of the research process as explaining and making explicit what exactly the research has found out. This stands in contrast to the position of “positivist” inclined students, who seek out concrete results, rather than concentrate on the process of getting to particular results.

Solution – be explicit about the uncertainties

In order to overcome student frustrations and confusions, I have also found that a worthy subject of class discussion is to make explicit that social science methods are generally not a subject that can be understood in real time, so to speak: it is thus expected, and students have to realise the fact, that the “aha moment” that students expect to experience may not come until late on in the course. Progress towards this realisation can be aided by turning the problem on its head and encouraging students to identify how they think specific method issues should best be solved – and how they think they could use their own competences from their own disciplinary background to tackle such problems. Although the answers they give may well be bias towards quantitative data collection, the process of getting students to acknowledge the ‘messy’ nature of social science is made easier by first getting them to communicate how their own disciplines would tackle the task. This often leads to the realisation that something more is needed than quantitative methods.

During the learning process I also find it vital to communicate that it is common that students may not understand what exactly it is they are expected to learn. Thus, it is not enough for students to read the course material. They also have to develop the skill to reflect on what they are doing

and why which is the real learning aim. In sum, it is vital that students create and develop their own awareness of disciplinary shortcomings. It is thereby important to communicate, discuss, and share the view that social science demands time to digest and reflect upon the choices of methods. Also, it is important to make explicit that the search for scientific certainties in terms of concrete answers is often in vain in social science. Hopefully in these ways, students come to realise it is more worthy and relevant to recognise the limits and significance of the uncertainties that are related to a particular research design, than to reach a firm conclusion based on an incoherent process. Finally, it is intended that a revised version of this working paper will be distributed and discussed in class. The aim here is to make explicit the challenges I have experienced and of course acknowledge the concerns of the students that together can provide a framework for solutions.

References

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