

Demonstrating progress in Economics and Business Studies: Making the starter the plenary

Demonstrating progress in lessons is of great importance to teachers, students and to anyone observing and assessing lessons (such as Ofsted Inspectors). In this article I set out to argue that one of the best ways to demonstrate progress is to use the same knowledge 'test' at both the start and the end of the lesson. I present a bit of theory to explain why this might be a good idea and give an example of how it might work, even at the start of a topic that students have had no previous experience of.

Obviously, the purpose of teaching is that students make progress and learn things. They should come in at the start of the lesson with one level of understanding and leave, after the teacher has done, with a different, more complex level of understanding about an issue in Economics and Business Studies. In the end, teaching really is about making a difference.

Making that difference explicit is important for both the teacher and the student. It is important for the teacher in order that they can assess the effectiveness of what they have done in the lesson and so review their practice. It is important for the student because being aware of the progress they have or haven't made is a vital step in encouraging them to take ownership of their own learning and become co-constructors of their knowledge. It is important because it allows everyone to understand what the starting point for the next lesson should be.

The idea of establishing student understanding at the start and end of lessons is generally well embedded in most teachers' day to day practice. This is great. It is often the case however that the 'test' used at the start of the lesson differs from that

used at the end. In one sense this is understandable. Given that since students have learnt things during the lesson it might not seem possible to use the same way of measuring their understanding at the beginning and end of the lesson. However, in applying different types of tests at different points in the lesson, it makes it harder than it needs to be for students and teachers to see any progress that has been made. This progress would be much more starkly revealed if both tests were the same. The test would act as an invariant background against which it would be easier for everyone to make out differences. The application of any assessment grading criteria developed by the teacher would become much easier too.

There is a theory about learning that underpins this idea: Variation Theory. The fundamental assumption of this theory is that students (and indeed all of us) learn by experiencing contrast between things. Thus for example, we cannot understand what daylight is unless we have experienced night time. We cannot understand what blue is unless we have experienced green; sadness without happiness, holidays without work and so on. The theory goes on to say that to learn these things, the background against which they are set must be kept constant and not allowed to change. So, for example, in a blue world if we wanted to introduce the idea of red it would be no use introducing both red and green at the same time, since how would anyone be able to determine what red was. In terms of the subject in this article, by having a constant background of the same test at the beginning and end of the lesson, teachers are reducing the amount of variation and thereby making it easier for students to make sense of things. For students to interpret the quality of their answers against two different

tests and then make the comparison between them adds a degree of extra complexity that is not really necessary (even if some students may be capable of this).

Developing tests along these lines should all be a relatively straightforward matter for Business and Economics teachers. We are used to working with questions that allow students to demonstrate different levels of understanding after all. It need not necessarily be too time consuming in a lesson either. Well focused students can write quite a substantial paragraph in 5 minutes at the start of the lesson for example. In response to the inevitable 'we have done this before Sir/Miss!' teachers might explain the purpose of the exercise. It might even be that students find it interesting to be able to identify differences in their own levels of understanding, particularly if this is made clearer to them. From the teachers point of view there is some economy of effort in only having to develop one activity that will form both the starter and the plenary.

A potential difficulty arises though at the start of topics. How is it possible to assess students understanding of something that the teacher has not presented to them yet? How is it possible to have an understanding of ideas that haven't been covered yet? This goes back to a previous argument that I have made here (see Volume 18 Number 1 of Teaching Business and Economics). The logic of this argument is that since topics in Economics and Business describe aspects of the world in which we all live, students will already have some experience (even if indirectly) of them. It is just a matter of presenting them to students in the right way and getting inside the subject content to work out what the fundamental principles are.

What should Coca-Cola do to the price to make more revenue?



Here's an example to illustrate this. At the start of a sequence of lessons on Elasticity, the teacher presents students with this slide and asks them to write 5 lines in answer.

They then do the same thing at the end having taught about elasticity. The special thing about this question is that it can be answered by anyone. There is no need for any pre-existing Business Studies or Economics knowledge but it gets to the heart of the issue of elasticity. The open ended nature of the question allows students to reveal a wide range of understandings. It may be that some students already have a good understanding of the concept of elasticity (without necessarily knowing the terminology) and they will be able to demonstrate this as a result of this question. The way in which students respond to this question forms important evidence for both the

teacher and the student of where the student starts. Everyone can use it to work out where they need to go next in order to make progress – although of course, this does rely on teachers being able to clearly identify what the different stages in the progression of understanding (in this case of elasticity) are and then sharing that. It can, as I have suggested, also be used as a point of comparison against another answer produced towards the end of the lesson. This might be extremely useful in proving to others how much learning has gone on in the lesson.

So in summary, I am proposing two things: i) that there are benefits to students, teachers and any observers of clearly demonstrating progress in a lesson by using the same test at the start and end and ii) that basing that test on an open ended question that gets to the heart of the subject

matter, without making explicit reference to it, can address the issue of students having no prior knowledge as well as encouraging a wide range of possible responses. By analysing student responses to questions such as these, teachers can become more aware of how their students see topics and build this knowledge into future teaching in that subject area.

Guy Durden
Award Leader for PGCE Economics and Business (Staffordshire University)
Chair of the EBFA

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