

Moving towards student-centred learning: A case study

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Abstract

Introduction This paper explores how part-time teacher-practitioners coped with the challenge of managing their professional development and investigates ways that they might be facilitated to improve their teaching for the purpose of better supporting students' learning. In order to achieve this, the author set out to determine teachers' perception of their role in teaching and learning and to identify those factors, which encourage and act as barriers to changing teaching practice.

Method: A semi-structured interview was carried out with six part-time teachers and the emerging themes were investigated further through individual interviews. These were transcribed and coded and phenomenology used as a framework for qualitative analysis.

Results: Implementing a student-centred approach is challenging and unlikely to be successful without a clear focus on the support measures that need to be put in place. Teachers' perception of their role in teaching and learning was closely related to their experience as learners in formal educational settings, which for most participants of this study was teacher-centred and content orientated. Four factors in particular acted as triggers and barriers to changing teaching practice: teachers' beliefs and values; experience in implementing change; student feedback; and staff development.

Conclusion: The results suggested that the current staff development programme provides teachers with some support and encouragement for changing teaching practice. There is a growing awareness of their teaching role and a heightened sense of identity. Factors that act as triggers or barriers to changing teaching practice for one teacher may not be significant for another, therefore individual differences of teachers need to be accommodated in as far as is possible. Further development should include explicit modelling of the staff-development programme on a student-centred approach and providing opportunity for teachers to increase their conception of teaching and learning. This could be achieved primarily through teaching teams being facilitated in: changing their view of knowledge and how learning occurs through exploring their experiential learning; understanding their perception of the effects of their teaching situation on their teaching; and the effects of their teaching on their students' learning.

Now four year on, teaching teams have become the norm and continue to provide a framework for teacher professional development.

Keywords

Student-centred, teacher-centred, teacher professional development, changing teaching practice, implementing educational change, teacher identity, part-time teacher/practitioner, student feedback, teachers' beliefs and values.

1. Introduction

Teacher-practitioners play a critical role in the education of our future health-care practitioners. But how well prepared are such teachers for this role? In the past it has been an accepted practice in Higher Education that the educators did not need specific education or training to teach. In medicine, for example, ‘doctors are experts in what they teach; most have little or no training in how to teach’ (MacDougall and Drummond, 2003). However, with radical educational reform now a reality, there has come a change in perception not only about the role of the teacher but also a lack of tolerance for their amateur status (MacLaren, 2005). Research literature on educational effectiveness has identified a clear relationship between quality teachers and their professional development (Meiers and Ingvarson, 2005). While it is widely acknowledged that learning from experience is essential, the implicit belief that experience alone results in continuous learning is attacked repeatedly. Tversky (cited by Atkinson and Claxton, 2000) claims that without feedback and reflection, ten years of teaching experience can simply amount to one year of experience repeated ten times over. Worse still is the view that learning from experience, without engaging in continuing professional development, results in reinforcement of errors (Mezirow and Associates, 1990).

As the focus of higher education is now firmly on the quality of students’ learning and achievement of learning outcomes, the need for teachers to develop their teaching has never been as great. Teaching roles must change to accommodate improved student learning. This requires a change from the traditional teacher-centred, content-orientated approach to a more student-centred approach, which focuses on achievement of intended learning outcomes. The shift from a teacher-centred approach to a student-centred approach poses considerable difficulty. Teachers and learners are required to adopt different roles and responsibilities, which change the balance of power within the relationship. The learner must ultimately take responsibility for his/her learning and the teacher must step back and provide support to the learner in achieving the intended learning outcomes. This handing over of primary responsibility needs to be managed with care as both teacher and learner struggle with the unfamiliar. Beliefs and values, which are largely implicit and rarely well understood, are challenged.

The challenge to teachers is immense as there are substantial fundamental differences between the two approaches to teaching. The traditional teacher-centred approach values ideas over experience or action, as evident in presenting principles before practice, whereas the student-centred approach emphasises the role of experience and active learning (Carlile and Jordan, 2005). Within the traditional teacher-centred approach, knowledge exists independently of the learner and understanding is getting to know that which already exists. Teaching then is a matter of transmitting the knowledge and learning is accurately receiving it, storing it and using it appropriately (Biggs, cited by Bennett, Dunne and Carre, 2000).

