

Class act: personalisation at classroom level

Offering choice in the classroom can improve students' behaviour and engagement, with gains in achievement as a consequence. **Tom Barwood** examines how to structure classes and lesson plans to take account of choice for learners and their learning styles

How important is choice? If Martin Seligman (1998), author of *Learned optimism*, is to be believed, it is of paramount importance. Some of his early work led him to design an experiment in which two groups of people were put into two sound booths and played loud music. The only difference between the two booths was that one had a volume control on the wall and the other did not – or so the participants thought. When the two groups were taken out of the booths, their stress levels were measured. Stress levels of the group in the booth with the volume control were much lower than those in the booth that did not have the control. However, the volume control was not actually functional; it was fake. Interestingly, even when the participants were shown this, they still maintained that the music became quieter.

Herein lies the important distinction for use in teaching. It is the perceived sense of choice and control that you have over your environment that is important. This is not to say that you lie to your students or attempt to trick them. Most of them are too bright for that and will spot what you are doing a mile off.

What is also interesting is what we tend to do when we try to do the opposite. Lou Tice, in the Pacific Institute's Investment in excellence training (see: www.thepacificinstitute.co.uk/pages/aboutUs.asp), shows how most people actually use coercion, whether it is in a more or less obvious fashion, such as the 'Do as I say right here, right now or there will be trouble' type of coercion or the 'I would be really grateful if you would...' type. Both of these forms of coercion will produce the same response – resistance. In his training video, Tice illustrates this very neatly by simply pushing against someone's hand and asking them what they want to do and the answer is invariably 'push back'.

Offering choice in the classroom

So, how do we structure our lessons and classes such that students have this perceived sense of choice and control in a way that allows us to get through the curriculum in a well-behaved and productive fashion?

One of the initial starting points on using the concept of choice can be gleaned from those of us who can remember the early days of telephone sales cold-calling, for example, for double glazing. Typically, the canvasser would ask, 'How many windows would you have replaced if it were free'. As soon as you said how many, you had indicated that you wanted double-glazing; the only question was the price you were prepared to pay. This is called a 'presupposition' and can be used to great effect, for example, by asking a group if they would rather have their test on Tuesday or Thursday. A debate will ensue which, if the group

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feels it is driving and the resolution is theirs, will produce an answer. By comparison, if you try asking the group who wants a test or telling them that it is on a certain day, you will get a different response.

Much of the ability of being able to offer choice comes down to teacher confidence. We know this relates to competence rather than 'front'. Occasionally, I ask students in my workshops if they would rather do the seminar from start to end or end to start. They normally look confused and so I explain that we can either start at the end and work back to the beginning or just go normally from beginning to end. I have found a much lower incidence of people trying to 'derail' the presentation with awkward questions when I do this. What is clear is that I am very confident with my materials.

Presupposition also leads into hypnotic language patterns, which can be a very interesting area to work on. This consists of using patterns of language in which the logical step is to agree. Much of the current work coming from the 'learned optimism' camp relies on getting people to respond positively to a 'nudge' rather than prohibitively around coercion. How often do we hear ourselves saying things like, 'I don't want to catch anyone talking', rather than 'I know I can rely on you to do this work quietly'. I once heard a colleague in the room next door yelling at his tutor group, 'Every day I shout and every day you never listen. Why?' It was all I could do to stop myself going next door to tell him.

Structuring your classroom to suit every learner's need at any one time can be a daunting task, but setting certain 'protocols' for different learning areas or stations that the students understand and can put into action with a minimum of fuss can help you in this endeavour. I met a primary teacher who always played the music to *Mission impossible* when it was time to clear up. She never had to tell pupils that it had to be done before the music finished nor did she need to say it was time to clear up after the first few times; she had never had a student who did not respond to the music with a sense of urgency.

