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USING THE SOCRATIC METHOD TO ENHANCE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND REDUCE THE BME ATTAINMENT GAP

Abstract:

Teaching standards in UK higher education institutions are under unprecedented scrutiny. Following the Minister of State for Universities and Science's rather scathing observation at the UK Universities 2015 Annual Conference that the quality of University teaching is not only 'highly variable' but that 'there is lamentable teaching that must be driven out of our system', the government has pressed ahead with the introduction of a teaching excellence framework (TEF), currently outlined in the 2016 white paper 'Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice.' Under this system Universities will be required to publish the gender, ethnicity and social backgrounds of their student intake, and will be assessed according to their institutional performance on student satisfaction, retention and graduate employment rates. Alongside this initiative, the Prime Minister has committed to 'increasing the number of BME students going into higher education by 20% by 2020'. However, to date, gentle taps at the door to the higher education sector, which have highlighted both the inequality of educational experience and the need for reform, have been largely ignored leading, ultimately, to the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). The authors suggest that the time has come for higher education institutions to fundamentally rethink the way in which curriculum delivery should take place for the benefit of all students. Consequently, the authors assert that the proper and effective implementation of the classical Socratic Method could provide a viable response to the TEF's call for reform

Keywords:

BME students, Attainment gap, Teaching Excellence Framework, Socratic Method, Critical thinking, Extra and co-curricular activities

JEL Classification: I28, I21

Introduction

Teaching standards in UK higher education institutions are under unprecedented scrutiny. Following the Minister of State for Universities and Science's rather scathing observation at the UK Universities 2015 Annual Conference that the quality of University teaching is not only 'highly variable' but that 'there is lamentable teaching that must be driven out of our system', the government has pressed ahead with the introduction of a teaching excellence framework (TEF), currently outlined in the 2016 white paper 'Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice.' Under this system Universities will be required to publish the gender, ethnicity and social backgrounds of their student intake, and will be assessed according to their institutional performance on student satisfaction, retention and graduate employment rates. Alongside this initiative, the Prime Minister has committed to 'increasing the number of BME students going into higher education by 20% by 2020'.

Whilst this may appear encouraging for future students in UK higher education, current studies highlight the fact that black, minority, ethnic (BME) students remain at risk of receiving a substandard educational experience while at university, and a substandard chance of being employed once they have graduated. A number of reasons have been cited for this 'attainment gap', but may be broadly listed under three main headings (Berry & Loke, 2011):

- "…differences between BME students and white students appear to relate to both rate of retention/withdrawal and achievement", and that: "much of the institutional work to address differential retention and achievement "is at an early stage";
- "…the National Student Survey (NSS) shows that BME students, on average, are less satisfied with their student experience than their white peers"; and
- "...ethnic minority graduates do comparatively worse in the labour market than white graduates in securing full-time employment, particularly on graduation"

The fact that the TEF will focus on student achievement, satisfaction and employability, amongst a range of other metrics, will certainly prove useful to those seeking greater transparency of information in these areas. However, as the authors have noted previously (Berger & Wild, 2016), any data set is only truly useful when it is placed into context via the TEF's qualitative element; an institutional narrative outlining the overall educational mission of the University in question. Equally, if taken in isolation, individual sources of information risk oversimplifying, or even overlooking, the complex inter-relationships at work within complex systems such as the educational process. More specifically, data is only the starting point. Collation of information, either centrally by the government or locally by individual institutions, will not enhance the educational experience of students. Similarly a multitude of reports commenting on data will not impact on a student's educational experience unless, as academics, we act upon the warnings that we are currently being given.

There is, undeniably, a huge amount of data and information available to universities regarding their student cohorts, accompanied by an almost endless list of priorities, ranging from concerns over widening participation and the achievement of male and female students, through to more specific concerns relating to both black and white male students. However, these have simply been gentle taps at the door to the higher education sector. Gentle taps that have grown in significance and intensity over recent years, demanding the attention of higher education institutions and highlighting the fact that there are students who still do not receive the same educational experience as their peers.

