

Staff and student beliefs about 'good teaching' at university (0152)

This paper presents findings from a research project examining the views of lecturers and students in a post-1992 university about what constitutes 'good teaching'. The aim is to identify how teaching 'quality' is judged by both groups, including reference to practices, behaviours, and external issues (e.g. the public debate on 'value for money' in higher education, students' prior educational experiences'). The extent to which the values and the language used to express them vary and converge between the two groups will be discussed. Implications for work in institutional academic development, including work with students, will be explored.

The question of what constitutes 'good teaching' in universities is a key issue in several contemporary debates within the sector. The reworking of the UK Professional Standards Framework for HE, alongside initiatives such as the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme and various institutional awards for work in learning and teaching all set out a diverse range of criteria, competencies and characteristics of individuals and practice. Official processes of Quality Assurance examine teaching quality in a variety of ways, and in most institutions are linked to mechanisms for 'quality enhancement'.

At the same time student evaluations of 'teaching quality' form a crucial category of various high-profile initiatives for the evaluation of universities and may be included in official indicators of potential 'value for money' spent on HE. Less formally, it is reasonable to assume that the student experience depends substantially on the quality of teaching received and on the relationship[s] of this to student learning.

However, relatively little is known about the criteria by which students and academics judge teaching to be 'good'. Key factors which may play a part include the relative salience of different 'dimensions' of the teaching and learning relationship, student expectations and previous experiences, staff identities as HE teachers and as academics, and beliefs about the nature and purpose of HE. The external social and policy context in which students undertake their university education will also have an impact.

The limited research on this topic suggests that students and academics may hold very different opinions on what is 'good'. For example, misalignments may occur in relation to practice designed to promote active learning (Reid and Johnston 1999, Sinclair and Johnston 2000), or unfamiliar content and teaching methods (Blackmore 2009, Davies and Reynolds 2007). Crabtree et al (2007) found that many students apply the norms of compulsory education to university. The literature on student retention suggests that this is an area in which the management of expectations and transition to HE is crucial (e.g. Loyens et al 2007). Gibbs (2010, 29) warns that 'what unsophisticated students want their teachers to do is often bad for their learning'.

This project uses a qualitative method (focus groups and interviews) to explore the concepts of 'good teaching' which are held by students and staff at a post-1992 university. NSS

ratings for 'teaching quality' and qualitative comments are used to identify departments with varying scores in this area. The NSS criteria are used critically in selecting participating departments, and the relative ratings received in the NSS are *not* taken as an indication of absolute quality.

Students are asked to describe the *practices* which they associate with good teaching. Minimal prompts are used in the early stages of the focus groups in order to avoid 'priming' the participants. Attempts are made to cover a range of relevant topics including content and curriculum, methods and classroom practice, physical and technological environment, organisation, feedback, and interpersonal and affective issues. They are not presented with an initial definition of 'teaching', although identification of implicit and explicit definitions is an important part of the analysis of the data. Crucially, students are invited to comment on the relationship between their experiences of teaching and their views of the impact of these on their learning. Academics will be asked to discuss their observations of the impact of their practice.

The context in which teaching occurs will impact on the extent to which different outcomes are desirable and practical, and also on judgements of quality. For this reason, the relationship of classroom experience to previous educational experiences, personal circumstances and views on the wider policy context of HE is investigated (with both staff and students).

Preliminary findings from the analysis of the data are presented. These include:

- which categories of practice, competency and context which are salient in making a judgement about the 'quality' of teaching.
- which criteria are used in relation to each of these categories.

Differences between the views of students and academics are discussed, as are contrasts by subject discipline and by stage of study (for students). Contrasts and similarities between academics with differing involvement and investment in the formal instantiations of a 'learning and teaching' culture (e.g. HEA fellowship, attendance at Academic Development sessions) are considered.

The language used to frame the discussion of 'good teaching', and the implications of different articulations, are analysed. For example, preliminary interviews with academic staff indicate a contrast between the identification of 'good teaching' with the characteristics of individuals, or the practice as professionals. A view of good teaching as an *individual* matter may frame this in terms of inherent talent (the 'x factor' which leads to 'inspiration' or 'hero innovation'), or emotion and disposition (the teacher who 'really cares'). The alternative view of 'good teaching' as a matter of practice tends to draw *either* on the language of credentials, expertise and competencies *or* on that of communities of practice. The contrasts between these discourses, and those used by students, complicate an already multifaceted area.

They also present challenges for those involved in academic development and learning enhancement, as well as initiatives to engage students in reflection on their own learning. The aim of the research is to provide a knowledge base from which to identify sites for a meaningful conversation between academics and students of the nature and purpose of higher education, and to forge and 'claim' a language in which this can take place.

References

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