Impact on behaviour

We know that destructive behaviour can have a negative impact on learning, both for the misbehaver and their classmates. Too often the best-laid plans for a great lesson can be easily thwarted by the refusal of one student to follow instructions. The important thing is to get the learning off to a prompt start; becoming embroiled in a debate about why that student should or should not be doing something will not create that. Offering choice has been used in behaviour-management strategies for a long time, something that Peter Hook and Andy Vass (2000),

Starting the lesson with a choice of procedures that all get you to the same point can be very useful

authors of *Confident classroom leadership*, have advocated. For example, asking someone either to 'put the phone away or give it to me' puts the onus on the perpetrator – they are the one choosing to disobey the request if they will not comply. This means that you can quickly ask for compliance and illustrate to the class that we are about to start. With choice also goes consequence. Many people, adults included, think they can take choice A and have the consequences of choice B. Demonstrating that one possibly negative 'chain' fits one choice and one more positive 'chain' the other, and allowing the person to choose is less fatiguing for you and avoids the whole 'or else' conversation. For example, you can point out to a student that, if they continue with a certain behaviour, there is a line of action you will have to take: 'If you continue to talk when I have asked you to stop, it means I will have to fill in a report card and you will have to spend your lunch hour with the faculty head explaining why. Whereas, if you simply do as I ask, we can all get on and you will be free to enjoy your lunchtime as you wish. The choice is yours.'

Sometimes simply stating the behaviour can be enough. As Bill Rogers points out in *Classroom behaviour* (2006), never ask 'why'. For example, asking: 'Why are you hitting him?' may elicit the answer: 'I don't like him,' leaving you with an irrefutable logic. By simply saying: 'You are hurting him,' it is implicit within the statement that you would like them to stop.

One line that I have used numerous times is one I stole from a teacher at a special needs school in Bedford and came as a result of a student in a wheelchair who was going round and round in circles, making a horrible screeching noise with the tyres. The teacher simply looked at him and said, 'Michael, do you think that makes me like you more – or less?' The student stopped instantly, grinned and drove off.

These are all isolated incidents in which the use of choice can be used to maintain the status quo and sort out small incidents.

Building choice into lesson plans

How can real choice be built into lesson plans so that learners are able to access the materials in a way they find most productive? A school I once went to in the

West Midlands had a sign in the staffroom, which said, 'If I can't learn in the way you teach then any chance you could teach in the way I learn?'

Without knowing it, many of us have a teaching style of which we are unaware. We will often tend to teach something either in the way it was taught to us or the way we would prefer to learn it. In his book *Lessons are for learning*, Mike Hughes (1997) outlines a useful graph in which students were asked to rate how they preferred to learn, ranging from group discussion to copying out of the book. Staff were then asked to score how often they taught in the different styles. The two graphs more or less exactly contradicted each other.

Finding out the styles of learning that your group prefers and attempting to try different styles to suit different activities is critically important to maintain the different pace, variety and rhythm that makes a professional teacher. Sometimes, we overlook altering the environment to suit the activity. Everything from boardroom style for a test, to seated in a circle without desks for a group discussion are important. It may take more work but the pay-off can be enormous. Remember that, as you take yourself out of your comfort zone, you also take your pupils out of theirs, some of whom may show their unease with 'interesting' behaviour.

We all know that getting a lesson off to a good start is of paramount importance (and that trying to salvage one that gets off to a bad start is really difficult) and here you can use choice to a deeper level. Shelle Rose Charvet (1995), in her book *Words that change minds*, takes the neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) concept of metaprograms and illustrates how to use this to generate enrolment among others. Part of her work is to show you how to speak to students 'talking out of both sides of your mouth'. Metaprograms are the large-scale programs we carry to help us to process and function within the world. It has been suggested that there are something like 14 major metaprograms, eight working and six motivational. It is the motivational that are of concern to us and those include things such as:

- towards/away from
- internal/external or self/others
- options/procedures
- sameness/difference or matcher/mismatcher
- proactive/reactive
- big picture/detail.

One of our most widely used motivational programs is the 'options/procedures' metaprogram. This idea is that we all exist somewhere on a spectrum of how we prefer to operate between the two poles of: being given lots of options; and being given a straight set of requirements. Some shops are now very conscious of this in trying to appeal to certain types of shopper. For example, the more option-driven shopper likes to wander and browse with no particular item in mind but is happy to think that there might be something out there that will interest them. Those of a more procedure-driven nature set out with a specific list or plan to visit a requisite number of shops looking for specific items or goods. We often vary in which model we adopt, depending on what it is we are looking for and the time that we have available. There have been some interesting case studies of what happens when you appeal to one group through advertising but have a store layout that appeals to the other type.

