



Transforming the use of tutorials through academic staff development

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Background

- Massification and widening access = diverse student population and larger classes
- More students with different levels of preparedness and less time for focused attention in large classes
- Tutorials - designed as intimate, small group, facilitated learning - become increasingly valuable
- BUT they need to be well designed, relevant and fit for purpose to enhance student learning and success
- THUS academic development for staff designing tutorials and training tutor would be necessary and productive investment

Our short course

- CHEC course, run in 2013, 2014 and 2015 with revisions and changes each year
- Small groups - maximum of 25 participants
- Team design and facilitation (facilitators from five WCape universities)
- Run like a typical tutorial - balance of facilitator input, Q&A, and small group discussion and activities
- Strongly theorised, but with a 'light touch' for participants
 - Social realist tools from Bernstein (knowledge structures), and LCT (Semantics)
 - Know-Be-Do 'triangle' from Barnett; Dall'Alba and Barnacle; Drake and Burns
 - Focus on disciplinary teaching and learning, rather than generic approach

This paper, and research

- Explores one aspect of our learning as facilitators: how to enable academic staff development and learning through a short course
- Interested in how lecturers - different levels of experience and interest and different disciplines - engaged with the theory and activities and whether their understanding of tutorials and student learning was 'transformed' and how
- Framed conceptually by threshold crossing (Meyer and Land; Cousin) but adapted to be less about 'concepts' in the stricter sense (Kiley and Wisker) .

Threshold crossing and liminality

- Thresholds are **doorways into new and changed spaces**
- Crossing a conceptual or emotional threshold changes the way you understand the concept or emotion and its relationship to other concepts or emotions as well as the way you see your yourself (Meyer and Land, 2005).
- Cannot go back - it is a **transformative move to cross a threshold**
- Must move through a liminal space to do so - Liminality is a transformative state in the process of learning in which there are both shifts or changes in the learner's meaning frame (Schwartzman, 2010) and shifts in the 'learner's subjectivity' (Meyer and Land, 2005).
- **Liminal spaces are uncertain, and can be uncomfortable** or even threatening to one's world view, prior knowledge or sense of self.

Methodology

- Data was participants' final portfolio assignments produced for the course
- Dataset included facilitator reflections on courses, particularly in 2014 and 2015 as the course was most coherent in form and enactment in these years.
- Data read for evidence of threshold crossing, or resistance to crossing
- We developed an organising framework: looking at Affective; Cognitive; Systemic moves made by participants. Data were coded within this framework through iterative readings of data texts.

Coding framework

Progress	Type of challenge experienced		
	Cognitive	Affective	Systemic
Liminality	Reference to difficulty in sense-making/ grasping new concepts	Reference to personal discomfort or being in a strange/new space	Reference to trying to adapt to (struggle) new practices/ways to do things
Threshold crossing	Evidence of having shifted in understanding ('lightbulb moments')	Evidence of feeling more confident with the new concepts and practices	Evidence of having changed practices (restructured programmes, eg)
Static	No evidence of shift, and not grasping concepts	No evidence of shift, but wanting to implement suggestions	No evidence of shift, but carrying out procedures
Integrated	Evidence of a shift in one or more categories impacting other categories		

Systemic threshold crossing

Relatively easy to change a system at a superficial level. Sustained change requires a change in understanding the role and functions of the system, which means a crossed threshold at this level.

Not all participants showed evidence of this, though:

I expected the course to deal with new forms of assessment ... that would be easy to administer and tools on how to maneuver students in and out of tutorial groups... Thank God my very basic expectations were not met! ... I ended up learning about tools that will assist me in transforming my tutorials...Being a part of this course allowed me to carefully plan my modules in terms of the presentation of material, assessments as well as the intended outcomes.(11)

But some did:

What concept mapping has done for me is made me realise how, after teaching this module for 10 years, important it is to reflect on your work and how we present it to students.(13)

Affective threshold crossing

Slightly more challenging in this context is actually changing the way lecturers see themselves in this context and their feelings about what it is they're doing.

Many participant texts used words or phrases such as 'challenging', 'open to change' and 'getting out of my comfort zone' - uncomfortable moves into the liminal space prior to potential threshold crossing.

even when the unknown is scary and totally out of your element it is not out of your reach. (4)

This course has really strengthened my passion to lecture as I have seen the gaps in my lectures so clearly now. (19)

Cognitive threshold crossing

Possibly the most challenging is the cognitive shift - the ability to really understand one's own discipline using a different set of theoretical tools which had been introduced.

When the concept of semantics was first introduced to me in the course, I was certain that we were revisiting my field ... However, it soon dawned on me that the term is related to segmentation of knowledge ...(14)

Semantic waves: a major eye opener for me! It was always bothering me in my classes as to why students were not leaving the class fully grasping these simple concepts that I was laying out (19)

Some participants showed evidence of more complex, integrated shifts:

... given me the self-confidence to pursue relevant readings in the field, and to be alert to changes and innovations (10)

The experience was much deeper, allowing me to consider my teaching from different theoretical perspectives and leaving me with far more than the match-making- type skills I had sought... I need to provide students with the space for light-bulb moments and to reflect their thoughts back to them (5).

Tentative conclusions

- Threshold crossing is something we do as lifelong learners, and something we expect of our students
- But it involves changing, shifting our perceptions of the world, others, ourselves, knowledge, learning - and is often uncomfortable and difficult
- Cognitive and systemic thresholds are often crossed once affective or emotional issues have been confronted - emotions often lead students into new learning spaces, or block students from even trying (see Case, Marshall and Linder 2010).
- We need to listen to successful and resistant participants in academic development spaces – all voices need to be heard and attended to in caring and ethical praxis.

References

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