

# Seminar capital: an exploration of the enduring social and pedagogical benefits of seminar engagement

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## ABSTRACT

This article presents findings from a small-scale qualitative case study exploring how engagement with seminars might prompt a sense of community amongst students. Further, it considered if such engagement might afford students 'seminar capital', a form of academic social capital (Bourdieu 1977 in Preece 2010). The study also aimed to uncover how seminar pedagogy can support students to develop their academic voice and connect with others in learning communities. Reflecting on emergent learning (Bourner 2003) supports students to move between a range of language codes (Preece 2010). Students in the study reported that seminar discussions supported their conceptual understanding, consolidated their academic language skills and offered opportunities to apply their knowledge to their assessments. This took place within an emerging positioning of relationships between peers and lecturers.

## KEYWORDS

SOCIAL CAPITAL

SEMINARS

NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

EMERGENT LEARNING

LANGUAGE CODES.

## INTRODUCTION

This practitioner research aimed to explore why students regularly attend and subsequently engage in seminars, so that staff would be better informed of seminar pedagogies which facilitate and promote greater student involvement and participation. There are evident benefits to both individuals and groups having high levels of social capital (Field 2008). In this study, the researchers were keen to understand how the concept of social capital could be applied to an academic context to promote a form of 'seminar capital' enabling students to develop academic identity, voice and generative relationships. We acknowledged, in accordance with Bryson & Hand's

(2007) research, that there is an engagement continuum that operates at different levels in different spaces, and expected to find this operating in our research. We wondered if students who develop a strong sense of social capital (Field 2008) with tutors and peers in seminar groups have stronger engagement and satisfaction with their seminar experience.

### STUDENTS' SELF-PERCEPTION, VOICE AND ACADEMIC IDENTITY

Many students attending the Early Childhood Studies programme are drawn from non-traditional backgrounds (Taylor & House 2010). Often these students have specific linguistic differences (Preece 2010) requiring particular pedagogical

acknowledgement and support (Daddow 2016). Higher education attendance by non-traditional students has increased as a consequence of the widening participation agenda, leading to a corresponding sector concern with the levels of engagement, achievement and retention of such students and a just focus on strategies to address these concerns (Bryson & Hand 2007). Preece (2010) asserts that students negotiate a range of language codes when they arrive in university that relate to class and perceived racialised groups. As such they need opportunities to operate as legitimate speakers (Bourdieu 1977 in Preece 2010) who possess desired knowledge. This relates to Ylijoki's ideas (2000, in Bryson & Hand 2007) about students'

transitions into university when they need to conform to teacher and other student expectations. Taylor & House (2010) found that older, non-traditional students' concerns centre on the 'how' of learning in contrast to younger students' focus on the social aspects of learning. Martin (1999 in Bryson & House 2007) found that students who had developed a degree of intrinsic motivation had a correspondingly high degree of self-responsibility which led to higher learning.

### **PEDAGOGY OF THE SEMINAR**

Much of the research literature focuses on harnessing or encouraging learner activity (Briggs 1989 in Bryson & Hand 2007) to promote deeper engagement (Biggs 1997 in Fry et al. 2000). Gibbs (2002) identifies that effective teachers are competent in using symbolic representations to process experiences and guide future actions. This can help avoid a transmission-only curriculum (Giroux 2011 in Daddow 2016) which can undermine engagement. Encouraging students to debate new knowledge in relation to existing understandings and link theoretical knowledge with their practical experience may promote students' ability to abstract meaning (D'Andrea 2000: 49), whereas a narrow focus on learning outcomes can favour lower-level cognitive tasks (Bloom 1956 in D'Andrea 2000: 50). Reflective thinking and emergent learning (Bourner 2003) are often cited as goals of university teaching and can be promoted by teaching that stresses active and personal engagement as well as flexible assessments (Bryson & Hand 2007).

### **RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN THE LEARNING COMMUNITY: POWER AND HIERARCHY**

Seminar sessions can support teachers to form a containing space for the group (Bion 1984; Armstrong 2004), thus preparing students to engage with the module and with each other. Such containment can encourage levels of informality in seminars as a means of minimising 'differences in role' (Griffiths 2000: 101) necessary for promoting

discussion. Harnessing students' prior experiences may provide opportunities for students to position themselves as legitimate speakers with useful knowledge (Preece 2010). Bryson & Hand's (2007) research found that students valued tutors who were enthusiastic, consistent, knowledgeable, equitable, who praise and acknowledge students, who have a personal relationship and a holistic view of student's workload and concerns. Similarly, Mann's research in 2001 (cited in Bryson & Hand 2007) found that students value power sharing, for example avoiding using assessment as a disciplining process, alongside a sense of criticality and awareness. Daddow's research drew on ideas of Funds of Knowledge (Moll et al. 1992 in Daddow 2016) to emphasise how students' familiar lifeworlds could be seen as assets in the classroom.

