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Outstanding University Lecturers: Ambitious Altruists or Mavericks of the Academy?

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Abstract: The paper discusses the results of a research study to determine what characteristics outstanding university lecturers have in common. Academic staff and graduate students at an Australian university were invited to participate in a survey questionnaire followed by voluntary interviews. Lecturers who had been identified as outstanding were also interviewed. The five characteristics were expertise, holistic approach to learning, engaging the student, open door policy and ambitious altruists. This study found that outstanding lecturers were unconventional in their work practices and valued student learning often at the sacrifice of their own career paths. Outstanding university lecturers are ambitious altruists who are working in an increasingly bureaucratized system.

Keywords: altruism; expertise; teaching excellence

Introduction

The article discusses the results of a study which identified the characteristics of outstanding university lecturers at an Australian university. The research was conducted as a result of differing perceptions of what was considered outstanding, what outstanding lecturers did differently and how they made an impact. It is through the research that a new set of characteristics were formulated in order to better understand teaching excellence. As a result, a new theory to understanding what motivates outstanding lecturers has been developed which has implications for learning and teaching in the university sector.

Research Design and Methodology

A research study was undertaken at an Australian university in 2013 to determine the characteristics of outstanding university lecturers and what they have in common. It was framed from the basis that outstanding lecturers would have a set of common characteristics from an existing theoretical foundation. The literature showed that these characteristics and frameworks were inconsistent across previous studies. The aim of the study was to determine what characteristics were valued by the students, how the previous research supported this and how these characteristics were demonstrated by the outstanding lecturers. Furthermore, from a perspective of outstanding lecturers in the tertiary sector, the focus was on the motivation of these lecturers and how it was manifested in their own teaching and learning.

The methods used for this study were thematic analysis and grounded theory. Thematic analysis was used in the first two parts of the study in order to identify, analyse and code the common themes found in the research (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

Grounded theory was employed in the latter part of the study as there were no extant theories of what made an outstanding university in order to support the findings of this study (Charmaz, 2000; Charmaz, 2002; Glaser, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The study was in three parts. In part one, an anonymous survey was given to students enrolled in the Graduate Certificate in University Learning and Teaching. They were selected due to their interest in the topic of tertiary teaching and they also represented a cross-section of students. The second part was a series of semi-structured interviews where the students from part one were invited to participate. The final part were interviews to lecturers who were considered to be outstanding. These were selected based on the Australian Teaching Awards system as well as the reputation of their teaching from students and peers. The outstanding lecturers were working at the university but were not lecturers in the Graduate Certificate in University Learning and Teaching. The final section of the paper discusses different approaches towards teaching excellence in the tertiary sector in which a new understanding and theory is developed.

There were limitations in the design due to the relatively small sample compared to similar studies. However, the aim was for in depth discussion, analysis and insights rather than producing yet another list of characteristics. Surveying and interviewing students who were already studying tertiary teaching meant that there may have been bias in their responses. The sample did, however provide rich data in which to base a new approach and understanding of excellence in teaching.

Literature Review

In the literature, the term “outstanding” and “excellent” have been interchanged depending on the context and philosophical foundations (Andrews, Garriso & Magnusson, 1996; Cosh, 1999; Gibbs, 2006; Sherman et al., 1987; Yair, 2008). Here the term “outstanding” has been employed as the focus is on lecturers who are exceptional in their craft. For this study, an outstanding university lecturer in this study is defined as a lecturer who was singled out by students and peers for their university teaching, had made a lasting positive impact on the students and was known for their contribution to the academy.

Investigating excellence in teaching has been of historical interest. Breed’s 1917 study identified knowledge and organisation of subject matter, personal qualities, skill in instruction professional development and university co-operation as the most popular characteristics (Breed, 1927). Likewise, the categories of skill, personality traits and professional engagement have been consistent throughout many similar research studies (Brookfield, 1990; Finkel, 2000; Harl, 2010; Metcalfe & Game, 2006a/2006b; Ramsden, 2003; Sherman et al., 1987; Skelton, 2005; Sternberg & Horvarth, 1995; Weimar, 1997; Yair, 2008). These studies have collected their data from surveys or interviews with students, peers, alumni, autobiographies or biographical material. This study is a combination of surveys, biographical reminiscences and autobiographical reflection.

Teaching excellence is still an area of debate. The current trend has been to measure quality and assess the outcomes. Hattie’s Visible Learning theory (2009) has identified over one hundred factors for effective learning and which ones make the biggest impact. This theory has influenced what is valued for effective teaching, most notably the teaching standards developed by the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership.

Articulating what exactly the lecturers did differently was challenging when these qualities were innate (Gosling & Hannan, 2007; Polanyi, 1966; Weimar, 1997; Yair, 2008). Kane, Sandretto and Heath (2004) in contrast, believed that excellence was a skill which could be developed.