The National Union of Students (NUS, 2009) noted that 'Black students are less likely to be satisfied with their educational experience and to attain first-class degrees in comparison to their White peers', going on to observe that: 'a simple explanation for the attainment and satisfaction gap of Black students does not exist'. At the time, the NUS tabled a number of proposals which emphasised pastoral measures and included increasing 'Black representation in role models and staff', 'providing encouragement and care'; as well as providing 'increased academic support'. However, as the QAA observes, 'the most popular type of intervention beyond data collection and analysis seems to be mentoring and the creation of role models'. This doesn't mean that such initiatives lack fail to impact positively on BME students, but it does suggest that a more thoughtful approach is needed. In this regard, the authors believe that the emphasis must be placed on the educational mission of universities and, more specifically, on curriculum delivery so as to actively engage all students during their studies.

Indeed, the NUS reported that a significant minority of BME students viewed their teaching and learning environment negatively, often speaking of alienation, exclusion and feeling invisible to lecturers, with 23 per cent describing it as 'cliquey', 17 per cent as 'isolating', 8 per cent as 'hostile' and 7 per cent as 'racist'. Many of these feelings spawned from inside the classroom. In 2010 the HEA also noted that when looking at the learning experiences of BME students, institutions should include the possible value of:

- student-centred, collaborative teaching;
- recognising the prior knowledge and experiences of BME students (and the avoidance of preconceived notions about them);
- paying attention to classroom dynamics – allowing BME students a voice (especially when in a minority);
- avoiding technology that disadvantages students from certain backgrounds (e.g. by class or ethnicity);
- using learning spaces known to be favoured/appropriate to BME students;
- skills development for teaching staff – including development of "emotional capital" (Cousin, 2006).

The authors argue that despite these indicators, few sector-wide initiatives have been undertaken so as to address the concerns highlighted by both the NUS and HEA over

six years ago. One local case study which the authors (Berger & Wild 2016b) have examined is the use of a refined flipped-classroom model across an entire undergraduate programme which not only resulted in a significant reduction in the BME attainment gap, but resulted in the lowest differential across the entire university. However, we have reached the stage where continuing concerns as to the overall quality of education within universities has obliged the government to go beyond gentle indicators so as to intervene.

The Socratic Method

The 'Socratic Method', named after the classical Greek philosopher Socrates 469–399BC 'the father of Western philosophy' (Tweed and Lehman, 2003), is a form of co-operative argumentative dialogue between individuals, based on challenging and subsequently defending an intellectual, possibly hypothetical, position, with the express intention of stimulating critical thinking and drawing out an individual's ideas, underlying false presumptions and beliefs.

The method is most commonly adopted in US Law Schools, such as at the University of Chicago, as a means of enabling teachers and students to work together so as to understand an issue more completely. At the start of the century, Watson (2001) conducted a series of interviews with law students enquiring as to their experiences, and views, of their law degree programmes. The main findings included the fact that first year students found their studies terrifying, and that "some teachers deliberately set out to intimidate students." This has led a number of commentators such as Stone (1971) to characterize the Socratic Method as "infantilising, demeaning, dehumanising, and sadistic, a tactic for promoting hostility and competition among students, self-serving, and destructive of positive ideological values."

However, before dismissing the Socratic Method as being an outmoded and dehumanising technique, it is necessary to question whether those professing to use this teaching strategy within the classroom are, in fact, practising what they preach. In other words, the authors suggest that the criticisms noted during Watson's study were directed at a derivative of the Socratic Method as opposed to the actual practice of Socratic Learning.

In the majority of instances, the process which lecturers refer to as being the Socratic Method is not the same as that described in Plato's dialogues. The reason for this is that many lecturers are, necessarily, grounded in specific subject matter, whether that it law, medicine or economics, which they feel their students need to learn and, ultimately, know. The authors do not suggest that there is anything wrong with this approach, simply that it is not the Socratic Method, as it introduces a subject-specific element with the ultimate goal of ensuring that students confirm that they 'know the answer'. It seeks to provide students with specific knowledge and the ability to talk to others within that particular discipline about it.

