

Exploring the drivers and barriers to teaching excellence

by Chapman-Waterhouse, E.

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ICED 2020 proceedings: Exploring the drivers and barriers to teaching excellence

Emily Chapman-Waterhouse¹

*Department of Animal Production, Welfare & Veterinary Sciences,
Harper Adams University
Shropshire, TF10 8NB, UK*

Abstract

In a sector that aspires to teaching excellence it is important to stand back and ask: what do we mean by this? While existing research defines effective methods for teaching and supporting learners, each institution and student collective has its own identity, culture, preferences and norms. The very exercise of locating excellence is also a powerful practice based conversation starter, particularly in terms of what makes our teaching practice “future-ready”. Findings from such evaluative conversations can provide a mandate for the advocacy of one practice over another; help individual staff develop confidence in their methods through affirmation; and shed light on institution specific conceptions of excellence.

The aims of our interactive workshop were to facilitate those evaluative conversations, using the prompts provided by a table-top dialogue sheet.

In combination with published literature, the findings from a project undertaken in the author’s home institution indicated that the drivers to impactful teaching could be categorised as either social, innovative or by the extent of their alignment with the real world. Perceived barriers included regulations and the entry profiles of students. The journey to teaching excellence was noted as not being without challenges; however, alternative pedagogies were perceived as a means to overcome them. Future work could include larger-scale projects to explore a wider range of both staff and student views.

1 Introduction

The profile of teaching excellence in undergraduate provision was highlighted by the English cross-sector implementation of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in 2017. This framework currently measures teaching quality, learning environment, student outcomes and learning gain (OfS, 2018).

A project which was undertaken in the author’s home institution during 2017-2019 and which underpins the intended workshop set out to establish an understanding of the academic staff perspective on what teaching excellence looked like in animal and veterinary sciences course areas. The project provided a novel perspective, as it was undertaken in a small specialist institution with a unique subject offering and a high cost base.

Our mixed methods project set out to explore the drivers and barriers to impactful teaching and teaching excellence. The aims of our interactive workshop were to facilitate dialogue between participants so they could themselves derive some of the answers.

¹ echapmanwaterhouse@harper-adams.ac.uk

2 Background literature

Published literature provides some insight into what excellent teaching looks like. The following is not an exhaustive review, but is intended to be indicative.

In terms of teacher characteristics, Ford (1983) discussed “humaneness”, “skill of reasoning”, being a “multicultural person”, and an ability to “integrate interdisciplinary aspects of the curriculum into their teaching.” Issler (1983) adds to this list enthusiasm, clarity, preparation, stimulating delivery, love of knowledge and experience. The two studies are connected in the sense that skills of reasoning, decision making and integration of knowledge are arguably a result of experience.

Some more recent examples of literature on this topic include Revell & Wainwright (2009), who defined excellent teaching as being where there is a “high degree of student participation and interaction, a clear structure and passion and enthusiasm in the lecturer.” Gunn & Fisk (2013) reported that excellent teaching arose when staff were “being dynamically engaged in teaching practice and inspiring and practically scaffolding the potential dynamic engagement of one’s students.” This aligns with Wood and Su’s findings published in 2017, which summarise excellent teaching as “...the effectiveness of academics in enabling students to learn... the level of competence in teaching which maximises learning gain and capacity for original critical thought recognised as exemplary by peers.”

3 Conference workshop approach

The intention was for the workshop to be organised as follows:

- Invite participants to sit in groups of four which where possible reflect a variety of subject/interest areas
- The author then presents
 - The aims of the workshop, two-three icebreaker questions (“post-its”) and a brief self-introduction
 - The context of the workshop
 - The dialogue sheet
- Using a dialogue sheet per table, participants spend the bulk of the workshop time in discussions within their group in order to complete it.
- Invite a spokesperson per group to give feedback to the rest of the room; discussion would then continue as a whole group.
- The author presents the key findings from the research project and from published literature.
- Participants draft a set of take-home definitions, expectations or calls to action relevant to their own settings.

