Teaching Research Skills from a distance – reflections of an international student and PGR

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Abstract

Research Skills are a core module in the undergraduate psychology curriculum at the University of Leeds. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, all teaching sessions took place on campus, from big groups for lectures to small groups (up to 12 students) for seminars. With the outbreak of the coronavirus, these moved online and I, as a seminar leader, found myself facilitating learning sessions in research skills from a distance. In this article, I will reflect on my experience of delivering these seminars online as both an international student and a postgraduate researcher. With this double lens in mind, I will consider interactions between students and myself, the sense of belonging and the role of feedback in the online learning process. While facilitating the 'Research Skills' small-group sessions did not leave me a lot of freedom in designing my own seminar, I managed to get students to collaborate on specific tasks, give comprehensive feedback on their assignments and provide them with material they could work through in their own time. In a time where students were physically distanced, my approach helped to create a sense of community to enhance students' learning experience.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and the following lockdowns caused universities all over the world to review and reorganise their teaching and learning to be carried out online (Arday, 2022). This brought several challenges for everyone involved, from students to tutors to postgraduate teaching assistants. Indeed, the latter, who find themselves in the liminal space between students and established academics, often play a major role in the delivery of undergraduate and postgraduate teaching (Compton & Tran, 2017), but their voices are rarely included when it comes to judging the effectiveness of Higher Education teaching and the fostering of a learning community for students. In this reflective piece of writing, I position myself as an international postgraduate researcher teaching at undergraduate level at the University of Leeds, both before and during the pandemic. First, I will analyse my own context, before reflecting on how this has informed my approach towards learning and teaching. Finally, I will emphasise the role feedback plays in the student learning experience and how this was, in my case, influenced by the fact that all teaching was delivered online for the 2020-2021 cohort of undergraduate students in the School of Psychology.

Student, researcher and teacher

As argued in Tomczak (2021), the term 'PhD student' might only describe part of the truth for postgraduate researchers. While, strictly considered, PhD students are still 'students', learning how to do research, they are also already 'researchers' and as I argue in this article, they are also 'teachers' in their role in undergraduate and postgraduate teaching. Our position in that way is unique, as both learning and teaching are part of our daily responsibilities, and we can use our own and current learning experience to inform our own and current teaching practice. In my case, this point of view enabled me to think about the research topic I chose for my PhD as an example and inspiration for the first-year undergraduate students I was teaching. Indeed, several students were very interested in hearing about my research and approached me to ask questions about it, which they probably would not have been able to do with their lecturers and tutors. As Dolan and Johnson (2010) stated, undergraduate students perceive postgraduate students as more approachable than more senior members of the faculty. This observation might not even be linked to the person who teaches their class, but more to the class itself, as postgraduate researchers usually facilitate small group sessions that allow for more interaction and rapport between the teacher and the students. To me, it was important to give my students the opportunity to have someone to talk to about research in general, but also about their studies and provide sufficient time for questions. As suggested by Aktar and Oxley (2019), bringing research to the classroom can have a positive effect on student engagement, as learners are able to see how knowledge is generated and become more motivated to engage in research activities themselves. At the same time, I was able to understand what my students were dealing with – starting their studies of psychology and living a more independent life away from their families – as the time when I started my studies was still very fresh in my mind.

Having been able to do a German Abitur and a French Baccalaureate (both A-level equivalents) in Germany, it allowed me to use my language skills further and start my undergraduate degree in France. Three years later, after successful completion, I moved to Leeds in 2019, where I started my PhD and teaching in the Research Skills 1 and 2 modules at the School of Psychology at the same time. Having experience of these three different educational systems has contributed largely to my own understanding of Higher Education and the atmosphere I want to create in my classroom for an ideal student learning experience. Besides, I was able to inspire students to look out for tangible opportunities internationally, which they may not have thought about before. A few students thanked me for this perspective I allowed them to take and have decided to study a year abroad during their degree. As Elliott and Marie (2021) suggest, postgraduate researchers who teach find

themselves in a place where they can best navigate between the positions of staff and students. This was exactly my experience, as being responsible for a group of students allowed me to grow into the role of a teacher, although I still considered myself a student.

Delivering Research Skills online

From 2019 to 2022, I taught first-year undergraduate psychology students as a seminar leader in the Research Skills 1 and 2 modules. These modules combine lectures and practicals (both taught by senior academics), computer-based learning sessions (taught by postgraduate teaching assistants) and seminars (taught by postgraduate researchers). While the lectures concentrate on research methodology and statistics, the practicals give students the opportunity to carry out a simple research study. Students then hand in a report (similar to a short journal article) about the study they carried out and the data they analysed. Seminars take place a week before a report is due as a final opportunity for students to talk about methods and rationale of the study and to review relevant content from their recent lecture for their report.

After almost a year of teaching on campus, these small-groups sessions were delivered entirely online and I, as a postgraduate teaching assistant, had to find a way of delivering the same content, without forgoing the standard of the interactions and discussions in the in-person seminars. The School of Psychology asked us to facilitate the monthly seminars on Microsoft Teams and while we were given the content to cover during these sessions, there was always time allocated for questions and discussions. To engage students and enhance their learning experience, Colaiacomo and Havemann (2022) suggest collecting ideas for activities and interactive workshops from the students, which can be found on their blog referenced in their article. However, simply communicating with students, being compassionate and human, and actively building relationships with them can already have a positive impact on their engagement and even raise their marks (Glazier, 2021).

