Undergraduate Group Vivas – Oxymoronic or a Path Towards Criticality?

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Introduction

In recent years, some scholars have been critical of the learning experience of management undergraduates, especially the lack of an ability to think critically (see, for example, Antonacopoulou , 2010; Clegg, 200; Errington and Bubna-Litic, 2015; Mingers , 2000). Such papers have reviewed the content, expectations, assessment and limitations in the 'typical' educational experience of undergraduate Business and Management students and their associated learning materials. The criticisms include the lack of critical thinking, the stance of students who view textbooks as being definitive and the lack of informed reflection on what is being learned. Such scholarly judgements are important for the on-going improvement of the higher education learning experience in management studies. However, it can be argued that they are oxymorons in the sense that the underpinning assumption is that it is always possible to improve the student learning experience (Errington and Bubna-Litic, 2015).

Rather than engage in further critical comment, the purpose of this paper is to present the first evidence of a new learning approach to the enhancement of the critical thinking ability of higher education students in management studies. Specifically, the aim of this developmental paper is to outline and explore the impact of Group Interactive Vivas (GIVs) on both students and tutors as part of the learning experience of students on a Level 9, degree year Strategic Management module at the University of the West of Scotland (UWS). Our early evidence shows that the approach has proved both beneficial for students and tutors. The paper therefore presents a useful advance in the educational armoury of academics to overcome the criticisms highlighted above.

Development of the GIVs

The GIVs were used to support the learning and analysis of case studies that the students selected following the guidance of Lynch (2015) and reviewed by tutors that only those organisations that have recently experienced significant problems in terms of such issues as lower than predicted profitability, market share or turnover. The rationale for this focus on 'challenged' organisations is that it is extremely unlikely that any 'successful' organisation will grant access to the actual strategies that are involved with their perceived success. It was also a requirement that only public organisations could be studied to ensure that a reasonable amount of formal annual reports and financial data was available to inform the analysis undertaken by students.

Objectives:
- Discuss previous similar work at UWS and elsewhere and explain how this work influenced the recent introduction GIVs.
- Highlight the key features of the approach adopted when adopting GIVs.
- Report on initial responses from external examiner, tutors, students and video recordings of GIVs from across 4 campuses.
- Highlight some observations and lessons that have been learnt about how to design, implement, manage and review the GIVs in an undergraduate context.

Previous Related Work to GIVs
The idea of GIVs was influenced by four areas of work into the idea of critical thinking and reflection. The first was the work of Wickham (2015) that advised students and tutors on the

typical frameworks and logics used in consultancy projects. This formed the core of a recent B.A. Management degree at UWS that included a 2 year In Company Project and Project Management package of modules that focussed on the students working directly with UK organisations on consultancy based projects. These culminated in the students making detailed, justified and specific recommendations on how to address an issue or opportunity identified by the client. During these presentations, clients typically examined the recommendations by simply repeatedly asking 'why' they should be adopted by their organisation.

The second source was the impressive work of Conner (2015) around the idea of what was termed 'interactive verbal examinations'. This was proposed as a possible way to boost the reflection and criticality of students' approach to their studies and assessments. Although more formally presented that the B.A. Management presentations discussed above, the central role of structured questioning is perceived as similar in both cases and Conner's work helped to provide justification for the adoption the GIVs.

The third source of support was the textbook and supporting websites of the Strategic Management textbook by Lynch (2015) 7th edition. This places an unusually explicit emphasis on the need for criticality when approaching the topic of Strategic Management and the associated challenges for senior management and those studying the subject. One consequence of this approach was that an adapted version of the Case Study guide from the Lynch website was developed to support the specific expectations of GIVs and feedback from tutors and students indicate that they found it to be of value when preparing for the GIVs.

Finally, a related although not identical approach to the teaching of Strategy at the University of Portsmouth was drawn upon to inform the GIVs this involved a more 'business orientated' approach to presentations that focussed on the clarity and defence of ideas and recommendations.

Key Features of Approach to Group Interactive Vivas

The module was completed by a cohort with 615 students across 4 campuses across and 5 deliveries in trimester 1. This was supported by 11 tutors in total and consisted of 18 tutorial groups. The tutorials were each one hour in duration and run weekly. There were also weekly 2 hour lectures that drew on the set textbook, the author's 2 web sites and a wide range of other video and learning materials frequently published under a Creative Commons licence. The other assessments were an Individual Management Report, not an essay, and a Critical Reflection that was worth a total of 65% of module grade. It is worth noting that students taking this module were drawn from 4 different degree programmes.