Mann (2001, cited in Bryson & Hand 2007: 354) suggested that students want to experience solidarity and mutual understanding, hospitality among the community, safety, acceptance and respect. This echoes Preece's (2010) study of students' experiences of linguistic code switching, whereby students learned to operate in a range of linguistic environments, according to a variety of social groupings present in different classes. Kemble et al. (2001 in Bryson & Hand 2007) found that students want to trust and develop affiliations in class and that teachers are pivotal to this process.

### **THE STUDY**

The project utilised a case study approach (Mukherji & Albon 2018) inviting level 5 Early Childhood Studies students to complete an online survey, followed by the option to take part in a face-to-face interview. Fifteen students completed the survey, and five students attended semi-structured interviews with a member of the research team. The interviewees are current module leaders on the Early Childhood Studies programme; however, measures were implemented to ensure that students were not attending modules

led by the research team during the academic year in which the research was conducted.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Findings from the survey of 15 students are as follows:

### **ATTENDANCE**

The majority of participants stated that they attended either all or most of their timetabled seminars. The reasons offered for their attendance were the time of the seminar, its relevance to the assignment for that module, and the seminar teacher. However, other factors such as the main topic of the seminar, relationships with other students in the class, and the room itself, were also noted. This indicates that students make choices around both logistical and pedagogical reasons. For some of the participants there did appear to be an investiture in both relationship with the lecturer and the learning opportunity provided by the seminar. This is evidenced by students' commitment to contacting the lecturer to send apologies if unable to attend and to review the seminar slides via the university's virtual learning environment. That said, very few participants stated that they completed seminar tasks in their own time if they missed the seminar.

Findings from the semi-structured interviews echo the responses made in the surveys, with further elaboration on the logistical issues impacting on non-attendance in seminars, predominantly due to external responsibilities, for example family or work commitments, consistent with the profile of non-traditional students. Interviewees alluded to the perceived authority/subject knowledge of the seminar leader, preferring to have a seminar leader who was also the module leader and had therefore taught the lecture. The benefits of learning from each other and having a broader insight into key themes were also considered.

*'Sometimes you go to the lecture and you absorb everything, and then other times ... you do not get everything so going to the seminars you get deeper, erm, and your colleagues can support you ...'*

*'To me the seminar is to enhance what was said before.'*

These comments reflect the findings from Lake (2001) who compared the pedagogy of the traditional lecture, and its emphasis on the dissemination of information, with the active learning approach used in small group sessions. Students in Lake's study cited the importance of group discussion and peer teaching as contributory factors to their enhanced engagement during the latter.

## PEDAGOGY

In relation to their seminar learning experience, the most commonly identified preferences were listening to the seminar teacher and discussing in groups. It should also be noted that a small number of students preferred to work by themselves. Discussion certainly seems to be valued by the students, with many participants stating that these exchanges helped them to understand a topic more thoroughly, particularly where the discussions related to the preceding lecture and thus reinforced what had previously been introduced. Occasionally this happens via application of concepts with specific examples:

*'People talking about their life stories relating to the topic. This helps me to really understand and have examples...'*

*'The seminar teacher would ask us to give our individual thoughts and ideas around the subject. This gives us different perceptions and varied ideas of knowledgeable information.'*

Similarly this also applies to specific terminology that is introduced in the lecture and then clarified in the seminar. The participants also valued the exploration of different resources

related to the week's topic. Videos were mentioned by a small number of students, but more commonly identified were extracts of relevant readings that could be analysed and then discussed with the support of the seminar teacher. Some of the participants made the link between these readings and their assignments.

Having the opportunity to consolidate and revisit lecture material in smaller groups where there was the opportunity to ask questions and share concerns was cited as a key difference between the lecture and seminar experience. In addition, interviewees enjoyed having the opportunity to apply theoretical concepts to real-life practical examples, which facilitated greater understanding. Further opportunities for support with the assessment tasks were also cited as a distinction between lectures and seminars, although all interviewees would prefer the seminars to allocate more time to assessment discussion.

