How can different plenary approaches affect learning outcomes?

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Rational

During teacher training, student teachers are commonly taught structure their lesson into three parts; the Starter, the Main Body, and the Plenary. Such lessons are structures are Ubiquitous in teaching in Scotland and throughout the UK (Gershon, 2013). However, the standard for professional registration in Scotland requires that teachers engage in ‘reflective practice’ and ‘Evaluate and adapt classroom practice…to enhance teaching and learning’ (General Teaching Council for Scotland, 2012). It has been argued that teachers have a tendency to slip into a safe space or a routine with their teaching (Carroll, 2011). An example of this can be seen in research which should that commonly used lesson strategies have to be implemented in very particular ways in order to achieve measurable positive results (Stevens, 2014). It is therefore essential that we critically examine commonly used strategies, such as plenaries, to assess their overall effectiveness and how best to implement them. The purpose of this study is to apply this critical approach to the use of plenaries in the classroom.

Aim

The aim in this practitioner enquiry was to explore the link between the effectiveness of a Plenary and to what extent it was linked to other parts of the lesson. The main focus was on how important a link between the starter and the plenary activities was in improving the successful achievement of the learning outcomes set for the lesson.

Methodology

This enquiry was carried out over a three week period. The class chosen to partake in this research was an S1 class. S1 classes attend at the same point of the day for each lesson. This meant that their performance was less likely to be affected by the time of the school day or the previous lesson or activity which they had attended. This method was chosen in an attempt to isolate the effectiveness of the change in approach to plenary implementation.
Plenary style

The style of Plenary chosen for this Practitioner enquiry was an image based starter. As the purpose of this enquiry was to assess the impact on learning outcomes of linking the plenary activity to the starter activity used earlier in the lesson, it was felt that maintaining the same form of plenary would ensure that it wasn’t the plenary itself which was more or less effective but its connection or lack thereof to the preceding starter.

The Plenary delivered would be image based in nature. To introduce students to the concept of an image based plenary, the first time the plenary was shown it would be of a historical image relating to the topic but not linked to the starter image shown at the beginning of the lesson. Students would then be asked to use the historical skills and knowledge to interpret this image. This information was assessed by the teacher using a variety of information gathering techniques. Individual verbal feedback was sought by the teacher and students were also given exit passes. Students were then asked to reflect on how this image related to the learning outcomes shared at the start of the lesson. Written evidence was gathered using an exit pass form of assessment in each lesson. The link which the image had to the learning intentions of the lesson was left to students to understand and reflect in their written feedback on the significance of the lesson.

Once students were used to this form of assessment of the learning objectives, a starter activity was introduced which displayed a relevant historical image at the start of the lesson. Students would be asked to interpret this image at the start of the lessons before the learning intentions were displayed. These would then be displayed and the main content of the lesson delivered and group and written activities undertaken. The plenary would consist in these lessons of students being asked to reflect on ways in which their interpretation of the historical image had changed based on their improved understanding of the learning outcomes following the lesson. Students would discuss these interpretations and verbal feedback would be sought by the class teacher. Finally, students would again fill out written feedback on their understanding of the learning objectives in order to provide comparable date from the plenary delivered without a link to the start of the lesson.
Findings

Non-like Plenary
Verbal feedback and written answers to questions linked to the image plenary displayed at the end of the lesson showed that when the plenary had no link to the starter activity/image, students generally had attained a strong grasp of the learning outcomes. This plenary displayed an image linked to the learning outcomes and content for the lesson. All of the verbal feedback provided by random questioning by the class teacher showed that students had been able to apply their learning and their understanding of the intended learning outcomes of that lesson to an image which was related to the lesson content but that they had not viewed before. This was further supported by the written evidence gathered by the class teacher in the form of answers to key questions written on exit passes.

Linked Plenary
When the plenary style was changed to incorporate an image which students had been shown at the beginning of the lesson and asked to reflect on both at the start and at the end of the lesson, the evidence suggested that learning outcomes had been similarly strong. Verbal feedback and class discussion again showed an accurate and coherent grasp of the learning outcomes for the lesson. However, students’ written feedback included a more reflective and self-critical aspect due to the nature of the plenary changing to ask students to assess how their understanding had changed. Therefore, it could be argued that the linked plenary was equally effective at demonstrating the learning outcomes of students in both verbal and written feedback. However, the nature of the linked plenary introduced an element of metacognition, requiring the students to be reflective and think about the process of their own learning that may enhance students’ critical thinking skills and more deeply embed learning long term.

Implications for future practice
The findings for this enquiry suggest that linking the plenary activity to the starter activity did not have a detrimental impact on the learning outcomes of students. While there was no significant increase in successful achievement of learning outcomes, when the written evidence was analysed there was an increase in the critical and reflective content of students’ feedback. This is an essential skill for students and a clear benefit of this plenary strategy.
This approach could be widened to other forms of plenary to potentially encourage such skills across the curriculum.

**Bibliography**