In comparison, Biggs believes that the view of knowledge in the student-centred approach, is that ‘...meaning is created by the learner, not imposed by the teacher or transmitted directly’. The aim in the teacher-centred conception is the simple transfer of knowledge and skill in comparison to the development of independent and critical

styles of thinking. In this regard the former is concerned with the conserving of knowledge while the latter supports the extension of knowledge (Biggs, cited by Ballard and Clanchy, 1991). The role of the teacher differs considerably, from teacher as ‘...knowledgeable expert who expounds the information the students are to absorb’ to teacher ‘as supporting learning’ (Biggs, 2003). The focus of the teacher’s effort in the first instance is ‘to know the content well’ whereas in the second it is ‘...on what the student does, on what learning is or is not going on’ (Biggs, 2003). A quick way of determining the attitude to knowledge that underpins a course is its style of assessments. An examination that involves recall of information that has been presented in class is clearly at the reproductive level (Ballard and Clanchy, 1991). One of the first challenges that confronts teachers in changing their teaching practice from teacher-centred to student-centred is how to assist students learn that which the teacher does not know (Boud, 1996).

There is considerable evidence to suggest that the traditional models of staff development are of little use in helping teachers integrate ideas into practice and that staff development is done **to** teachers rather than **with** teachers (Anderson, 2001). Professional development workshops are thought to be of little value (Biggs, 1999, Meiers and Ingvarson, 2005). Other approaches are now being used to promote scholarship in teaching, for example, teaching portfolios as evidence of continuing professional development are the method of choice in the United States while in the UK the focus has been on the development and delivery of post graduate level qualifications in teaching and learning (MacLaren, 2005). Regardless of the approach taken, if professional development is to be effective, its aim must be to improve teaching practice and students’ learning opportunities (Meiers and Ingvarson, 2005).

2. Context of the Study

This qualitative study examined the views of six part-time teachers on their perception of their changing role and their experience in implementing a more student-centred approach. It attempted to identify those factors, which encourage and prohibit changing teaching practice. A key feature, which characterises the teaching context in which this research occurred, is the apparent part-time nature of the teaching staff. The programme in question caters exclusively for mature students, therefore classes are held on weekends. As a result, the teaching faculty are part-time and most teachers are engaged in full-time private practice in their particular discipline. The experience that the teacher/practitioner brings to the classroom and teaching clinic is the essence of the programme, contributing significantly to the high level of student satisfaction and employment opportunities available to students. A negative consequence of this situation is the fact that in general, teachers in the past were inclined to see themselves primarily as practitioners. The challenge was to move to a position where teachers identify themselves as teacher/practitioners. This is not an easy option as increasingly, teachers (part-time or otherwise) are expected to provide evidence of their continuing professional development as a teacher. Working as a practitioner demands similar commitment to professional development. Essentially the teacher/practitioner is expected to have not alone a foot in both camps but to have expertise in both professions.

Prior to this study and over a six year period the college had made a number of innovations, which focused on the development of capacity for work through an emphasis on student learning. While these innovations had significant positive effect, general areas of weakness were identified, which limit their effectiveness. These included: over-emphasis on content resulting in superficial learning; assessments that rewarded low-level learning outcomes and discouraged a deep approach to learning; misalignment between the stated learning outcomes and the teaching, learning and assessment strategies; and insufficient application of science to practice. It is perhaps worth noting that all of these characteristics are associated with a teacher-centred approach (Ballard and Clanchy, 1991; Biggs, 2003; Toohey, 1999). As a result two key strategies were recommended: there should be a significant shift from teaching to learning; and teachers should be provided with support for their changing role. Essentially, the college sought to implement a student-centred approach.