The Socratic Method transcends subject matter as it seeks understanding through deep questioning; the questioner as the unknowing bystander. In other words, the Socratic Method may be likened to an advanced form of the child continuously asking 'why?' As it isn't restricted to one particular field or topic, it is extremely difficult to use in the classroom with any true success, especially within a sector that is focused on specific educational goals, (by the end of this class you will understand X, or Y), and in measuring a student's knowledge at pre-determined intervals via paper-based assessments. Ultimately, the Socratic Method requires a lecturer to be prepared to go 'off topic', to leave behind a tutorial plan or restrictive curriculum, and to embrace the fact that the answer is less important that the logical reasoning or the process of critical thinking being developed by their students.

Turning to the notion of 'critical reasoning', this refers to the process of constructing unique answers, supported by authority (Berger & Wild, 2015). It is the ability to recognise and identify key issues, and then solve problems using logic, common sense, experience and knowledge. It will be an opinion based on an appreciation of the 'best' thinking – both subjectively and objectively derived - available. By the term 'subjectively' derived, the authors refer to the fact that the student must derive their own hypothesis from their own derived thought processes. Equally, by 'objectively' derived, the authors refer to the fact that the answer must have legitimate force from external authority, or 'authority without an author' (Van Roermund 2000). The combination of these two elements allows a student to deliver a unique answer with either the support, or criticism, of the best thinkers in any particular field. Of course, these states are not mutually exclusive. External knowledge necessarily informs a person's inner beliefs. Equally, even the most extensive evidence requires a 'leap of faith' on the part of an individual to enable them to accept that even the most empirical of data is true. However, a student should be encouraged to embrace these two paradigms in equal measure. There are no definitively 'right' answers in academic problem scenarios, as in real life, but that it is the ongoing attempt at the construction of logically sound arguments, supported by authority, which provides 'good' answers (Dworkin 1978). More importantly, a graduate is employed for their ability to think critically in the workplace, not simply for their ability to regurgitate knowledge.

War of Words

The authors assert that the transition from school pupil to university graduate cannot be guaranteed unless teaching methods, which actively prescribe the enhancement of critical reasoning, are widely adopted. In other words, a conscious shift in focus away from telling students what to think, towards that of how to think. Indeed, as Trahar (2007) notes: 'those who favour these approaches to learning are often critical of more formal learning, (such as the traditional lecture in higher education) and rote learning, believing that such practices constitute a "surface" rather than a "deep" (Marton & Saljo, 1984) approach'.

To this end, the authors created a university-wide extra and co-curricular course (ECCA) – War of Words (WoW) - at the start of the 2015/16 academic year which utilises the Socratic Method of delivery. At the end of the course, participants were asked to provide information regarding their demographic background, their reasons for participating in the ECCA and their experiences of participation, together with their hopes for future involvement. The results of the survey demonstrated overwhelming support from students for the implementation of the Socratic Method. Furthermore, the data highlighted that the percentage of BME student participants on the ECCA (92% of respondents) was significantly higher than the University of Hertfordshire's overall proportion of undergraduate BME students (48% Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2014). In the light of this data, the authors argue that ECCAs have not only proved extremely popular with undergraduate students (Berger & Wild 2016), but that the Socratic Method used within this specific course has been shown to be of particular interest to BME students. The question is, why?

Trahar (2007) ventures the fact that the collective nature of the Socratic Method is mirrored in a range of cultures across the globe that supports communal learning techniques. For example, 'in Chinese cultures there is a high level of collectivism... and a preference for working together in groups to solve problems' whilst in Africa, 'knowledge is transmitted orally from one generation to another and by practical example; learning through experience, therefore, predominates'. However, this does not explain fully the significant uptake highlighted by the authors within this case study, but simply highlights the fact that collective learning may be seen within many cultures.

The authors also took the opportunity to examine whether there is a correlation between student participation in ECCAs which implement the Socratic Method and enhancement of their academic performance on their degree programmes. The data collected indicates that there is indeed a correlation which, the authors posit, could, when taken in conjunction with the high uptake of BME students, offer a viable strategy for universities to close the 'BME attainment gap'.

