Observed Teaching Session 3 – Reflections

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LTS502 – Teaching and Learning Methods and Media

I. Introduction

The Observed Teaching Session consisted of a one hour tutorial for the Unit HET306 – Unix for Telecommunications. Within the Lesson Plan I indicated that I was trying to move away from the traditional concept of a tutorial being a *Question and Answer* session and to attempt to itegrate a practical component into the tutorials. To this end, each tutorial this Semester has been redesigned to cover a range of different techniques and approaches and will be evaluated at semesters end before being redployed next year.

As mentioned in the Lesson and Media plan, use of technology in our field of education (Telecommunications Engineering) is typically second nature, students already make extensive use of the available resources. The challenge therefore is to come up with different means of deploying technology within the class. The challenge I set myself - and have used twice this Semester - is to interactively use the technology within the classroom. To have students use and demonstrate their understanding of the content in real-time on the available computer hardware in an interactive environment within the class.

II. Class Response

A. Technological

The technology was well integrated into the classroom environment. The use of the technology blended well into the student presentations and subsequent discussions and was not distracting. This is important as technology use that is poorly thought out and deployed often takes centre stage and supplants the key aim of the classroom – teaching and learning of ideas and concepts.

The success of the technology was due partly to the lack of technological gremlins and partly to students familiarity with the technology. I also believe that having seen my use of technology during lectures to provide real-time demonstrations of working systems has helped students to realise that computers can really be used as a teaching tool. As a side effect, I believe it helped students to feel more comfortable about showing and demonstrating their own work – particularly when some of my own demonstrations during the lectures occasionally fail to work the way they were planned to.

B. Class Understanding

The class in general understood what was expected of them and showed that they had grasped the primary topic of this particular session well. Some of the presented work clearly demonstrated that those particular students had gone beyond the basic content of the Unit and extended their knowledge and practical experience. This is particularly pleasing as preperations for this tutorial were deemed to be non-assessable.

C. Participation

Participation can be broken down into two sub-components:

1) Preparation and presentation of a system to the group
2) Participation in group discussion on other students work

In the first instance – preparation and presentation – I thought that classroom participation was as good as, or better than, could be expected for a class in this field (Engineering). There seems to be a culture in the field of Engineering where classroom participation is minimal and difficult to achieve. This was true when I was a student and is still true now that I am teaching. I remember the shock I felt when I first participated in a Unit that was outside the area of Engineering and saw the difference in levels of participation by students within the classroom environment.

Given this observation, I am extremely happy with the level of effort put in by the students to participate in this exercise. I am left to wonder whether this is because the material itself is interesting and leads to this extra work or whether the structure of the class away from the traditional tutorial style has contributed to this.

The second issue of participation in group discussion was a little more muted and more in line with what is the culture amongst Engineering students. I often had to draw out conversation and discussion points following each presentation but was in general happy that once I started the conversation going there were a number of students who were happy to participate and add their own ideas to the conversation. Given how the tutorials ran in the previous semester, I consider this to be a marked improvement.

III. Improvements

Some students did not prepare for this tutorial, I believe that this is highly likely due to the tutorial being non-assessable. Perhaps we cannot totally blame students who have to prioritise their work, however I think the overall preparation and participation rate was more than encouraging.

One possible idea is to make the tutorial assessable. While this would increase the level of work presented, I think it would be detrimental overall. Students already have enough assesable components to this Unit and this would uneccesarily increase their stress levels as well as my work level in order to provde an assessment. Also, having too many assessments reduces the number of marks attributed to each assessment and tends to bunch all student results together.

It is good to see that as I have restructured the tutorials for the entire semester, that participation is in general increasing as the semester progresses – perhaps this is a sign that students are becoming more comfortable with the format and more wiling to participate in the tutorial work.

IV. Final Thoughts

I am extremely happy with my changes to my tutorials for this Unit over the whole semester, particularly with the increased use of technology in not just this particular session, but in about half of the total number of tutorial sessions for this Unit. While pushing new ideas for the use of technology in teaching, I have tried to stay away from the gimicky use of technology for technologies sake and instead attempted to use technology in a more interactive and active teaching environment where technology is actually used rather than an adjunct.

This approach has worked in that tutorial participation has been higher than is traditionally seen in the field of Engineering and that students have seemed to embrace the structure of the tutorials as the semester has progressed.

None of the tutorials are assessable, and while this may impact on the level of participation by students, I believe it also has meant that student participation is more genuine and the discussions that are had lead students to think more creatively rather than within the strict confines which is often found in assessable work.

I believe that I will continue down my approach of making the tutorials more interactive and the use of technology where appropriate. While this approach has resulted in a greater workload in terms of preparation for myself, the outcomes as seen in the classroom lead to an improved teaching environment.