Creative use of space and environment can have powerful influences on making certain learners feel more comfortable

Case example: options/procedures approach

I had a particularly challenging group to whom I taught humanities. They were an unbelievable combination of intelligence(s), behaviours and needs. In an attempt to 'make' them work I became ever more prescriptive in my teaching, more or less making them do what I wanted one step at a time. It wore me out and it did not work. The acquiescence I demanded was not going to appear. Teaching them about life in the trenches in the first World War, I started the lesson by putting three clear choices on the board:

- Option A – produce a detailed and annotated cross-section of a trench
- Option B – construct a letter home to your friend who has not yet joined up in which you try to warn him of what to expect without either scaring him off or letting him know how scared you are or that you are doubting what you are doing
- Option C – read through an excerpt of Wilfred Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum est' and try to explain what he means by the different ideas.

I was surprised how they settled to work and how much easier it was to ask: 'Tony, did you choose A, B or C?', initiating the dialogue: 'C, sir', 'And how are you getting on?', 'Fine, sir', 'Good, I will be over to have a look in a minute'. This style of working also allowed me the freedom to offer suggestions for improvement or ask the students where they thought they could improve.

Not surprisingly, most teachers tend to be procedure driven, which can be a real switch off to those learners with a strong options model. Combining the two by starting the lesson with a choice of procedures that all get you to the same point can be very useful. I found that starting with three options works well. It also gives you a great way of checking whether students are on task by asking which option they chose and how they are getting on (see the case example in the box on page 16).

Every one of the different areas of motivational psychology that I have touched on here is very complicated and can be a lifetime's work to one person. As a busy classroom teacher, I found it easiest to cherry-pick bits of the information that I read and apply them to different situations, as I thought best. For example, I used the idea of metaprograms as a speedy lesson starter, as described above, but used solution-focused thinking when mentoring students over coursework. While it is somewhat magpie-like, it allowed me to develop a teaching style that was derived from many sources but which was essentially mine. This probably reveals a lot about my preferred way of working.

Recognising preferred learning styles

Preferred learning style is one of the major ways in which students vary but it is an area in which we need a degree of subtlety. Giving pupils ideas such as 'I am an auditory learner' can be a dangerous thing to do, as it gives them the idea that they can learn no other way. Unless your eyes have been poked out and your hands chopped off, then you can learn in other ways.

Interestingly, I once went through a scheme of work that I had proudly produced and, using highlighter pens, tried to work out how many of the lesson activities were either visual, auditory or kinaesthetic (VAK). In 42 lessons I found only three kinaesthetic activities because that is not one of my dominant styles and does not feature largely in my thinking. I would suggest that you test out your own preferred style and see how often you teach in that way and then try to find people whose preferred learning style is different from yours and watch them teach. It would be useful to have an Inset day dedicated to looking at learning styles and then develop pairs or groups of differing styles to see how they would each teach a set topic, mixing people not only by their learning style or subject but also by whether they see themselves as being from a more 'expressive', 'physical' or 'academic' subject. A 'physical' mathematician working with a more 'academic' sports scientist is a possible combination that you often would not think of when pairing up colleagues for collaborative learning purposes.

Asking the students how they might teach or explain an idea or concept to people who were lacking in a major sense, such as sight, hearing, touch or sensation, whether through impairment or lack of experience, can prompt some good metacognition. The box above right gives an example of this.

Barbara Prashnig's (1998) work on *The power of diversity* allows for up to 142 different learning styles in her learning styles analysis. While it seems initially daunting, the work is quite straightforward and many students find it empowering that they have a style that may not fit their preconceived notion of what it is to learn 'properly'. Many students, especially at A-level, think that proper learning involves you sitting

Case example: focusing on learning styles

I observed a superb lesson in which a group of Year 10 students had been asked to illustrate how they would teach German sentence construction to students from the nearby hearing-impaired unit, if the signing translator were away. They started with a picture on the board, which was then reproduced as a sentence on a series of cards that students held up in a line. To illustrate how the sentence would be set up in English they waved the Union flag and then, after waving a German flag, changed places to show how the sentence structure is different. The great part was that they insisted on changing places in a Swan Lake-type dance. Interviewing a student afterwards who had a strong preference for kinaesthetic learning she said that it was the dancing that really helped because as she visualised the sentence in her head she saw the words dancing to change place.

