Exploring tutors' conceptions of excellent tutoring

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Abstract

With high numbers of new casual tutors in the Faculty of Economics and Business each semester, a program that addresses tutors' preparation for teaching is essential. The tutor development program described here is underpinned by a 'communities of practice' model (Wenger 2000), where tutors engage in activities in order to share and develop their experiences of teaching. This paper discusses one such activity that was used in the early stages of the program to support the development of a shared repertoire about excellent tutoring. Tutors individually identified the characteristics of excellent tutoring and these were then grouped and discussed. The categories of comments addressed many of the recognised principles of excellent teaching, with student-centred aspects at the fore. The exploratory exercise highlights the importance of informal knowledge, and the role of reflective exercises in bringing forth that knowledge.

Keywords: academic development, teaching, sessional staff

Introduction

There is a substantial body of literature on effective and excellent university teaching, yet this research mainly focuses on full time academics rather than tutors. For students, the tutorial learning environment is a place where they can apply theory, practise skills, interact with and learn from other students, develop relationships with peers that support learning beyond tutorials and receive individual attention in relation to their progress. In units of study with large numbers of students, the learning environment within a tutorial is often relied upon to counter a sense of anonymity that can exist in typical large lectures. A skilled tutor who understands the importance of student learning is crucial, yet tutors in many fields are often research students or industry experts with little experience of university teaching that requires facilitating student learning (Kift 2003). There is a need therefore to ensure that tutors are appropriately skilled and supported for the job of helping students learn.

This paper aims to address this imbalance by reporting on an exercise that was implemented within a Faculty-based tutor development program in order to determine what tutors thought were the attributes of excellent tutoring. The paper is organised as follows: a literature review on the characteristics of excellent teaching, a description of the tutor development program and its theoretical framework, the details of the exercise and a description and discussion of the results.

Literature review

The need for effective, systematic and evaluated development programs for tutors is well documented (e.g. Carroll 1980; Savage and Sharpe 1998; Sutherland 2002; Smith and Bath 2004; Dearn, Fraser and Ryan 2002; AUTC 2003). In response to this need, there is also a well developed literature on tutor training and development that covers many diverse approaches (see Smith and Bath 2003; 2004). While excellent tutoring is not often specified explicitly, there are several studies on excellent university teaching that are generally applicable to tutors. These are reviewed below.

What do experts say are the characteristics of excellent teaching?

One of the key attributes of excellent teaching that is of great importance to students is giving helpful feedback. Ramsden (2003) found that giving helpful feedback to students on their progress most clearly differentiated the best and worst courses as evaluated by students in Course Experience Questionnaires (distributed nationally in Australia since 1993). This is one of Ramsden's six key principles of effective teaching in higher education, which are: appropriate assessment and helpful feedback; making the subject interesting and explaining it clearly; clear goals and intellectual challenge; independence, control and engagement i.e. students feeling control over their learning; learning from students i.e. being open to change and continually improving and concern and respect for students and student learning.

Reflection on teaching is a further key characteristic of excellent teachers. Kane, Sandretto and Heath (2004) interviewed 17 lecturers who had been nominated by their heads of department as excellent teachers. The authors used three data collection methods with each participant: semi-structured interviews, repertory grid interviews and stimulated recall interviews where participants discussed their teaching while watching a video of themselves teaching. Kane, Sandretto and Heath (2004) then identified five common attributes of excellent teachers: subject knowledge; teaching skills (including communication skills, making real world connections, clear expectations, use of strategies to stimulate the interest of students, being able to improvise and respond and being a teachable person); interpersonal relationships with students 'caring about students' needs, and what and how they think' (p. 296); integration of research and teaching; and personal attributes (e.g. enthusiasm, sense of humour, being yourself). All five attributes were integrated by 'regular, purposeful reflection' (p. 300) on teaching.

The importance of creating a student-friendly environment is emphasised by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) as it is

the extent to which peers and student groups are seen as friendly and supportive and to which faculty are seen as approachable, helpful and encouraging that have the most important positive implications for how much students report learning during college.

(p. 85)

Defining the student learning experience in terms of alienation and engagement emphasises the importance of concern and respect for students (Mann 2001). Mann recommends five ways in which academics can help students become more engaged in the learning community: solidarity - dissolve the separation between 'them' and 'us'; hospitality - make students feel welcome and at home; safety - provide safe, supportive environments where students are accepted and respected; redistribution of power - give students power over their own learning and criticality - being aware of/examining the conditions in which academics work.

