Chapter 12

Use Semi-Structured Discussion in Health Economics Seminars

Peng Zhou
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4310-9474
Cardiff University, UK

ABSTRACT

This chapter applies the semi-structured discussion approach to organising seminars in higher education using an undergraduate Health Economics module as a case study. It provides the theoretical rationale by re-investigating the different roles of lectures and seminars in learning and teaching. Evidence shows that it significantly improves the students’ engagement and active thinking in a social learning environment. That is because a dialectic discussion involving both students and tutors results in a deeper understanding of welfarism and alternative value system, which are the fundamental principles underlying people’s decision-making related to trade-offs between outcome efficiency and procedural fairness. Therefore, this approach is believed to improve the long-term holistic development of students’ values and attitudes towards social, economic, environmental, and cultural matters.
1. INTRODUCTION

A heated discussion on the clash between the traditional and interactive teaching approaches has recently been provoked by a BBC documentary at the pre-university level in the UK, but the same question applies to university-level teaching (Hanushek, 2011). Arguably, there is no universally best teaching approach for all subjects at all levels in all scenarios (Allen et al, 2014), so this paper only aims to focus on the teaching approach to undergraduate-level economics seminar, with an experimental teaching intervention in a level 6 (or the third year) undergraduate health economics module. An important reason for choosing this module as the case study is that this module introduces and reflects on alternative value systems which form the fundamental principles underlying the students’ decision-making in the future, especially on the issues involving trade-offs between outcome efficiency and procedural fairness (Hadsell, 2005; Chalton, 2006). Examples include but not limited to healthcare funding, environment protection, and poverty mitigation. The feedback from the students suggests that a good balance between effectiveness and efficiency in the learning and teaching is gained under the semi-structured discussions, compared to the unstructured students-led or the structured tutor-led fashion.

The traditional approach to teaching seminars in economics is “chalk and talk”, which has been pervasive for decades (Siegfried and Fels, 1979; Bach and Kelley, 1984; Becker and Watts, 1996; Becker and Watts, 2001). One main reason is that modern economics heavily relies on mathematics and logical arguments. A typical economics seminar in this old fashion is more or less carried out like the following: tutor gives the students exercises beforehand, tutor goes through each question in details, students take notes of the answer and this is it. (Marmah, 2014) The advantage of this traditional approach is that it saves the students’ time to obtain the standard answers. This is an approach with high efficiency measured by input-output ratio, since tutor leads the seminars and many exercises can be done within a short seminar. However, one obvious drawback of this approach is that students do not actively internalise the concepts, methods and techniques, because the structured seminar cannot accommodate each participant’s learning need. Even if some tutors do ask questions now and then to promote student engagement, these questions asked are still planned ex ante. Seemingly, the tutors are doing the exercises with the students, but it is effectively the tutor who is actually practicing. In other words, due to the lack of effective interaction between the tutor and students, the role of seminar does not complement that of lectures. Fortunately, after the implementation of the QAA and NSS evaluation system in the UK, very few lecturers are still using the traditional structured approach in organising seminars today.

The fundamental purpose of learning and teaching at the university level is not memorising some “correct” answers for exams, but to accumulate the students’ transferrable skills and employability (Sloman and Mitchell, 2016). Even in the courses with heavy technicalities such as economics and mathematics, there has been a trend to apply student-led discussions in the seminars. It is believed to be able to encourage a social learning environment and be more tailored to the students’ personal learning need. Nevertheless, the key concern is that students with weak understanding of the basic analysis techniques and threshold concepts may digress too far from the questions at hand (Cousin, 2006). And at the end of the seminar, the group discussion becomes group conversations, resulting a low learning efficiency. Therefore, the pure unstructured discussion, at the other end of the spectrum of teaching approach, may not be the best alternative to the traditional method in the economics context.
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