Preferred learning style is one of the major ways in which students vary but it is an area in which we need a degree of subtlety

quietly by yourself in a closed room, surrounded by books and paper, making notes for hours on end. For some people, this is bliss and, for others, agony. Similarly, some people think that sitting in a room with a large easel producing a group mindmap of an upcoming essay is cheating. However, we should use any method that produces results and avoid the ones that do not give results. To find out that you do not revise best when sat at a desk in a room by yourself (or that you do) can be liberating for some students.

Howard Gardner's (1993) multiple intelligence type can also be used to generate diversity and so choice within a lesson. One of the most interesting ways to achieve this is to become familiar with the different styles and then set yourself a challenge to teach using one scheme of work but using a different intelligence style each week or lesson. See the box below for some case examples.

Homework can be a fertile area in which to explore multiple learning styles. Begin by explaining how the different intelligence types work or test out the students using one of the many questionnaires available (either in books or from the internet). Check their understanding by asking them to think of famous people who are good examples of different styles, for example, a sculptor for visual/spatial, or jobs that people might suit, for example, counsellor for intrapersonal. You can ask them to choose a style of intelligence and then they produce a homework that explains how you would teach what you learned in the class to someone who prefers that particular style.

Case examples: varying intelligence styles within one scheme of work

■ In an eight- to 10-week scheme of work on glaciation, week five was the one to tap into the 'music/rhythmic' intelligence type. As the topic was glacial features, this left me stumped initially. However, I eventually came up with a lesson in which we learned glacial features using flashcards and the game structure of 'names of', which I last played (badly) as an undergraduate drinking game. Once we had learned the features, students had to try to fill in the empty boxes on an annotated photograph of a glacial valley. It surprised me how many of the students were tapping out the rhythm of the game to try to remember the different names, before deciding where they went. For me, it was a revelation to see what you could come up with when put under artificial pressure – normally we would have resorted to using the textbook.

■ Using a number of props, all judiciously muddled and presented in Ziploc bags, and wearing latex gloves allowed me to teach a great series of RE lessons under the title of 'Was there a fourth wise man?' Students were required to work in crime investigation teams to try to date and verify the materials (supposedly dug up in the Negev desert when I was on holiday there) to discover the answer. In doing so, they found out the rest of the ideas around the story of the nativity. This was the nearest that I got to being able to use multiple types within one lesson.

Thinking about thinking

Using the Philosophy for Children (P4C) structure – put forward by the Society for the Advancement of Philosophical Enquiry and Reflection in Education (SAPERE) (www.sapere.net) – can also be a great way of eliciting what pupils already know and what further questions they need to ask. Much of the initial P4C work involves providing pupils with materials that are there to stimulate thought. Pupils can then prepare questions they would like to ask or can arrange the materials in some order that they then have to explain. The thing to remember with metacognition is that you are trying to get people to think about thinking rather than come up with the 'right' answer – as the case example in the box below right illustrates.

Pundits a few years ago kept saying that the teacher of the future would be the 'guide from the side' not the 'sage on the stage'. I think a lot of people simply thought that internet searches would replace textbooks and we would carry on in a similar fashion.

To me, using the P4C structure really does allow this, with the teacher taking the role of facilitator and the students driving the debate or conversation. In Clackmannanshire, Scotland, where P4C was trialled extensively in primary schools, impressive leaps in intelligence quotient (IQ) scores were reported. More interestingly, these persisted even when the students had gone to secondary school and stopped doing the P4C work (see: <http://sapere.org.uk/2005/08/04/research-project>).

Managing a class of individuals

One of the biggest difficulties with trying to take account of pupil differences to plan effective teaching for each group is remembering what those differences are and who is who among the hundreds of pupils you have contact with. Sometimes, most of our planning is done to avoid problematic incidents. I once taught a student whose preferred way of learning was to sit in the corridor at his own desk copying out large screeds of information, which he would proudly show me at intervals. I always made sure that I had this situation well catered for, because of the devastating effect that he had when he was in the classroom or did not have anything left to copy out.

Practices that I found helped me to be more structured around this were to conduct student interviews on how pupils thought they learned best and to then ask them to write clear instructions to themselves in the back of their exercise book or homework planner.