In response to these recommendations, a staff development programme was initiated in September 2005, which aimed to support teachers in managing their new role and the shift towards a more student-centred approach. This resulted in monthly sessions of two-hour duration, integrated into the college timetable, thus enabling all teaching staff to attend. There was flexibility with regard to the content of the programme with issues of common interest dealt with as they arose such as: writing learning outcomes; critiquing each other's assessments; and discussing teaching methods. A facilitative style was used to stimulate discussion. Teachers were generally required to prepare for these sessions in advance by reading articles or reports. As part of the programme, teachers were invited to seek assistance from the staff development facilitator in providing feedback on their teaching if they so wished.

3. Methods

Semi-structured group interview was carried out with six teachers and the emerging themes were investigated further through individual interviews. These were transcribed and coded and phenomenology used as a framework for qualitative analysis. Criteria for selection were three fold: participants were employed as part-time tutors; they had responsibility for at least one module; and had attended staff development sessions regularly prior to the period of the study.

4. Results

The results of this study suggest a complicated web of factors that acted as both triggers and barriers to changing teaching practice. Four themes in particular emerged from the data: beliefs and values; experience in implementing change; student feedback and professional development.

Beliefs and Values

Participants' beliefs and values influenced their teaching and the changes they made. Four categories emerged from this theme: experience as learners; view of knowledge; learning style; and perception of teaching situation. Participants' experience as learners in formal educational settings influenced their approach to teaching. In the case of five of the six participants this experience was about absorbing the skills and knowledge that was being passed on by the teacher. The teacher was the main source

of information. Their initial teaching style reflected their experience as learners. Participants' view of knowledge was in most cases in line with a teacher-centred approach. Developing awareness of their informal and experiential learning provided encouragement for participants in changing their view of knowledge. Learning style influenced teaching approach and consequently judgements made about student learning. Participants' perception of their teaching situation also influenced their teaching approach and included: level of control of subject matter; academic workload and the value placed on teaching by the college.

Experience in implementing change

Five participants spoke about changes they had made to their teaching over the past year and included: designing their class around achievement of learning outcomes; applying active learning techniques; actively seeking feedback from students; guiding students in synthesising knowledge; using students' experience; including more formative assessments; and inviting staff development facilitator to observe class and provide feedback. Participants' experience of implementing change fell into two categories – positive experiences and challenges. Positive experiences included: self esteem needs being met; support for student learning; learning from students; and an increased conception of teaching. Challenges included: beliefs and values challenged; lack of control over content; excessive workload associated with changing teaching approach; student response to change; inexperience in student-centred learning; and lack of student resources.

Student feedback

Student feedback occurred in three ways; teacher initiated written feedback; non-verbal clues from class; and student initiated verbal feedback in class. Five of the participants sought direct written feedback from students. Initially they used the standard form, which was available from the college intranet. Thereafter they tended to develop their own forms, which contained fewer and more open questions, aimed at seeking students' perception of the strengths and weaknesses of their classes.

Participants focused more on the negative feedback. Sometimes this negative feedback was understood and expected by the participant. Some participants reported their annoyance and frustration with the lack of consistency of students' responses and evidence of lack of commitment on the part of the student in comparison with their own commitment.

Change, in response to student feedback, occurred only if the participant perceived that he/she had the power or ability to make the necessary changes. One participant reported non-verbal clues as powerful catalysts for changing his teaching practice. Direct feedback from students, while challenging at one level, provided opportunity for another participant to develop greater insight into her teaching.

Professional Development

The categories that emerged from the data concerning professional development included: support for teacher development; areas identified as in need of support; and clinical practice. The (then) current staff development programme provided support for teachers in: developing their identity as a teacher; facilitating them in applying a more student-centred approach; designing class around learning outcomes; becoming

more aware of the need to align teaching and learning with the intended learning outcomes; challenging assumptions; sharing ideas with colleagues; and observing colleagues teach. Areas in need of support included: devising a framework for supporting the novice teacher; devising effective ways of directing student effort; setting up a system for sharing case scenarios; and providing opportunities for teachers to share teaching experience with colleagues. Clinical practice was regarded as helpful in enabling teachers adopt a more student-centred approach. By drawing on examples from their practice, teachers could explain the relevance of their subject. Teachers' perception of their ability to support students' learning in an area where they lacked clinical experience differed. Three participants spoke about the positive effect their teaching had on their practice and how being more up-to-date with their knowledge sensitised them to look deeper into their clients' problems. Most participants mentioned time management as challenging in juggling teaching with a practice.