To create the space for reflection, I asked my students at the beginning of the academic year 2020/2021 to share with the class in the chat any aspects of their studies they were particularly looking forward to and any aspects they were particularly worried about. While I was happy to see that the students were excited about some subjects, I was more interested in their fears, as these would give me a good idea of how I could support them best, even from a distance. As shown in past literature (Macher et al., 2012), students were mostly concerned about their upcoming statistics classes and felt they would not be good enough to pass this module. They told me about their computer-based learning sessions and how difficult it was for them to use the statistical software SPSS to answer their research questions designed by their tutors.

The Research Skills seminars were delivered in preparation of several research reports which students had to hand in for me to mark. As the module progressed, students were asked to move from descriptive statistics to the use of inferential statistics. While the statistical knowledge and skills were covered mainly during the lectures of the same module, the first aim of the seminar was to create a place where students could ask questions about anything they had not understood, in order to be able to confidently write their reports. To facilitate the discussion between them and encourage the more introverted students to communicate with each other, I regularly used the break-out room function of Microsoft Teams. This enabled students to work in small groups in separate virtual rooms, where they could discuss their questions with their peers, before we would come back to the 'main room' and I would help with any remaining questions.

On a more theoretical level, according to Marton and Säljö (1976), there are two ways of engaging with new, difficult concepts: a surface-level processing and a deep-level processing. As suggested by these terms, a surface-level processing only concentrates on recalling as much information as possible, whereas a deep-level processing enables students to understand mechanisms behind

concepts through reflection. To complete Marton's and Säljö's theory, Entwistle (1988) added a strategic approach to learning, which he described as the "hope for success" which allows students to navigate between the deep and surface learning approaches for more efficient outcomes. During my seminars, I encouraged students to use a deep approach to learning, which has been shown to increase their success of reaching learning outcomes (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004), by minimising the time they have to listen to me, but instead help them to work through material independently or only with the help of other students. In an online context, this often included some ice-breaking before we could start activities in small groups, as students were hesitant to talk to each other. I would join students in the break-out rooms, introduce them to each other and help facilitate the communication to start with. By listening carefully to their questions at the end of group activities, as Marton and Säljö (1976) did when asking students to describe their learning process, I was able to tell when students engaged on a deep level with the content of the seminar or when I needed to prompt them further.

The first aim of the seminars, as described above, was to make sure students had access to all the resources they needed to write their next research report and give them a place to ask questions. The second aim was to reflect on any feedback students had received on their last research report and in the next section of this reflective piece, I will discuss my own approach to providing feedback.

Assessment and Feedback

As someone receiving regular feedback on written work from my supervisors, I had my own ideas of what constructive feedback should look like and how it should be delivered. I knew it had to be both encouraging but also challenge students to go beyond what they had already learned. This process called 'scaffolding' was first theorised by Wood et al. (1976), who described how an adult, or 'expert', could help facilitate learning by choosing an activity that goes just beyond of what a child, or the less experienced person, would be capable of doing. In my teaching role, I was responsible for marking students' reports in their Research Skills 1 and 2 modules (three reports per semester) but did not take part in the process of designing these assessments and their marking criteria. However, I used every opportunity I had during seminars to provide students with feedback about their work in class, in addition to the more formal feedback for their reports. For the assessment of the reports, all postgraduate researchers teaching the seminars received specific training at the beginning of the semester by marking an example report and comparing their feedback. From my own experience, I knew that written and asynchronous feedback was received in a different way than oral and synchronous feedback (be it face to face or from a distance). While written feedback can be misunderstood, misleading or just appear quite negative, oral and synchronous feedback gives students the opportunity to ask for clarification by turning it into an activity for the entire class. In my own experience, it also allowed me as the teacher to reconsider my wording, to make sure to always include some positive feedback and to pay attention to how students received the feedback in general. For this reason, I took additional care of planning enough time for group feedback during the seminar and giving students the time to reflect on feedback.

Brown (2005: 82) claimed that assessment and feedback, as part of a continuous progression for students, "should be learner-centred […] and should reflect a learner-centred curriculum" and should create opportunities for tutors to provide constructive feed-forward comments on the learners' achievements. Part of the assessment of students' reports involved assessing the amount and choice of literature they used to support their argument, and allowed for a lot of variability between students. In addition, as the HEA (2017: 15) suggested, I provided students with an 'educational rationale', which explained how and why they were going to be assessed and how this feeds into their general curriculum.

For the academic year 2020/2021, the School of Psychology started using a reflective feedback sheet for students' reports, where they were asked to copy feedback they had received previously, reflect on how they addressed these points and asked them which aspect of their report they would particularly value feedback on. In my seminars, I noticed that the students who engaged with it generally made more progress during the module, as they were encouraged to review feedback from their last report and think critically about it, before submitting their next piece of work. This observation is in line with the findings of Harris et al. (2022), who claim that the implementation of this type of feedback sheet is perceived as a positive change by students, due to its reflective nature. While this feedback sheet was not assessed, I insisted that students should include it in their report, in order for them to better engage with, and reflect on, received feedback. Compared to the previous year, where this feedback sheet was not used, I noticed more students were able to answer their own questions independently, by engaging with the reflective feedback sheet and they were less reliant on the educator's support.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to argue that the move to online teaching was not only a challenge, but also an opportunity to question and adjust our teaching practice in Higher Education. Indeed, whether the future of learning and teaching is campus-based or online-based, educators should apply the same theories to the learning environment we want to create. Communication between students and between tutors and students is essential for a healthy learning environment, be it face to face or online, as this enables students to learn from their peers and to further engage with feedback respectively. Through my own experience as a student, researcher and teacher, I was able to create a learning community for students, where they felt connected enough to talk to each other, solve problems and answer questions in groups, and reflect on feedback regularly.

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