I also wrote notes and devised symbols to go in my lesson planner/mark book to remind me of the structure of each class. I then added something that really helped me, which was to draw a diagram of the seating plan of each lesson and add my notes and symbols to that. I kept this on the desk so that I could glance at it and have a snapshot of who and what was in front of me.

Arranging students for learning

Much of the perceived pattern of 'how things should be' is that students should sit in a certain format and remain seated in that format for the entire lesson. At one time, schools actually had rules for staff as to how this should be. However, creative use of space and environment can have powerful influences on making certain learners feel more comfortable.

Test out your own preferred style and see how often you teach in that way

Case example: encouraging thinking about thinking

I observed a great English lesson from a newly qualified teacher in which students were offered buttons from a jar. Each group of three or four had one button each (they were quite interesting buttons rather than plain shirt ones). The teacher then led them through a series of questions to build up the garment that the button had come from, who wore it, where they lived, how old they were, until each group had a very definite 'character' of their own making. Each group then described their character before the teacher asked each group to try and weave the different characters into a short but exciting narrative. The results were impressive and a great start to a piece of creative writing.

Try to find people whose preferred learning style is different from yours and watch them teach

Some environments lend themselves to the opposite. During my teacher training I taught RE in a science lab with large, high wooden desks that were very spread out. This neatly facilitated some of the students from the back going 'on safari' beneath the interconnected benches. It was very difficult to supervise and stop until I changed many of the rules about seating and I controlled certain movements to create an early version of 'hot-desking'.

It has often been assumed that pupils will occupy different seats depending on learning style, going from front to back and reflecting V, A and K. Kinaesthetic students will often sit near the front (as that is where all the action is and where you were once traditionally more likely to be asked to wipe the board). Visual students tend to sit at the back so that they can see the big picture comprising not only the board but also all the other students. The more auditory pupils sit in the middle so that they can listen in to everything around them.

Think carefully about different activities for different learning styles. Avoid the simplistic or stereotypical – especially if you are coming from a particular standpoint yourself. Best of all, ask the pupils how they might do it. You may get some unexpected and original ideas.

Organisational tools

Much in the way that exploring a new city or place with a map and a guidebook that you like makes a difference, curriculum maps, unity organisers and individual learning plans (ILPs) can help a student to navigate their way through school. For many students, it is that bigger picture of how one day fits into a week, that is part of a term that can make all the difference to where they see themselves. Much of this also fits into a target and goal-setting exercise. The main problem with most people's goal-setting is that it is too general and too far in the future. It is more useful to know that you are going to attempt a piece of writing today in which you are going to use three words that you have never used before, as part of working towards a longer term goal of improving your literacy score at the end of term by a specific number of points.

Utilising some of Guy Claxton's (2002) work allows us to use maps, organisers and ILPs to create higher levels of resourcefulness (as well as reciprocity, reflection and resilience) by allowing students to refer back to them when they think they are stuck. ILPs are a tough nut to crack until you begin to master the art of coaching. First is to realise that the ILP belongs to the pupil and is not your view of what is best for them. Second is to be able to only ask questions and not proffer solutions. Third is to practise non-judgemental listening where you genuinely listen to the person rather than through the filter of what you are about to say next (which is normally a solution).

Given that we do not often have the luxury of designing our learning environment to best suit particular learners, students will often take responsibility for their learning within those constraints once they have been able to air them. Publishing ILPs and putting them on a piece of paper, which is then put into the back of books or, even better, displayed on the wall, can be an interesting approach.

Optimising access to learning

Good rock climbers always spend time gazing at the rock face working out their route before beginning to climb. You need to imagine that, to your students, your lesson or the curriculum is like a difficult climb and that you need to organise your classroom to optimise 'access' to the face.

Always focus on the beginning, making sure that everyone can get a good early foothold and that there are rest points where you can catch your breath and figure out where you have come from and where to go next, especially if you may worry that you have climbed too high too fast.

Set out tasks that allow an early easy move, a bit like the initial low-value questions on *Who wants to be a millionaire*. Then allow them to build up to higher value questions or tasks, but with the proviso that there are resources to help if they are stuck, such as 'ask a friend' or 'go 50/50 with the teacher'.

