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The challenges for new academics in adopting student-centred approaches to learning. (0078)

Programme number: P5

Research Domain: Learning and Teaching

The aim of the current investigation was to provide an insight into how new lecturers in higher education develop as teachers and to identify some of the main influences upon this development. A qualitative, longitudinal design with three semi-structured interviews over a two-year period was employed with eleven new teachers from a range of higher education institutions. The analysis used case studies, alongside a thematic analysis, to provide fine-grained insights into the teachers' development. Despite having taught for less than two years, several of the teachers described relatively 'sophisticated', student-centred conceptions of teaching. The teachers who described teaching in this way were often those who were most unresolved about their practice and experimented with a variety of strategies in order to support the students learning. These findings help to reveal the complexities of teacher development and provide support to academic developers in understanding the real challenges that new teachers encounter.

The challenges for new academics in adopting student-centred approaches to learning

There is an extensive body of literature in higher education that describes two main ways in which teachers conceive of teaching. These have been labelled as *teacher-centred*, *content-oriented* or *student-centred*, *learning-oriented* and are often considered to be at opposing ends of a continuum (Kember, 1997). A student-centred, learning oriented conception of teaching has been described as desirable (McKenzie, 1996), complete (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999) and sophisticated (Entwistle and Walker, 2000). In addition, encouraging teachers to think about teaching in this way is often considered as being a primary aim of effective staff development programmes (Ho et al., 2001 and Light and Calkins, 2008). Results from studies that have developed and implemented the approaches to teaching inventory (Trigwell and Prosser, 1996a and 1996b) indicate that there is a congruent relationship between conception, intention and strategy. In other words, an individual who holds a student-centred, learning-oriented view of teaching will use strategies that are student-focussed and have the intention to change students' conception of the subject area. However, such research is limited in acknowledging the real difficulties that a teacher may face in aligning these aspects of teaching and little attention has been paid to what it is like to be a teacher who holds a student-centred, learning orientated conception. Entwistle and Walker (2000) used a retrospective account from a single teacher to provide a unique insight into the experience of a teacher who developed a sophisticated conception. However, there are obvious limitation of this method such as ability to generalise and the individual's experiences being clouded or influenced by the passage of time. Although the current study focussed upon the development of new lecturers in higher education a key theme to emerge was the challenge of adopting student-centred approaches to teaching.

The current study employed a qualitative, longitudinal design with three semi-structured interviews with each of the eleven participants being undertaken over a two-year period. This longitudinal design was the most distinctive and novel aspect of the current work. All participating teachers had less than two years experience and were from a range of higher education institutions and subject areas. The institutions within which they taught included traditional research intensive universities, new universities which were teaching-led and a further education college that delivered higher education qualifications. The majority of the participants (all but two) were from what would be classified as teaching- as opposed to research-led institutions. The teachers were from a range of subject areas which included: Sport, Physiotherapy, Psychology or History. All of the participants were engaged in their institution's postgraduate teaching programme at some point throughout the data collection period. Each participant was interviewed three times in consecutive semesters of teaching. A key principle in the design of the questions in each section was to ensure that the questions initially encouraged the participants to describe concrete experiences of real, everyday instances. All interviews were tape recorded using an analogue tape recorder and table microphone, which was subsequently transcribed verbatim. For the two follow-up interviews the participants received a copy of the transcript to remind them of particular topics explored in the previous interview and their responses to these questions.

The analysis was based upon the principles of building theories from case study research (Eisenhardt 2002). The theory-creation process in the current investigation contained two main phases. The first phase of the analysis was the development of in depth case studies for three of the participants to illustrate their experiences of development over the two-year period. These three participants were selected as they provided a range of contexts and appeared to be most theoretically useful. Care was taken to maintain the essence of the participant's accounts and the developing analysis was scrutinised in relation to the case studies and transcripts by two further independent researchers. Such an approach allowed for the generation of fine-grained and idiosyncratic insights into the experiences of the new teachers in higher education. The second phase of the analysis was a thematic analysis which aimed to identify common trends in relation to the teachers' development. Checks between participants were made at this point to search for cross-case patterns. This stage of the analysis required the researcher to move between the case studies, the interview transcripts and the literature.

Despite having taught for less than two years, several of the teachers described quite 'sophisticated', student-centred conceptions of teaching. The teachers who described teaching in this way were often those who were most unresolved about their practice. One of the case studies in particular, Kate, held a well developed conception of teaching and extensive content knowledge, but despite this she often described her experience of teaching as being problematic. She constantly battled with how best to teach and was unclear about how she could get the students to 'think like historians'. Kate described extensive experimentation with different strategies, which may have been an attempt to bridge her well developed conception of teaching and extensive content knowledge, through the development of her

pedagogical content knowledge. This situation appears to sit well in terms of how a sophisticated conception of teaching has been considered by Entwistle and Walker (2000) in that 'it requires an act of imagination through which the teacher first envisages the subject from the students' perspective, and then devises ways of helping the students across the initial gulf of incomprehension' (p343). Similar situations were apparent in sport and psychology lectures in terms of how particular topics or subject areas better lent themselves to more student-centred strategies than others and the challenges this brought. Therefore many of the new teachers often described the use of more 'blended' approaches to teaching. It would appear that teachers such as Kate require support with 'devising ways to help students across the gulf of incomprehension' or in other words identifying a range of strategies that can potentially align with their conception of teaching.