4 Underpinning project methodology

A research ethics application was approved by the home institution’s Research Ethics Committee and participant consent was obtained and stored securely. This project sought views from active teaching staff within the “home” department of the author.

The research methodology took a two-phase approach:

4.1 Phase 1

4.1.1 Focus groups

Two semi-structured focus groups, exploring both research questions, took place at the home institution. To remove the potential for bias, the focus groups were facilitated by a trained external facilitator.

4.1.2 Analysis of focus group data

The transcribed focus group recordings were analysed using a grounded theory and open coding approach to derive categories. Analysis was undertaken in NVivo Plus Version 11.0 by the author and following initial coding; a peer review was sought from an independent consultant to corroborate or refute categories.

4.2 Phase 2

4.2.1 Online questionnaire

In an iterative style, the headline findings from the focus groups informed the development of an anonymous online questionnaire delivered via Online Surveys and preceded by a short pilot to test accessibility. The questionnaire sought scaled and free-text responses, set to answer both research questions.

4.2.2 Analysis of the online questionnaire data

This yielded a 37% response rate. Online survey data was exported to MS Excel for analysis.

4.3 Participants

The author was excluded from the potential pool of participants. Focus Group 1 (FG1) comprised five participants, and Group 2 (FG2) seven participants. At the time of the study, these staff members were involved in the delivery of modules in undergraduate and postgraduate Agriculture, Animals, Veterinary Nursing and Veterinary Physiotherapy. The twelve focus group participants volunteered to take part. The Phase 2 questionnaire was circulated to active teaching staff within the department ($n=75$).

5 Results

5.1 Take-home messages from the project

Table 1 below summarises the findings from the project undertaken in the author's home institution, reported as participant perceptions.

5.2 Limitations of our project findings

The timing of data collection may have influenced responses from participants, e.g. if they were mid-way through a large research project of their own. A future iteration should also capture current workload, projects or activities being undertaken by study participants to better understand their possible impact on perceptions. It is important to note that there was no representation from one section of the department and there was a very limited response rate for the Phase Two questionnaire. If participants had little or no experience of poor teaching (when they were students), they may not have been able to then benchmark teaching excellence.

Student characteristics of Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME), mature age group, care leavers or international domicile were not mentioned by participants in our project. Therefore we cannot be sure that our findings are relevant for the wider student body. The lack of reference to these specific student characteristics may be explained by the limited extent to which our courses recruit such students.

| Drivers to impactful teaching | Barriers to teaching excellence |
|---|---|
| A passionate teaching philosophy; having experienced enthusiastic teaching when they were themselves students; having freedom to be innovative | Access to resources; timetabling; teaching space constraints; tension for staff regarding teaching versus research; external sector regulations |
| Small group sizes; a comfortable environment; a personable communication style; placing students as leaders | Large groups; assessment load; accepted entry profile of students |
| Application of technology in teaching; application of tools or equipment used in industry; practical application of student skills; staying connected with industry | Technology that breaks face-to-face contact between staff and students |

Table 1: A summary of the perceived drivers and barriers

5.3 Intended results derived through the conference workshop

During the course of the workshop, participants would have been challenged to (re-)think teaching excellence: what it has been, what it currently is and what it could be in the future; what drives them as practitioners to aspire to teaching excellence; what they perceive to be the barriers and potential solutions to these; and lastly, what next?

6 Conclusion and recommendations

Whilst the intention was that workshop participants would derive their own recommendations to take back to their own settings for comparison, our project gave rise to five specific recommendations:

- Showcase the active teaching approaches identified through the focus groups.
- Optimise opportunities to reach teaching excellence sustainably, therefore creating a culture shift.
- Undertake a larger-scale project, informed by the design and findings of this initial work.
- Capture what the students view as teaching excellence by way of comparison, and/or to understand commonality or differences of opinion.
- Revisit the study participants to assess the likelihood of unintended consequences for an individual's teaching practice – and in turn, of departmental and institutional changes – through undertaking this project.

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