*'Yeah, the difference is like, in the smaller group, you can explain yourself, I don't really like talking in a large group, I prefer to take notes, and the lecture is more of delivering information but the seminar is more discussion.'*

*'It's more like a 1 to 1, so even though we are in small groups, the teacher is able to come to each table and make her contribution ...'*

*'You get to relax, but not in the normal sense, I mean like a relaxed atmosphere, it doesn't have a rigid structure ... it should be a bit flexible'*

*'I gain more knowledge and understanding, it (the seminar) provides opportunities so you're not losing anything, it fills in the gaps.'*

The students' recognition and appreciation of the different pedagogical approaches facilitated in the seminar sessions, compared to the lectures, resonates with Wrenn & Wrenn's (2009) study which explored the significance of

active learning techniques, particularly when applying theory to practice. According to Wrenn and Wrenn, active learning requires students to be engaged in more than simply listening; there needs to be less emphasis on disseminating information and more focus on the promotion of specific skills. Furthermore, students should be involved in higher-order activities which allow them to consolidate their understanding, ask questions, learn from their peers and gain new knowledge. As indicated by the responses above, the conditions in which such active learning can take place include the facilitation of a learning environment which supports risk taking, where each student's learning journey is valued, where student concerns about assessment are openly acknowledged and where opportunities for asking questions are routinely offered. Arguably, such an environment is easier to facilitate with smaller groups of students and in teaching spaces which offer collaborative learning opportunities, compared to tiered lecture halls populated by large groups of students with diverse learning needs and expectations.

## ACADEMIC SKILLS

Although there was not a clear consensus about the academic skills that were developed via effective seminars, most participants identified different ways in which this area was supported. This variance may reflect the diverse needs of our students, and also their own perception of what they need help with. For example, presentation skills, analysing texts, receiving and acting on feedback and academic referencing were all mentioned in this context. In many cases these points were discussed in relation to upcoming assignments.

Interviewees alluded to the development of their conceptual understanding more than their academic skills development, although there was some acknowledgement of the ways in which their confidence in relation to specific academic skills had increased over time.

The importance of offering students the opportunity to reflect upon their conceptual understanding and their academic skill development cannot be overstated (Schön 1983; Kolb 1984). The findings indicate that the integration of academic writing skills with the students' emerging perceptual understandings and aligned to their assessment learning outcomes may support them more effectively with the development of their academic writing skills, as reflected in Gopee & Deane's (2013) research which explored students' experiences of their academic skill development, citing the concurrent conceptual development that occurred when academic writing support was contextualised within their module topics.

### RELATIONSHIPS WITH STUDENTS

One of the most commonly selected seminar preferences was working and discussing with other students, either in small groups or during whole class discussions. The importance of these in developing subject knowledge and supporting relationships with other students was identified by a number of the participants, many of whom stated that they sat with the same peers each week.

'We are building a relationship and learning different perspectives at the same time.'

*'I tend to love working alone however working in small groups has helped me get other peoples [sic] ideas and thoughts ...as well as adapting professionalism.'*

*'I feel excluded when I am in the big rooms but in the seminar even if you do not get to speak to everyone 1:1, you still get an understanding of the people in the room.'*

*'they give a lot more of their own experiences, so you get to identify with each other ... [offers example] we were able to find a connection because we both had the same experience'*

*'Yes, because ... you're free to talk because in the seminars they do a lot of group work ... the seminar becomes more personal because people give a lot more of their own experiences to explain and enhance and to show that they understand, so in that case you get to build better relationships. For example, a student in my seminar class came and gave an example of when she came here and she was struggling because, she had an 8 year old child at that time and she was in a hostel ... I couldn't say it before but I had the same experience as that but I never said anything but when she said that I added that I had lived it myself with my 8 year old, so we built a relationship, we were able to find a connection ...'*

These perspectives underscore ideas of regularity, proximity and shared experience leading to connection similar to Mann's findings in their 2001 study revealing students' desire for solidarity and mutual acceptance and understanding (cited in Bryson & Hand 2007). Similarly, Steinhart's (2004) study exploring the characteristics required for effective small group activities cited a 'non-threatening group atmosphere' where the tutor is acknowledged and valued as a guide to learning and where there are opportunities for students to learn from each other.

Participants also explained that the group presentations that they have had to complete in some modules have supported them to be able to develop positive relationships with one another. It was noted however that, in some cases, group presentations can lead to some students exerting control over a group, or contrarily feeling excluded. These frustrations were reflected in Le et al.'s (2018) research on collaborative learning whereby perceptions of high-status and low-status students impeded equal consideration of all group members' contributions to class discussions.

