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Differential Experiences: Why Context Matters in Personal Tutoring. (0047)

Abstract

'The personal touch' in higher education is set to become an important agenda. Rising student expectations, continued demographic change in the student body and the need of universities to provide and promote a supportive and tailored environment for students, all place a focus on the role of the personal tutor. This paper explores this role and argues that whilst there is commonality in experience between personal tutors, professional and discipline contexts play a large part in differentiating practice and experience. Interviews with personal tutors across all faculties of the author's institution reveal considerable variations in attitudes, skills, and models of working. The paper concludes that an appreciation of the differing contexts in which personal tutoring takes place is essential for institutions in developing policy, practice and support for this challenging academic role.

Introduction

Personal tutoring is an academic role under pressure. Massified HE and greater student diversity means institutions have been presented with more, and a greater variety of

personal, mental health and learning issues (Barer, 2007; NUS, 2010). Against these demands, resources for personal tutoring have diminished (Grant, 2006; Luck, 2010). Student to staff ratios have not kept pace with the increased numbers of students and their attendant problems; academic staff are under immense research pressure; and many staff feel poorly equipped to deal with the personal development and 'emotion work' (Hochschild, 1983) of the personal tutoring role. Despite this, the demands placed on personal tutors are likely to mount. 'The personal touch' in higher education is set to become an important agenda. Students already have high expectations of the level of personal support they will receive at university (NUS/HSBC, 2011, p17), and this will be heightened as fees rise (Cooke *et al*, 2004). The continued demographic change of learners and the potential rising pressures on students to get the most of their degree due to fees are predicted to lead to added mental health issues (NUS, 2010). Universities will also need to promote their provision of supportive and tailored educational environments as they attempt to attract and retain students (Thomas *et al*, 2010). All of these factors will place an added focus on the role of the personal tutor.

A number of articles explore staff experiences of the role of personal tutor e.g. of new lecturers (Ridley, 2006). Here the focus is on commonalities of experience. Varying models and practice are evident in the literature, often through individual case studies (e.g. Barfield *et al*, 2006). These limit scope for examining difference and, where models of practice are discussed, these are from the perspective of policy and procedure not necessarily, from what Schön (1987) describes as the 'swampy lowlands' of practice. The position taken in this paper focuses on differential issues in the role – as opposed to common experiences and concerns. It explores why personal tutoring for academic X varies from academics Y and Z in

relation to their own disciplinary context and professional training. This paper contends that, due to the complexity of factors at play, context specific differentiation (Haggis, 2008) is necessary to appreciate experience and practice in personal tutoring.

Methods

Research was conducted through structured interviews with 24 members of staff across all six faculties of the university. New and experienced staff were invited to discuss their experiences and opinions on the role of personal tutor. Each interview, which averaged an hour in length, was audio recorded, transcribed and qualitatively analysed using the NVivo qualitative data analysis software package. A grounded theory approach (after Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was used in order to explore emergent themes from the conversations. Analysis, whilst at a preliminary stage, has revealed interesting differences in practice, attitudes, and confidence in relation to the role.

Discussion

The language used by staff about personal tutoring revealed that new staff were more uncomfortable with the role than experienced staff. This is an unsurprising finding. However, what is more interesting is the bigger divide in the apparent comfort with the role between staff who teach on professional/vocational programmes and those that teach on traditional academic programmes. Discussions with staff from the Education and Health professions voiced few concerns and they were much more likely to dwell on the positive developmental and support aspects. They often conceived themselves as coaches or mentors. The personal and professional development frameworks and outcomes of the disciplines they were teaching clearly assisted them. It also seemed that their own

professional experience - beyond academic professional experience - had provided them with skills and attitudes for the role that were better developed than for the traditional academic 'group'. Conversely, staff from non-vocational disciplines betrayed unease in relation to dealing with pastoral problems and the personal development functions of the role.

Conversations with arts-based academics indicated that within this faculty, personal tutors seemed to be spending more time dealing with the personal issues of their students than in other areas. Seemingly, staff in the arts had more conversations of a personal nature with their tutees than was reported by other academics. Why might this be the case? Arts subjects provide more opportunities for one to one contact due to the nature of studio teaching and the individual tutoring and feedback students receive on their work. Arts students also work on projects that frequently draw on their personal life and emotional experiences. The nature of their disciplines therefore evokes issues, and the context of the teaching environment is an enabling factor for them to be discussed. Such settings help to create a culture in which it is acceptable to talk about these matters. On the other hand, academics from science backgrounds gave an impression of more modest pastoral demands in comparison to that experienced by their arts colleagues. Students in these areas seemed to be more reluctant to discuss personal matters. Could it be that the culture of co-construction of knowledge prevalent in the arts is more conducive to pastoral dialogue than the sciences, in which the learning culture is one of transmission en-masse?

Expanding on the topic of disciplinary cultures, the possibility of other discipline-related factors should be considered. At a mental health training workshop the author was made

aware of clusters of mental health and learning difficulty clusters in relation to disciplines at

the author's institution. Correspondence with other HE professionals anecdotally indicates

that this is observed in other institutions. Unfortunately the literature contains little by way

of evidence of disciplinary inhomogeneity in relation to student characteristics. These

themes will be expanded upon within the conference and the author would like to use the

conference as an opportunity to discuss with participants disciplinary cultural influences on

personal tutoring.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is considered important that an appreciation of the significantly differing

contexts in which personal tutoring takes place is essential for institutions in developing

policy, practice and support for this challenging academic role.

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