War of Words (WoW) is a weekly extra and co-curricular activity (ECCA) which places individual students in front of a large audience (normally 150-200 per session) of student judges to argue a one minute defence of a controversial topical position, such as 'The UK should abolish its monarchy' or that 'Breastfeeding in public is unacceptable'. A student volunteers for the position by commenting 'I volunteer' on a blogpost which advertises a number of positions per session, and the position and student are paired-up at random. The student will then usually have two to three days to prepare their argument.

On the day of the WoW, the student presents their one minute defence from the front of the lecture theatre, in complete silence from the audience. Once they have finished, the student is then subjected to questions from the audience, who have prepared impromptu responses while the speaker is presenting, all of which are designed to throw the candidate off-balance and to test the student's preparation, critical

reasoning skills and, ultimately, their resolve. After approximately 10 minutes of questioning from the audience, the Chairperson calls a halt to proceedings and asks the audience for feedback on the candidate's performance on the following grading criteria; (i) content – what the candidate argues initially and subsequently in response to questions; (ii) presentation – how the candidate presents the argument and how persuasive they are; (iii) popularity – the public vote. The judge's decision will be based on (a) his/her own assessment of the candidate; (b) the feedback on the first two grading criteria; and (c) on the public vote outcome – (a)-(c) are weighted equally.

Candidate students are discouraged from using statistics or empirical 'facts' in their arguments, which are hard to verify in the room on the day, and are not determinative in any case. Students should attempt to use subjective 'everyday' analogies to make their points and successful students tend to seek to use gently persuasive verbal and body language, rather than aggressive rhetoric. At the end of the academic year, the students with the largest number of successful defences throughout the year, will enter a knockout competition of a number of stages, culminating in a Grand Final of six students. The academic year 2015-16 featured twenty WoW sessions.

In the final session prior to the Grand Final, the gathered participants were given a questionnaire to complete, which sought to collect data relating to: (a) the participant; (b) the participant's experiences of WoW; and (c) any hopes the participant may have of seeing WoW-style teaching embedded into their academic course curriculum delivery. A total of 187 viable responses were recorded, indexed and then coded as to identify emerging patterns and themes. The data was then analysed in an iterative manner and translated into useable information.

Analysis of the Data gathered

Of the 187 participants, 57% were female and 43% male, with 95% of those completing the questionnaire being undergraduate students, 2% were postgraduate students and the remaining 3% self-identified as 'other', including academics and members of the Students' Union.

Of the undergraduate student participants in the questionnaire, 54% were in their 1st year of study, 24% in their final year of study, and 22% of respondents self-identified as 'other', including 2nd year of study. In terms of subject-disciplines, the data indicates that 48%, of the undergraduate students, were from the School of Law, 17% from the Business School, 8% from Education, 7% from the School of Humanities, 5% from Physics, Astronomy and Maths, 5% from the School of Computer Science, 3% from Life and Medical Sciences, 3% from Creative Arts, 2% from the School of Engineering and Technology and 2% from Health and Social Work. It should be noted that the supervising lecturer for WoW was from the University's School of Law and, as such, a great deal of the promotion activity for this ECCA during 2015/16 was through the School's portals and social media platforms and, as such, should be borne in mind when considering the participation bias in favour of law students.

Turning to the ethnicity of the 187 student participants, 8%, of student self-identified as White UK or White other, 38% as Asian UK or Asian, 46% of students were Black UK or Black/African/Caribbean, and 6% classified themselves as Mixed race/Multiple ethnicity, with 2% choosing 'Other' for their ethnicity. When this profile is compared to other ECCAs offered to students which included Debating, Mediation and Mooting, then the overall BME participation rate for these courses was 83% of all participants. If the specific data relating to WoW is discounted (i.e. 92%), the remaining BME participation rate for the other ECCAs during the 2015/16 academic year was 72%. Whilst this still represents a considerable proportion of student participants, it is nevertheless 20% lower than the BME participation rate for WoW.

The data also highlights the fact that 18% of the 187 participants had attended 1-3 sessions of the twenty available during the 2015/16 academic year; 28% had attended between 4-6 sessions, with 35% having attended 7-9 sessions. It was noted that 19% of the questionnaire participants had attended over half of the sessions provided throughout the academic year.

