

WHY DO I NEED TO KNOW THIS?

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Abstract

We are involved in teaching a 100 level education course to first year teacher trainees. The course requires students to examine and develop a reasoned, critical analysis of the contexts of education in Aotearoa/New Zealand through the knowledge of theory, philosophy, ideology, policy, and practice of education.

One of the greatest challenges for teachers in the course is to raise students' awareness of politics and policy making. The student cohort is diverse in terms of age, experience and educational background. Older students with greater life experience appear to grasp the political and policy material with some eagerness whilst the school leavers often look bemused (and bored!).

Is it possible to make educational policy and politics more relevant and comprehensible to the latter group or are we asking the impossible?

This paper explores responses from students and a range of strategies implemented to meet the challenge. Input from people attending the paper will be welcome.

Introduction

This is in effect a piece of action research or ongoing course development and review. The course is a compulsory 100 level course which is part of the Bachelor of Education (Teaching) and Diploma of Teaching for Primary and Early Childhood at the Dunedin College of Education. The present study focused on two of the course's learning outcomes:

- a. Examine the range of present education provision in order to evaluate the present contexts in which education is delivered
- b. Identify the relationships between ideology/public policies and implementation in education settings

The philosophy of the course reflects the views stated by Peters et al (1994 p 263-264) and "Such a view recognises that interpretation of policy is an inherently politically loaded activity".

Thus for students with little political awareness, interpretation of policy is a challenging task. The course was designed bearing in mind points made by Francis et al (1998), "Students entering universities, and particularly those who are first time university students within their family, are often unprepared for the type of teaching and learning that occurs; the expectations of the lecturers often seems unrealistic and foreign to them...".

Content is targeted at the students as future teachers.

The classes are small (20-30) and interactive, with a variety of in-class activities such as discussion of focus questions, video clips, role taking. The opportunity for student questions

is a key feature. Efforts are made to link to students' prior knowledge with the use of specific examples such as zoning, student loans.

There is a course book with readings selected specifically for each section of the course, including material written by staff member Dr Ruth Gasson for 100 level students. There are focus study questions for each topic based on readings which are to be done prior to class.

Assessment for this part of the course was a group seminar exploring an aspect of the topic, and a compulsory question in the end of year exam. The seminars also provided further learning opportunities for others in the class.

The course is delivered on two campuses to a range of students:

- School leavers
- Graduate students
- Mature students
- Enrolled in primary programme
- Enrolled in early childhood programme
- Enrolled in 0-8 programme

Prior experience suggested the course was received differently by some groups of students, with more mature students bringing greater political awareness and hence understanding of links between ideology and policy.

The study was conducted for three purposes:

- Collect some data to test the above assumption
- Explore what is working
- Investigate possible changes

Procedure

Four classes of the 1999 enrolment formed the sample:

- One group of school leavers primary
- One graduate primary
- Two classes of primary and early childhood students, aged 22-44

Information was collected from the students:

- After the first session of the topic, students were asked 'What is hard about this topic?' 'Why?'
- Comments at end of section of the course
- Evaluation of total course at end of year
- Evidence from student assignments and exams

Results

Student responses tended to confirm our age related hypothesis. (see attachment 1)

The structure of the course seemed to be achieving the outcomes for many students, but not all. The combination of reading and discussion helped students' understanding.

Some were clear why a teacher needed to know about education policy. "Found this topic really relevant to teaching as it gave us good background on where we have been and where we are going"; "Education is the interaction of political ideology, social policy and implementation in educational settings". Others were less clear, "they need to know how much is available in their budgets", "As I have no interest in politics I found this class boring and hard to keep my attention although I did try!".

Exam results showed that some students scored equally well on both the gender question and ideology/policy question (attachment 2). However, more students scored poorly on the ideology question. The nature of the wording of the questions and not just the content may explain some of the differences (see attachment 3).

A further analysis of the question on ideology and policy showed that many students did show evidence of understanding, but for some there was little evidence (see attachment 4). (This exam analysis was conducted on the exams of the two groups of mature students).

Challenges/Future Directions

This course is succeeding for many students but the challenge remains as to how to reach the rest.

Some aspects for consideration are:

- Students do not know what they do not know
- Do not see the relevance to their teaching
- Need to foster critical evaluation of material
- How to assess

- Evaluation/reflection at end of each session
 - 'I'm still hazy about ...'
 - 'I understand ...'

- More teaching techniques to aid understanding
- Keep looking for ways to improve

CONCLUSION

How do you build time and life experience into a course?

You have to try in the knowledge that these issues are relevant to them as parents, teachers, future policy makers.