The concept of student control over, and involvement in, their own learning is sometimes referred to as active learning. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) report many studies comparing active with passive (lecture-only) learning. Active participation includes small-group discussion, question-answer dialogue, case study debates, collaborative learning in groups/pairs etc. Most studies showed that students perform significantly better when actively engaged in learning. For example, Hake (1998) showed that courses that made substantial use of interactive engagement methods (e.g. collaborative peer instruction) were significantly more effective in promoting conceptual understanding than courses that made little or no use of interactive engagement methods. Similarly, accounting students who participated in cooperative learning outperformed those taught using a traditional, passive lecture format (Hwang, Lui and Tong 2005).

In summary, this brief literature review has identified at least ten key attributes of excellent, effective teaching:

o   Subject knowledge

o   Making the subject interesting and explaining it clearly

o   Clear goals and intellectual challenge

o   Learning from students, being able to improvise and respond

o   Concern and respect for students and student learning

o   Active learning where students feel control over and are engaged in their learning

o   Integration of research and teaching

o   Personal attributes such enthusiasm, sense of humour, being yourself

o   Appropriate assessment and helpful feedback

o   Regular, purposeful reflection on teaching

There are no doubt many more and many different ways that these attributes could be described and categorised.

The study setting

With high numbers of casual tutors in the Faculty of Economics and Business, approximately 200 each year, a program that addresses tutors' preparation for a new teaching role is a necessity. Since 2004, the Faculty has provided a development program for new and existing tutors each semester. The program provides learning and teaching theory together with training in practical skills. Each year the program has developed in response to feedback from tutors, students and academics.

The program consists of four two-hour development sessions per semester plus a peer observation and self reflective exercise. These activities are available to both new and experienced tutors. The first two development sessions are discipline-based. The first session helps tutors prepare to teach their first tutorial, with information and activities on excellent tutoring, ice breakers, tutorial lesson planning and setting expectations. The second session focuses on techniques and activities that encourage student involvement in and commitment to learning. The third session centres on giving in-class feedback, feedback on assessments and helping students during one-to-one consultations. This session also provides information on ways tutors can gather and use feedback on their teaching. The final session is about the outcomes of the peer observation exercise, reflecting on the semester's tutoring experiences and career development. The peer observation exercise is an integral part of the program. It gives tutors the opportunity to learn

more about their teaching by observing another tutorial and by providing feedback to the tutor in a supportive manner (Morris and Mladenovic 2005).

The tutor development program attempts to balance tips and techniques with discussion of conceptions of learning and teaching. Some basic theory on topics such as student approaches to learning is introduced (e.g. Ramsden 2003). Also discussed are some short first person articles by academics on particular incidents and issues that the tutors are likely to encounter. These papers raise issues such as the balance between being approachable and being firm (Carabetta 2006), how to involve students from non-English speaking backgrounds in discussion (Carson 2006) and what to do when students seem to be particularly bored (Coyne 2005).

The tutor development program is underpinned by a 'communities of practice' model (Wenger 2000) where tutors engage in activities in order to shape and develop their experiences of teaching. Tutors enter a new community of practice when they begin teaching and Wenger's social definition of learning is particularly apt: 'Communities of practice grow out of a convergent interplay of competence and experience that involves mutual engagement. They offer an opportunity to negotiate competence through an experience of direct participation' (p. 229). The tutor development program utilises several aspects of Wenger's model. Informal processes such as conversations, brainstorming and social breaks are incorporated within the sessions. Tutors are encouraged to engage in the program as a mode of belonging to a cohort of tutors and to the Faculty as a whole.

The sessions also provide time for reflection (or 'imagination', as Wenger describes it) and the peer observation exercise includes a formal reflective component. New and experienced tutors are connected via experienced tutors attending the program. In addition, selected experienced tutors are invited to discuss various aspects of their tutoring (the information shared by experienced tutors is likely to be a valuable 'boundary experience' for new tutors). The program is aligned with other processes in the Faculty and the university which ensures that the program is useful beyond its completion. Artefacts from the sessions are collected and circulated to attendees (e.g. the results of the exercise described in this paper) and feedback from tutors about each session is circulated afterwards and certain points are responded to. There is also a website where tutors can find further readings on the development session topics, as well as important 'settling in' information and practical tips and soft copies of resources.

An exercise exploring tutors' conceptions of excellent teaching

In the first week of semester one 2006, nine discipline-specific tutor development sessions were conducted. The theme of each session was 'What is excellent tutoring?'. Each session provided an overview of the tutor development program, a presentation on excellent tutoring and covered planning for the first tutorial. Activities included a discussion after watching a short video of part of a tutorial and the exercise described below. There were opportunities for tutors to engage in discussion and ask questions. The sessions modelled aspects of how a tutorial might be run. For example tutors participated in an ice breaker, a range of activities and provided some brief, anonymous written feedback about the session. Both new and experienced tutors attended these non-compulsory sessions. Between 3-17 tutors attended each session; 63 attended in total.