The importance of shared experiences was a key response from the interviews, not solely about work-related concerns but also the opportunity to share personal experiences and the sense of belonging that this engendered between seminar members. However, the majority of responses in relation to this theme focused on the opportunities that the seminars offered in terms of study support, and engagement with group-based tasks. The interviewees acknowledged the limitation of their own personal circumstances (family commitments, work commitments) as a hindrance to the development of further social relationships with their peers.

### RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE LECTURER

It has already been established that an important deciding factor regarding seminar attendance is the seminar teacher and the opportunity to work one-to-one with the lecturer or in small groups. One student outlined:

*'... drop in sessions has [sic] helped me form a relationship with my lectures [sic] as it is an opportunity to present your work and ideas in a one to one form. This [is] less formal and nerve wrecking [sic]. I have found that I got better grades on the assignments I attended these drop in sessions than those I skipped out on.'*

Having the chance to seek clarification on anything that was unclear in the lecture was a key component in student preference for their seminar tutor, with students stating their preference for having a seminar leader who was also the module leader and who therefore delivered the lecture. Furthermore, specific pedagogies employed by certain seminar leaders were cited as particularly helpful.

Interviewer: Has your confidence developed over your time at UEL, do you feel more confident at contributing?

Student: Yes, because ... being a mature student, my first few weeks was a week of asking myself so many questions, whether I would be able to make it or not ... I nearly stopped and ... I spoke to H, and she was very, very good to support me ...

Interviewer: So, because of H, you decided to carry on going?

Student: Yes, she kept on checking on me, and sending me emails to see how I was getting on, she was really really supportive

This is commensurate with findings from Kemble's research (2001 in Bryson & Hand 2007) that revealed teachers who promoted trust were a key ingredient in students feeling confident in their academic community. Bryson & Hand's own research in 2007 revealed students want lecturers who have a holistic view of them beyond their academic work and that this type of warm and realistic view of student lives was also a factor in students developing trust and confidence in their learning community. Finally Steinhart's (2004) research recognised the significance of the personal attributes of the tutor to effective small group sessions, a point which is further reflected in Wrenn & Wrenn's (2009) research which describes a conducive learning environment as one where the tutor is strongly invested in each student as an individual, and able to communicate implicitly or overtly that every student's learning matters.

## CONCLUSION

It is not possible, given the small sample, to generalise conclusions beyond the scope of this study and the students who took part. Nonetheless some interesting and relevant conclusions do emerge.

This research indicates that students value both the relationships they develop with peers and with their lecturers. Students see these encounters as useful in developing their understanding of different topics, and as a means to becoming more professional, by hearing and adapting to other people's perspectives. Indeed, students clearly understand that they can learn a lot from their peers, and not just the lecturer. These sorts of opportunities highlight the importance of the pedagogy of the seminar, which should enable students to not only improve their understanding of the topics in question, but also develop their academic identity. The seminar provides a clear opportunity to do this with informal approaches and sharing of power within the session. It has already been established that supporting non-traditional students is of relevance within the context of this research, and the seminar provides opportunities for this with the flexibility of the session enabling the development of students' academic skills, irrespective of their prior academic profile. In addition, seminars should enable students to begin to see themselves as valued contributors to debates and discussions because of the format, and this may not be as possible in other types of teaching session.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The seminar provides different learning opportunities from those inherent in lectures and tutorials. It is important to ensure that these are realised, especially when working with students who may be non-traditional, or when lecture groups are very large in number so that group work is harder to facilitate.

Where seminars are part of a teaching model in which seminars follow lectures (as is the case in this research) it is important that there is a clear link for students between those two teaching modes. Topics that are introduced in lectures need to be developed or discussed in seminars, and the same terminology should be used. This is of course easier if lectures and seminars are delivered by the same lecturer, and this was also the preference of some of the participants in this research.

Students see the seminar as an opportunity to discuss ideas, ask questions, and fill in any gaps in understanding from the lecture. However, these elements do still need to be planned for, so thought is needed as to how and when this happens. In particular, students mentioned feeling fearful of speaking in a large group, such as in a lecture, so while the seminar environment is less likely to cause anxiety, that does not mean that all students will have the confidence to take part. Given that this is key for the development of academic identity and voice, teaching approaches which encourage participation should be prioritised. ■

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