Much like the concept of 'phone a friend', an important addition to your resource bank can be an 'expert bank' to call upon. This bank can either be imaginary, for example, what you think Buzz Lightyear or Bear Grylls would do in this situation, or it can be a peer mentor, parent, grandparent, learning mentor, classroom assistant or an internet buddy (whether genuine or a site such as Wikipedia). Questions can either be saved up to ask that person later, accessed online or be the subject of your next mentoring conversation.

Sometimes, asking the question 'how would you do it if you could?' or 'how would you do it if you were really clever?' or saying 'take a wild guess' can produce an interesting conversation. Some students I taught were amazed when I told them that Einstein had a lot of his best ideas when staring out of the window and so they should try it for five minutes and see what happened.

These steps up the rock face of learning can be physical or emotional; guide points as to what to do if you are stuck can be written on the walls, or you can 'freeze the action' at any point and see where everyone is and what help they need to go on to the next step.

Role of feedback

Feedback is a crucial part of providing choice. Too often we shy away from feedback for fear of being criticised, but that is often because we structure our questions in the wrong way. I used to hand out sheets that asked you for the best and worst parts of the day. One student wrote that the best part of the day had been that it was really exciting and the worst part that it was really boring.

My questions are now much shorter and more pertinent to my interests and so I ask things such as:

- 'How did today affect your attitude to school? Did it improve it, make no change or make it worse?'
- 'How much did you learn today that could help you in an exam? A lot, a little or none at all?'
- 'How boring did you find it? Very, a little, not at all?'

No pupil is going to tell you that they find school-work exciting but saying that it was not boring is about as good as it will get.

I use the concept put forward in *Personalizing learning* (West-Burnham and Coates, 2005), which, rather than asking for 'any other comments'

If you were to ask me what elements allow for greatest choice I would simply say 'props'

(to which I have had some fantastical answers, especially from teachers), asks them to state what went well (WWW) and what could have been even better if (EBI). The feedback using this system is much easier to read, analyse and work on. For more on the role of feedback in providing for learner choice, see the article on pages 40-44.

Using props to increase learner choice

If you were to ask me what elements allow for greatest choice I would simply say 'props'. Imagine if our PE lessons consisted of playing the same sport for five years using imaginary equipment or, worse, simply being told about the sports and then reproducing what you have learned on paper. Wherever possible, use models, toys, games, puppets or whatever you can to bring your subject to life. Charity shops, the Early Learning Centre and magic shops are still my most trusted sources. I still remember that my sixth-form students always responded best to rolling the learning dice – see the box below left.

In with this are all the usual resources, such as books, internet searches, videos, DVDs, visits, visiting speakers and library visits. However, try to make sure that these are entwined around the subject matter rather than seeming to be the work itself.

Students are there to learn

Giving pupils choice does not mean that you forsake rigour. For example, asking students whether they would prefer to wear school uniform or not will produce an obvious answer. Working within the confines that uniforms are an important part of school life but allowing students input over choice of fabric, colours, badges and mottos works better than having it imposed from above. Similarly, telling students that you can be called Mr Barwood or Sir (or, in my case, not to be called Sir until I have been knighted) and telling them that I will always use the name they prefer worked well.

Driving round the country from school to school, I always dream of my perfect school and perfect lesson. In that school, we take on the tenets of personalised learning; there is a house system; vertical tutor groups and setting by ability not age. In that school, my classroom has big wide desks with stools; there are resources available around the room; there is a screen and projector used at various points through the lesson; laptops connected to wireless broadband are open on the desk; students are busy on extended projects and making notes in hardback notebooks with alternating lined and plain pages; students are wearing smart, functional uniform, calling me Mr Barwood and making polite requests and suggestions. Why? Because this is work not play.

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Tom came into education with a single goal – to be an inspiration. He continues this mission by providing workshops for students and teachers on all aspects of learning to learn. He can be contacted via email at: info@likeminds-learning.co.uk

Learning dice

A learning dice has a plastic sleeve on each face into which you can slide a piece of card outlining a different learning activity. The choices could be as simple as:

- groupwork
- roleplay
- note-making
- mindmapping
- oral presentation
- answer questions from the book.

The idea is that the teacher decides on six methods by which they might deliver the lesson and then writes one on each card to slot into the dice. The students are told the topic of the lesson and then get to roll the dice to see how it will be delivered. I marvelled at the acceptance of tasks such as 'practice essay question' when the elected class gambler's roll of the dice presented that face.