During the sessions, tutors were asked to complete an exercise, reflecting individually on 'what are the characteristics of excellent tutoring?'. Each participant wrote down a few points on notes and put them up on the whiteboard. We then grouped these into categories. This exercise took place near the beginning of the session and so was not informed by any of the session content on excellent tutoring.

The exercise was designed to be exploratory; there were no pre-conceived ideas of what the tutors would come up with. The exercise was used to get tutors thinking about the topic (which was about to be covered via presentation/discussion) and also to get tutors involved in an active learning experience. As with many of the activities in the program, it also provided an example of a type of exercise that tutors could use in their own classes.

The exercise provided a lead in to a presentation about findings from the literature on what excellent teaching is considered to be. As each iteration of the exercise took place, tutors identified many of the documented principles of excellent teaching. This observation was discussed during subsequent exploration of the relevant literature focussing on development of high quality learning and teaching environments.

Results from the exercise

Looking at the data set as a whole, 10 separate categories can be identified (Table 1). Not every group identified every attribute; groups identified between three and six attributes of excellent tutoring, with about five being the average.

Tutors' experiences of the exercise

Informal feedback was gathered at the end of each session. Not many tutors mentioned the exercise explicitly but some did in response to the question 'What did you appreciate most about today's session?'. There were six such responses. Four tutors enjoyed sharing and discussing excellent tutoring e.g. 'Everyone's ideas about what makes excellent tutoring'. One experienced tutor found the exercise to be a verification of their approach to teaching: 'That the issues on the post-it notes reinforced what I'm doing'. Another tutor liked the type of activity: 'Post it notes is fun way to look @ brainstorming'.

Table 1: Attributes of excellent tutoring as identified by tutors

Attributes	Examples of tutors' statements	Group 1 (n=4)	2 (n=12)	3 (n=11)	4 (n=5)	5 (n=5)	6 (n=3)	7 (n=3)	8 (n=3)	9 n=17)	Totals
Student interaction and participation	'Engaging all students in exercises'	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	80
Respect for students	'Tutor makes students feel welcome'	✔	✔	✔		✔		✔	✔	✔	29
Communication skills	'Tutor speaks clearly and audibly'	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	26
Helping students understand the material	'Asking relevant questions to ensure understanding'				✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	26
Tutor preparation	'Industry & theory. Knowledge.'		✔	✔	✔	✔			✔	✔	25
Tutor attributes	'Patience'				✔					✔	5
Feedback to students	'Strive to give constructive feedback on assessments'		✔								4
Lesson planning/management	'Well paced'		✔								2
Classroom management	'Flexible with way tutorial runs & wants of students'							✔			2
Clear objectives and expectations	'Clear objectives and expectations being set'								✔		1

Discussion

It is important to note that in the absence of further data, the interpretation of these results is exploratory at this stage. However, some useful insights and avenues for further exploration emerge. This short exercise highlights the importance of informal knowledge and the role of reflective exercises in bringing forth that knowledge. Tutors, in five minutes, came up with many of the attributes of excellent teaching identified by expert researchers. Thus, tutors seemed to have a good understanding of student-centred teaching. The categories with the comments emerging from the exercise were student interaction and participation and respect for students. The comments included: 'Being able to encourage students to talk and have exchanges rather than everything going through the tutor', 'Being able to understand the student (where they're coming from)', 'Serve as a bridge', 'Stand in students' shoes'. These comments suggest that some tutors consider their teaching from the perspective of their students.

There are mixed findings in literature on whether early-career teachers have student-focussed conceptions of teaching. The finding of this exercise where tutors had a student-centred focus concurs with that of Buelens, Clement and Clarebout (2002), who surveyed 121 teaching assistants about their conceptions of knowledge, learning and instruction and found that they favoured a student-oriented conception about teaching rather than a teacher-centred conception. This result contrasts with some authors who propose that new teachers have teacher-centred conceptions of teaching, with student-oriented conceptions of teaching developing due to many years of experience of teaching and reflection upon it (e.g. Kugel 1993). However, Norton *et al.*'s(2005) large study (n=584) did not support the notion of academics' conceptions of teaching developing with increasing teaching experience.