The GIV tasks the student groups were expected to undertake are summarised in the table below. Each GIV was worth 35% of the overall module grade for each student. One feature of these groups was that each student was randomly allocated to a group rather than allowing students to choose to join groups with their own friends. Some students welcomed this, whilst others formally requested that they should be allowed to choose who they formed a group with. This request was turned down by the external examiner as not typical of the workplace the students will experience in the future.

Initial Student Advice

• Identify a <u>public</u> organisation from the private, government or third sectors that has recently not performed very successfully.
• <u>Diagnose</u> the underlying causes of the selected organisation's recent performance over the past 3-5 years.
• For this organisation, make strategic <u>recommendations</u> for the most appropriate actions over the next 3-5 years to become more successful.
• Submit 3 slides summarising your diagnosis, recommendations and references to the information, books, journals and conceptual models

The preparations for the GIVs started in the first week of tutorials when the students were introduced to a mini case study of their own choice based on the 'Socratic Questioning' style of questioning. The typology of Socratic questions was initially drawn from work at the University of Michigan that referred to the work of R. W. Paul http://www.umich.edu/~elements/5e/probsolv/strategy/cthinking.htm although students were encouraged to explore the work of Lynch (2015) and the Open Learn Material from the Open University (2015).

Further specific advice was given to students in the early weeks of the trimester and is summarised below.

Key features of educational approach

1. A 'group interactive viva' is an opportunity to <u>defend</u> your diagnosis and recommendations.
2. A 'Socratic' style of critical questioning will be used by tutors.
3. Each 'group interactive viva' will last 15 minutes, this will allow about 10 questions to be asked by the tutors. It is expected that each group member will reply to a minimum of one question each.
4. This is <u>NOT</u> a presentation of your work.
5. A group may '<u>sack</u>' a group member for a lack of academic contribution after justifying and evidencing their decision to the satisfaction of the tutor. The group will inform the 'sacked' person of the outcome. There will normally be 5 members in each group.
6. The weekly tutorials will provide opportunities to review and practice the 'diagnosis', 'recommendations', 'viva' and 'Socratic questioning'.

Initial Results on GIVs

Overall the early reports on the effectiveness of GIVs have been broadly very supportive from an external examiner, fellow lecturers, tutors, student representatives and students. The formal review by the external examiner was that the assessments 'excellent, developmental and challenging'. Lectures and tutors have also reported strong support for the approach to tutorials and assessments and have noted that most students have valued this approach. Conversations with student representatives have also been in favour of this approach, especially when compared with the previous assessment model. The initial student surveys show improvement over previous years and the overall pass rates have also been consistently satisfactory across campuses and over 90% on the first diet. The mean grades were within the expected range of approximately 50% with the students achieving slightly higher results for the vivas than the individual management reports.

Further work will be completed by collecting data on the cohort of students studying the module this trimester who are typically part time students and the contents of the digital recordings will be reviewed to look for common strengths and weaknesses in the vivas to inform future tutorials and lectures. The results will also be examined to establish if there are any differences between the different degree programmes studying this module.

Observations and Lessons Learnt

Based on the implementation of GIVs in 2016/2017 there are some points to be highlighted that will future use of GIVs.

1. Students may initially struggle to understand need to focus on a public organisation that recently experienced serious problems as defined earlier. They require tutors' support, encouragement and advice to persist with this since they find it much more challenging than superficially praising an organisation that is presented in the media as currently 'successful'.
2. Adopting a Socratic questioning approach in every tutorial and lecture was perceived as helpful by the students since they found the idea of every question leading to another question, within reason, to be challenging and demanding.
3. The students almost seemed to require 'permission' to diagnose problems although they were then well able to develop their own critique of their organisations.
4. Once they understood the expectations and features of vivas the students became highly engaged in the preparations for the vivas, possibly to the detriment of attendance at traditional lectures.
5. The option of 'sacking' a student for a lack of participation was found to be effective in helping with student engagement by the students and tutors with only a very small number of students finding themselves without a group by the time of the vivas. These students are now expected to form a new group for the resit diet in the summer of 2017, a situation supported by the external examiner.
6. The digital recording of a sample of vivas for moderation by tutors and review by the external examiner was supported by most students, some of whom asked for the opportunity to review their recording as part of their wider personal Development.

Conclusion

Despite the multiple apparent contradictions of expecting undergraduate students to complete, albeit limited in time, vivas the early results suggest that they may offer an opportunity for students to develop their own critical approach to the study of Strategic Management and organisations in general. The support and enthusiasm the approach has gained from most students and staff alongside the quality of the viva defences that were recorded has encouraged the teaching team to continue with this approach subject to further improvements based on the further research that will take place in future.

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