5. Discussion

Beliefs and Values

All participants who were educated in Ireland experienced their formal education as teacher-centred. Interestingly, the one non-Irish participant viewed her role as 'facilitative'. She believed that knowledge had to be constructed by the student. It is difficult to say what made her different. However, this study clearly demonstrates that prior experience as a learner and learning culture influenced the role participants took to their teaching. While the Irish educational system appears to lean heavily towards a conception of teacher as information provider, Biggs (2003) claims that this approach is in fact the dominant paradigm worldwide, adding further to the claim that teachers' experience as learners influence their teaching style. Therefore unless teachers have prior experience of a student-centred approach it is likely that they will adopt a teacher-centred approach to their teaching, at least initially.

Because participants whose conception of teaching was that of 'information provider' believed that the teacher was supposed to be the knowledgeable expert, they had to ensure they knew the information that they were presenting very well. This had a number of consequences. Firstly it was very time-consuming, stressful, and left little time for considering issues concerning student learning. Secondly, it was often difficult to admit to not knowing something. Not feeling comfortable about admitting to not knowing may be partly because participants were unsure about how students would react to this revelation. However, this reluctance to admit to 'not knowing' may send out the wrong message to students when the explicit values of the college claim to encourage and support the model of patient-centeredness and with that a willingness to explore the patients perception of his/her problem.

A reluctance to share information was also linked to the role of teacher as expert, which could be seen to perpetuate the myth or it could be associated with a fear of 'letting go' of the role of teacher as information provider. The implications of continuing to hang onto the belief that 'teacher is expert', that information is 'owned' and that 'content is fixed and must be covered' is that no change can occur. These are fundamental principles that must change. The belief that students in the earlier part of a course have little to contribute to the learning situation results in the teacher taking

full responsibility for the learning and with that an acceptance that they have to do all the work. Responsibility for learning must be a shared process.

In spite of the fact that five of the six participants commenced teaching with the conception of teacher as ‘information provider’ there was a noticeable shift towards a more student-centred approach. The reasons were varied such as: response to student feedback; encouragement and support by the college to engage in activities such as designing class around learning outcomes; and seeking to have a more satisfying lifestyle by decreasing workload. Exposure to discussions through the staff development programme and identification of issues in need of change at curriculum development meetings also encouraged change. Some participants tried new approaches to teaching as a result of pressure/encouragement from the college and while they may not have had a felt need to make these changes, participants did come to appreciate their value.

A growing awareness of participants’ experience of experiential learning increased their conception of teaching and learning to the point of creating, for one participant in particular, a significant shift in her view of knowledge. The student was no longer seen as a passive recipient who knew nothing of the subject. His experience was now more valued and his perspective was considered. There was a noticeable openness to consider alternative views and explore assumptions. Engaging in any form of professional development activity where she was thrust into the role of the learner heightened the participant’s awareness of the learner’s situation. As a result she sought to immediately change some aspect of her teaching. The literature suggests that expanding ones conception of teaching and learning leads to positive effect on students’ learning (Meirers and Ingvarson, 2005).

For most of the participants, the shift towards a more student-centred approach resulted in a sharing of responsibility for learning with their students. There was a realisation that students brought new knowledge to the classroom and different ways of viewing things. Participants began to realise that they didn’t have to do all the work, didn’t have to cover every little detail and didn’t have to know everything. Participants reported that changing their teaching practice had resulted in: greater enjoyment and satisfaction from the job; reduced workload as a result of finding appropriate learning resources for students and involving students in preparing and presenting material; greater rapport with students; increased ability to support student learning; and increased conception of teaching and learning.