Although new tutors do not have years of teaching experience, they do have many years of experience being taught at school and university. Jackson's (2004) survey of pre-1974 graduates revealed that people remember good and poor teaching long after the fact. Jackson found the key distinguishing feature of good teaching was that it was student-centred; there were only occasional references to teachers' preparedness for their classes, well-organised lectures and content mastery. Teachers' past experiences as students have a strong influence on their teaching (e.g. Entwistle *et al.* 2000, Roehrig *et al.* 2003, Hayes 2006). It is possible that the student-centred focus prevalent in tutors in this study is due to their past experiences as students.

Throughout the program tutors have tended to express more interest in the student point of view than some experienced, senior academics. Some tutors have expressed their frustration that they are not able to implement certain innovations or best practices as they have limited or no control over material, structure,

assessment and so on. Unfortunately, many tutors do not feel comfortable enough to approach the lecturer in charge to discuss these issues and to make suggestions. The issue of the marginalisation of casual teaching staff is not unique to this Faculty. Quinn (2005) found that part time teaching staff had 'difficulty in establishing and maintaining a sense of institutional belongingness' (p. 25) due to isolation, lack of facilities and lack of recognition. He describes the division between full time and part time teaching staff as a chasm (p. 30). Marginson (2000) also recognises the lack of security experienced by casual academics and their exclusion from 'the collegial tradition' (p. 32). In the tutor development program Wenger's (2000) communities of practice model is used to address these issues of marginalisation. For example, feedback from tutors is valued and informs the design of the tutor development program and Faculty decision making bodies.

The tutors in this study did not identify all aspects of excellent teaching reported in the literature. For example, two points that were not mentioned by tutors in this exercise were reflection and being yourself. In Kane, Sandretto and Heath's model (2004), the attributes of excellent teachers were integrated by frequent, focussed reflection on teaching. This reflection encompasses activities such as noting what went well and what didn't, making changes next time, always looking to improve, and being informed by several sources of data (e.g. students, colleagues, theory). In addition, no two excellent teachers interviewed by Kane, Sandretto and Heath (2004) approached their teaching in the same way. Interviewees emphasised the importance of being themselves, of 'integrating their personalities into their role as teacher' (p. 299). It is, perhaps, not surprising that tutors did not mention these aspects of excellent teaching, as they are characteristics that are developed over time, often supported by development activities.

While tutors displayed significant informal knowledge about excellent teaching, there is, as McKeachie (1997) describes, a difference between knowing and doing. To put it bluntly 'effective teaching is not a paper-and-pencil exercise' (Hayes 2006, p. 50). A tutor may know what good teaching techniques are but perhaps cannot employ these techniques in a successful and deliberate manner. Prosser *et al.* (2003 p. 46) found that 'for subjects in which students report a lower quality learning experience, the reported approaches to teaching of their teachers are dissonant and unrelated or incoherently related to perceptions of the teaching and learning context. This is particularly so for less senior tutors (tutors and demonstrators)'. McKeachie (1997) believes that a key element in transforming knowing into doing is helping teachers understand their conceptual beliefs about teaching.

Further reflective activities are needed in the tutor development program in order to help tutors transform their valuable informal knowledge into classroom practices. One possibility is the model described by Sandretto, Kane and Heath (2002) where early career lecturers participated in a teaching intervention where they were interviewed about their teaching (their espoused theories), and then participated in a stimulated recall interview to discuss their practice (their theories-in-use) while watching a video of their teaching. For most participants, being 'confronted with the reality of their own actual teaching practice' and the discrepancies between their espoused theories and theories-in-use (p. 139), led to changes in their teaching practice.

The simple nature of the exercise discussed in this paper belies the complexities of teaching. Claxton (2000 p. 36) believes that '…virtuosity cannot *in principle* be fully explicated, for it embodies observations, distinctions, feelings, perceptual patterns and nuances that are too fine-grain to be caught accurately in a web of words' (original emphasis). Even so, such exercises arguably are of value within tutor development programs as they begin the process of transforming knowing into doing.

Further research is needed as the results are based on a small, limited exercise as part of a voluntary tutor development program. The voluntary nature of the program means that perhaps the majority of tutors who attend are those more interested in teaching (a similar bias was described by Buelens, Clement and Clarebout 2002 in relation to their voluntary questionnaire). In addition, the study was conducted at only one site. It would be interesting to replicate the study in another tutor development program, and also to continue conducting the exercise each semester.

This paper has shown that, in a short reflective activity, tutors identified many of the recognised principles of excellent teaching, with an emphasis on student-centred aspects. The prevalence of student-centred comments provides a good basis on which to provide further developmental activities within the learning community of the tutor development program.

Acknowledgments

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