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Title of project:

Revision of the style of teaching of a first year module: The Global Environment



What did you set out to do?

Background

The aim of the module is to develop students' ability to critically assess their own attitudes to global issues and their awareness of the relationship between the basic problems individuals face - poverty, lack of health care, pollution etc. and the economic and political models adopted by the government of the country they live in.

It must also prepare them for further study of the subject in years 2 and 3. I, as module leader, was keen to find a way to do this more effectively.

The module takes about 100 students from 2 faculties and 3 distinct degree paths. They have a wide range of academic background: entry points from 100 to 240 and typically more than 20 'favourite school subjects'.

The challenge

To revise the module so as to improve its ability to keep ALL these students interested and make sure that each individual progresses from their widely varying starting points, as far as they are able, along the path set out in the module aims.

Benefits for students

"Mixed ability" teaching encourages the acknowledgement by staff and students of differential starting points and encourages valuing progress on an individual learning pathway, rather than competitive grade comparisons.

Benefits for staff

This form of teaching encourages creativity and so can make the experience of teaching more enjoyable.

Benefits for the University:

Good example of successful cross faculty work

How have you achieved it?

By finding "current affairs" topics with which all students can, in some way, identify, and using them as the focus of the module.

I have used discussion of these topics in several ways:

- 1) To describe some of the processes taking place in the world today that lie at the heart of the globalisation debate. All students can understand this - at some level.
- 2) To develop, for those who don't have it, some notion of the importance of history in understanding globalisation and briefly introduce, to those who don't know them, some influential characters and ideas from the field of economics (e.g. Adam Smith). This is very important as preparation for the 2nd year.
- 3) As a vehicle to get all students, but particularly the best, thinking beyond description of how the world is and considering the processes that underlie the topics studied. The module repeatedly challenges them on abstract ideas such as: Democracy; A 'fair' share; The Market; The State; The Individual; Ideology, in both lectures and seminars.

I have called this "mixed ability" teaching style The Ideas Ball. The ball is periodically thrown into the room, some grab it and run with it, some grab it and quickly drop it, it bounces over some heads and they hardly notice its presence. But maybe with repeated throws they will at least start to notice it is there.



What next?

One feature of this revision was starting to develop a bank of appropriately graded reading material for seminars. Further development of this is now needed.

Feedback was collected from the whole group at several points during the year and it seems that the aim of keeping everyone interested was reasonably well achieved. Focus groups with the higher achieving students confirmed that I did manage to challenge them, their thinking did progress and the module aims were fulfilled. Next year I need to devote more attention to understanding what lower achievers make of the module - this is a bigger challenge as they are, of course, less willing to talk to me about such matters!