Experience in implementing change

Participants experienced a number of challenges to changing their teaching practice such as: difficulty in letting go of the role as information provider; lack of confidence in managing the new role; feelings of responsibility to pass on knowledge and skill; a heavy workload and consequently little time to consider student learning; and lack of suitable student resources. Difficulty in letting go of the role of information provider has already been discussed in the context of a reluctance to share information and a reluctance to admit to not knowing. Some participants felt that it was also about a lack of confidence in managing the new role. Without personal experience of a student-centred approach, teachers had to take a leap of faith, not knowing what the consequences might be. The new role required the teacher to support and challenge students in an effort to increase their depth of learning. This required a greater level of

understanding by the teacher. Research conducted by Meirers and Ingvarson, 2005 identified the need to find ways to support teachers in gaining a deeper understanding of the content they teach and conveying that knowledge in meaningful ways

One of the features of the teacher-centred approach was participant's perception that they were doing most of the work, in comparison to their students. As already mentioned, participants spent considerable time preparing class notes and consequently had little time to consider how to go about supporting student learning. Where the teacher engaged the students in preparing and presenting material, the workload became more evenly distributed and there was a greater sharing of responsibility for learning. Teachers' time was then better spent on organising learning activities, and helping students understand difficult concepts.

Student Feedback

Four key factors emerged from the findings as influencing teachers' response to student feedback: the method used to gather the data; teachers emotional response to feedback; how teachers interpret information; and teachers' perception as to whether they could make the appropriate change or not.

The method used to obtain feedback from students greatly affected the quality of the feedback. Written open questions that sought feedback on strengths and weaknesses of the teaching proved far more useful than closed questions with a rating system. Non-verbal feedback proved to be a powerful catalyst for change for one participant in particular and resulted in immediate response by adopting more active learning techniques. The participants' intuitiveness allowed him respond quickly and appropriately. Atkinson and Claxton (2000) suggest that a nurturing environment can support the development of intuition. In addition teachers need opportunity to explore their intuitiveness to determine which aspects they can trust and which need to be challenged.

Emotional reaction to student feedback influenced the actions participants took. Negative feedback was focused on much more than positive feedback. Reading negative comments sometimes had the effect of confirming what the participant had expected or could cause great upset for days. When this occurred, time allowed a more rational approach to be taken. Participants generally interpreted the information on their own. Sometimes they followed up on items that had emerged from the written data by seeking more verbal feedback from the class.

Teachers' perception as to what changes they could or could not make determined action taken or not taken. Knowing instinctively that a change to one's teaching style was needed, even when confirmed by the students, failed to bring about change when there were two major competing beliefs, i.e. content versus understanding. Anonymity of feedback questionnaires sometimes resulted in participants feeling helpless in supporting individual students whose feedback was clearly at odds with those of their colleagues. Sometimes feedback from students was not responded to and when it was it tended to result in minor changes only. When action was taken it was rarely followed up.

There is little doubt but having a clear appreciation of how students experience learning is crucial to changing teaching practice in support of student learning. Hard evidence is needed to make good decisions. The mechanism used to elicit this

information from students is important. Generic feedback forms, which act as a catch all, are likely to result in frustration on the part of teachers and students. If teachers are to act on the feedback from students, they must be confident that the data is reliable in so far as is possible. The purpose of the feedback must be clear and consequently the questions must relate to its purpose. Not using student feedback effectively tends to lead to a reliance on hearsay and anecdotal evidence. Difficulties being experienced by individual students or groups of students are not likely to be identified and there is less chance that the student experiences will be similar to that which is intended by the teacher.

The type of information that students can provide includes - how the course expectations are communicated; adequacy of assessment feedback; accessibility of learning resources and support. The timing as to when specific information should be sought is related to its purpose, for example, adequacy of assessment feedback after students had received feedback. While the research is clear that student feedback does not provide direction on how to improve teaching, seeking students' perception on the quality of teaching is useful. The inference is that if there is a mismatch between student and teacher's conception of what is good teaching, an opportunity could be created to respond to it. This is particularly relevant in the context of this study, which is firmly grounded in the transition phase from a teacher-centred to a student-centred approach. Students must be involved in the process.

Emotional reaction to student feedback can get in the way of making rational decisions. Interpreting the feedback requires a deep understanding of teaching and learning. The implications of not having support are either inaction or possibly inappropriate action taken.