As part of the questionnaire, students were asked why they had attended WoW, with the following six categories being provided as part of the survey: (a) It is generally educational; (b) I am interested in the positions argued in a specific session; (c) It helps to improve my public speaking skills; (d) It helps to improve my critical reasoning skills; (e) It is entertaining; and (f) It is generally sociable. On a scale of 1-6, with 1 being 'least important' and 6 being 'most important', the participants reported across the range, (by accruing and averaging the scores for each category): It is entertaining – 2.1; I am interested in the positions argued in a specific session – 2.3; It is generally sociable – 2.8; It is generally educational – 4.1; It helps to improve my critical reasoning skills – 4.6; It helps to improve my public speaking skills – 5.1 (rounded figures) = 21.

Participants were also asked to self-reflect on their level of participation and engagement across the sessions they had attended. The questionnaire data highlights that of the 187 participants, 32% reported that they considered themselves 'Highly active', a further 38% identified as being 'Sometimes active', with 12% 'Occasionally active'; and a further 18% of participants felt that they had been 'Passive' during their attendance at sessions.

Finally, the participants were asked whether they would appreciate the future inclusion of WoW-style learning and teaching methods into the delivery of their formal degree programmes. The results indicated that 65% of the survey's participants stated 'lectures' (within which staff defend pre-set positions); 74% stated 'workshops/seminars' (within which students defend pre-set positions); 18% declined to answer.

Where participants indicated that they would appreciate the inclusion of WoW-style learning and teaching delivery in their formal degree programmes, the predominant reasons provided by students included the following: 42% stated that it 'improves

critical reasoning and/or understanding of the subject matter'; 27% stated that it 'improves student engagement'; a further 16% of participants stated it 'improves self-confidence'; and 15% stated it 'improves public speaking skills'.

Future plans and research

In the light of this student feedback, and following the revalidation of the Law School's undergraduate portfolio in 2016, the authors have embedded WoW-style teaching as a pilot project within a first year Constitutional & Politics module. This module is compulsory for all Law degree students as well as those studying on the Politics & International Relations degree, providing a direct comparison between subject-disciplines as part of the next phase of research. The pilot will involve incorporation of the Socratic Method (as outlined in the WoW course) into a series of workshops within which they may ether actively defend or challenge positions based on the critical analysis points of the subject matter. It is the authors' intention to collate the data from these students to discover whether there is a direct correlation between those who allocate themselves to actively defending a WoW position, those who choose to simply challenge these students, and those who perform better in their academic studies.

Alongside this, the authors have worked with academics within other discipline areas so as to embed WoW-style sessions into their curriculum delivery. Whilst some of this is still undertaken on an informal basis, the Hertfordshire Business School has actively followed the Law School's lead by embedding a WoW-style pilot into their Business and Tourism degree. This will, once again, provide the authors with further subject-discipline comparative data, as well as more detailed information as to whether a similar level of BME student engagement takes place within these two pilot projects. This, in turn, will enable the authors to explore further whether there is a disproportionate demographic trend towards BME student involvement in the WoW style of teaching on these undergraduate degrees, as it currently is with the WoW ECCA.

There is a further stage to the future research plan, which is not specifically BME-centric: In the next stage, the authors' plan is to allocate students to WoW-style workshops to identify whether the method works with those who either: (a) do not volunteer to participate; and/or (b) whether there is a correlation between those who do currently volunteer and those who outperform others on the undergraduate academic programmes. In essence, the authors are seeking to identify whether there is something inherent in the WoW-style of teaching that improves performance, or, conversely, whether there is something inherent in the type of student who is amenable to WoW-style teaching.