Helen Bradbury and Jill Paris

References

Francis, K., Lemerle, K. Smith, L. & White, F. (1998). *Reading, Writing, Raging and Retention: A Strategy for Success*. Paper presented at Third Pacific Rim Conference on the First Year in Higher Education. Published by Auckland Institute of Technology

Peters, M., Marshall, J. & Massey, L. (1994). *Recent Educational Reforms in Aotearoa* in Coxan, E., Jenkins, K., Marshall, J., Massey, L. (eds). *The Politics of Learning and Teaching in Aotearoa/New Zealand*. The Dunmore Press Ltd. Palmerston North

Attachment 1

AGE RELATED

Age 41

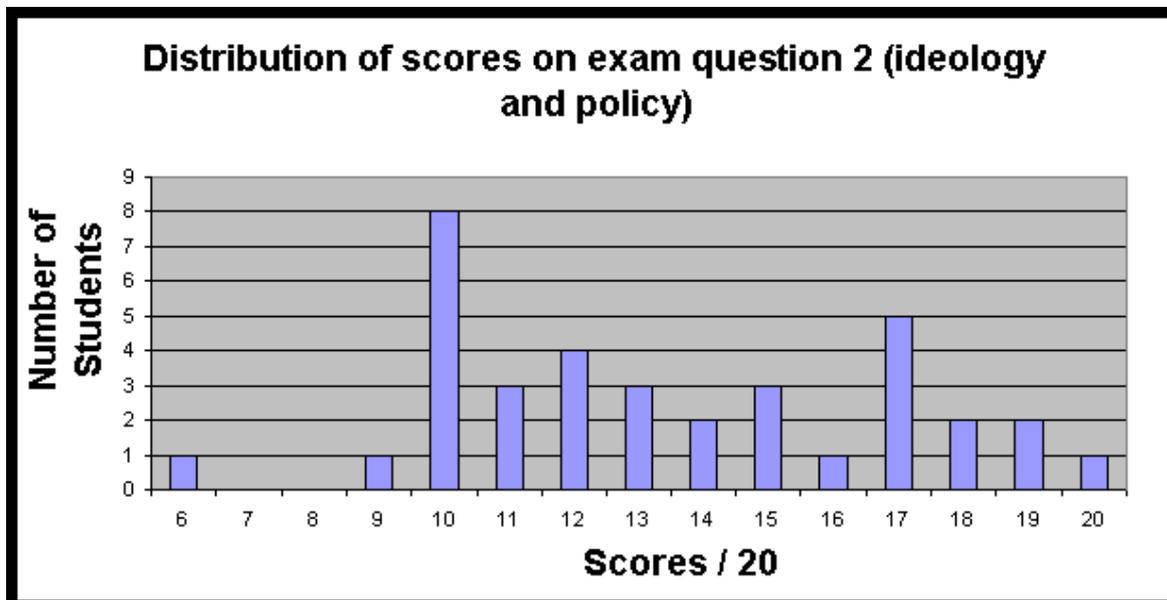
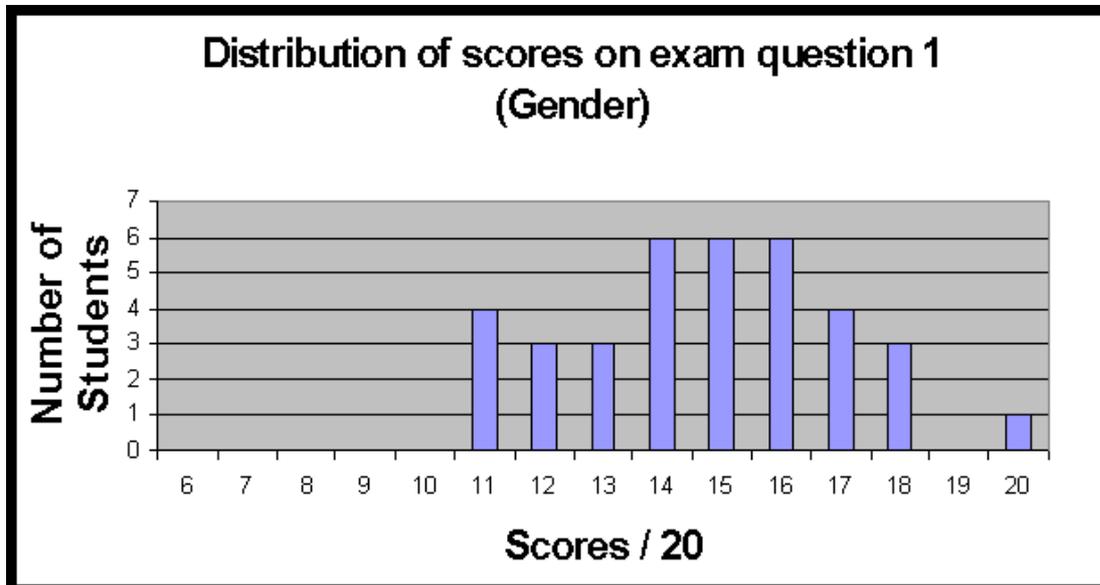
No difficulties in understanding this now - once terminology was clarified. I understand this because I am interested in politics and economics and because I have experienced life under center, left and right wing governments.

Age 36

It is easy for me as I was there at the time!!

Age 27

I am not entirely sure about this topic or why it is relevant in teaching. It must be somehow. Political stuff has never really interested me too much. I did do the reading before coming to class and answered the questions. Politicians to me is all just bureaucratic rubbish.



Attachment 3

Evidence of links between ideology and policy in exam question 2:

Strong links	12
Some links`	17
Little evidence	7