An integrated system which links professional development, course improvement strategies and student feedback, could enable appropriate action to be taken based on a more rounded interpretation of the situation.

Professional Development

While participants valued different things about the staff development programme, everybody valued being part of the teaching team and there was a strong sense that sharing ideas with colleagues was particularly useful. A focus on teaching and learning heightened participants' awareness of their identity as a teacher, which the literature suggests is closely linked to teacher efficacy and motivation (Stone et al, 2002).

For the novice, support in structuring and managing a class was seen as essential. A small but adequate variety of basic teaching skills, information such as college guidelines and procedures, and emotional support were needed to survive the initial teaching period.

Participants gained insight into their teaching practice in different ways. Two participants availed of the staff development facilitator to observe class and provide feedback to them. Another participant found co-teaching with a colleague, whom he felt had a wider conception of teaching and learning, particularly useful in helping him change his teaching. Curriculum development meetings provided another participant with feedback on the degree to which the overall learning outcomes had

been achieved. For yet another participant benchmarking how she assessed a student against her colleagues' assessment helped develop insight into the expected standard.

Participants identified group activities that they would like to see included in the professional development programme. These included: general discussion on common problems experienced by teachers such as directing student learning; case scenarios for particular purpose; sharing experience; and seeking advice on new techniques.

Clinical experience was seen as very important in facilitating participants move towards a more student-centred approach. It enabled the teacher help students see the relevance of the topic, grasp the variety of management approaches and possible outcomes for a particular problem and emphasise those problems which new graduates were most likely to see in practice. There were benefits for teachers also in increased clinical knowledge and personal growth. The implications are that encouragement and support for the novice in developing a practice acts as support also for their teaching. New teachers need to be provided with a clear indication of the workload involved in teaching.

6. Conclusion and further work

This study sought to develop an understanding of teachers' experience in implementing a more student-centred approach to their teaching for the purpose of devising a framework for supporting their development. The topic of the study is particularly relevant in Ireland at the moment as legislative framework is in place, which requires educational providers to radically change their teaching provision (Government Publications, 1999). The recently published National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (The Department of Education and Skills, 2011) clearly articulates the expectations of higher education teachers and the need to convert best practice into standard practice.

While the results of the study may not be readily transferable to other teaching situations, the study does provide insight into the issues that influence teachers' decisions to implement change or not. It contributes also to the limited pool of data on the part-time teacher, for whom there is likely to be increased demand (Skilbeck, 2001).

This study recommends a team approach to faculty development where teachers' own teaching situation is the unit of study. It can be assumed that unless teachers have experience, as learners or teachers, in a student-centred approach, they are likely to adopt a teacher-centred approach to their teaching, at least initially. Therefore our staff development programme must model and make explicit the principles and practice of a student-centred approach. New teachers need considerable support and guidance in establishing a classroom environment that is conducive to learning. All teachers need support in learning new tasks. Teachers should be facilitated in developing a critical understanding of their teaching practice with the aim of continuous development. Support should be provided to teachers in working through their beliefs about: their changing role and that of their students; their view of knowledge; the effect of their learning style on their teaching and consequently their students' learning; and how learning occurs. Teachers' workload should be managed so that they have time to consider how they could best support student learning.

Four years on, what has happened? Teaching teams have become the norm and provide a framework for teacher professional development. A semi-structured support system exists for novice teachers throughout the first year of teaching, facilitating their participation in their teaching team and learning from colleagues. Some teachers have embarked on post-graduate education in teaching and learning. Over the past two years we have successfully integrated Problem-Based Learning into our programme, a challenge that may not have had such a positive outcome without the strong team approach.

So while we can claim to have reached a critical mass in terms of the percentage of teachers who have transitioned from a teacher-centred to a student-centred approach, some basic concepts such as how learning occurs needs to be reaffirmed. Vigilance needs to be maintained to ensure that content is not increased at the expense of deep learning. Student feedback has perhaps been the most effective strategy in supporting change. The expectation that all teachers will, at some point over the next few years, gain a qualification in teaching and learning suggests that the critical role played by our teacher/practitioners in the future of our health-care practitioners is in good hands.

7. References

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