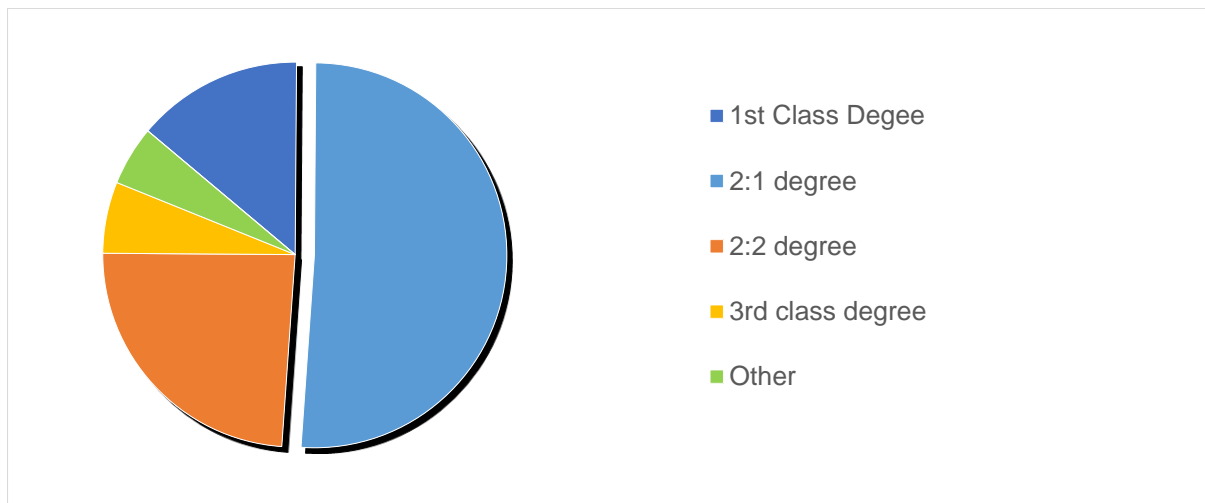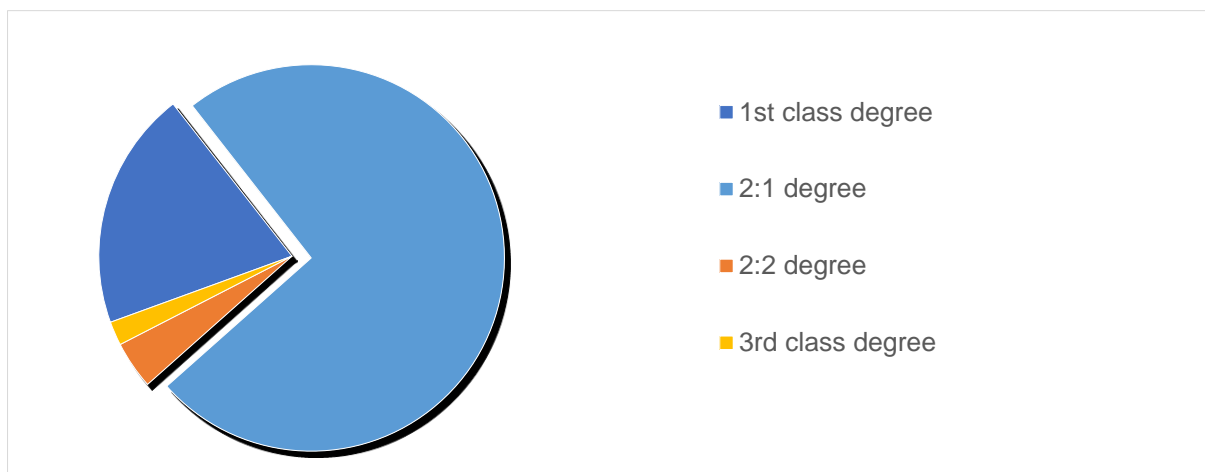**Figure 1.1 Academic Performance of the entire cohort (2015/16)**

Figure 1.2 Academic Performance of the ECCA engaged cohort (2015/16)

As may be noted from Figure 1.1 above, approximately 65% of the entire Law School cohort graduated with a good honours degree (defined as being either a first class honours or upper second class honours degree). A further 23% achieved a lower second class honours degree, with a further 12% either achieving a third class honours degree or another exit award. By comparison Figure 1.2 illustrates that of those students from the Law School who were engaged with ECCAs, 94% of the student cohort which engaged with ECCAs during their academic studies achieved a good honours degree. Approximately 4% achieved a lower second class honours degree, with a further 2% receiving a third class honours degree.

Based on this data, the authors assert that there is a direct and positive correlation between exposure to Socratic Method learning and teaching implemented in ECCAs, and the improved academic performance of students on degree courses.

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