Identifying characteristics was complex due to the many individual personality traits (Bain, 2004; Bentley-Davies, 2010; Boonshaft, 2010; Gladwell, 2009; Yair, 2008). Knowledge, passion and enthusiasm were terms which frequently appeared to describe excellence. Students valued the personality of the lecturer and approachability more highly than skill attainment (Feldman, 1988; Lawler, Chen & Venso, 2007; Moore & Kuol, 2007; Saroyan & Amundsen, 2001).

There was a correlation between teacher evaluation and improvement but this study was only focussing on outstanding university lecturers rather than strategies for improvement (Freeman & Scheidecker, 2009; Murray, 1997; McAlphine & Weston, 2000; Ramsden, 2003; Sherman et al., 1987).

Universities have recently been recognising and awarding outstanding lecturing in a research dominated environment (Boyer, 1990; Weimar, 1997). However, the bureaucracy of teaching awards has resulted in some lecturers being rewarded for compliance in completing applications rather than for their raw brilliance, creativity and innovation (Dunkin & Precians, 1992; Jones, 2010; Palmer & Collins, 2006; Skelton, 2005; Yair, 2008). In this study, there were only six outstanding lecturers identified at the university and interviewed. They had received awards for their lecturing and were recommended by both students and peers.

At the tertiary level, the connection between expertise and excellence was a common theme (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1986; Chi, Glaser & Farr, 1988). The distinction between novice and expert and how this could be acquired has also been an area of research (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1986; Gladwell, 2009; Saroyan & Snell, 1997; Syed, 2010).

One personal quality was the ability to reflect (Brookfield, 1995; Cosh, 1999; Cowan, 2006; McAlphine & Westin, 2000; Schön, 1983). They, consequently were more open to self-improvement through change.

Robinson (2009) recognised that there were teachers who inspired and transformed lives in spite of the structure and limitation of educational systems. They managed to work around these barriers to evoke change. It was these lecturers who coincidentally became the focus of the research. Outstanding lecturers who have made an impact have done so through their ability to question the status quo for the benefit of learning.

Part One

The first part of the study were surveys given to a cohort of 70 students in the Graduate Certificate in University Learning and Teaching. They were asked to list the qualities of an outstanding lecturer. The results from the students were organised into three categories which were “skills”, “personal attributes” and “actions” (Dunkin & Precians, 1992). This section of the study has been discussed in detail in *Teacher Magazine* (2014). It was of little surprise that the survey results revealed that “expertise” rated the highest with a frequency of 33 responses (Lierse, 2014). Below are the three categories:

Skills	Frequency of Responses
Expertise	33
Clear Speaker	6
Knowledge at appropriate level	5
Intelligence	2
Broad Knowledge	2

Table 1: Responses which included skills

Personal Attributes	Frequency of Responses
Engagement	17
Enthusiasm	17
Inspiration	11
Passion	11
Rapport with students	11
Encouragement and expectations	9
Caring	8
Approachable	7
Compassionate/Mentor	6
Role Model	5
Humour	4
Strict	3
Extroversion/Dynamic	2
Adaptable/Flexible	2
Tender/Humble	2
Entertaining	2

Table 2: Responses which included personal attributes

Actions	Frequency of Responses
Made me think/Challenge status quo	11
Lecture Pattern	8
Simplified complex ideas	7
Inclusiveness of student input	5
Controversial	4
Reflective	3
Committed	2
Democratic	1

Table 3: Responses which included actions

Personal attributes had the most varied responses as they were describing the passion and motivation of the lecturer. Actions were the conscious strategies in order to motivate student learning. “Made me think” was an expected characteristic in a tertiary setting. It was interesting that “challenge [the] status quo” was bundled with “made me think”. To what extent the “status quo” was challenged by the lecturer and students and how this was achieved will be the focus of the study. Through studying the personal attributes and actions of the outstanding university lecturers, their motivations may be better understood.

Part Two

Part two of the research were voluntary interviews by the students in the Graduate Certificate in University Learning and Teaching. The students were contacted by email and provided with the interview questions beforehand which formed the basis of the discussion. The interviews were recorded and the transcripts were returned to them for verification. Fourteen students were interviewed which was 20 per cent of the original student cohort.

The purpose of the interviews was to determine whether there were any common themes or trends. The outstanding lecturers identified did not share any similarities in their backgrounds nor were there any distinguishable trends in gender, age, nationality, cultural background, career institution, discipline or levels of status or achievement. The range was from early career academics to a Nobel Laureate. Lecture delivery and style also varied across the lecturers due to trends, personal preferences and technological advancements.

The interviewees raised common themes which were explained and manifested differently. The students who knew beforehand that the lecturer was outstanding made a conscious effort to adjust their timetable to be in their class. If the reputation of the lecturer was not known beforehand, the students knew by the end of the first class the lecturer was special. When enquiring “how” the lecturer was outstanding, the reasons were expertise in the field and engagement with the material. These outstanding lecturers were prepared, focused and passionate about the topic. These tie in with the characteristics above which were expertise, enthusiasm and engagement. A common reminiscence was how quickly the lecturers flew by with comments like “one hour felt like five minutes”. This experience has been coined by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) as “flow” which is optimum work and total immersion in a positive environment. Robinson (2009) described this as working in ones “element” which is the “meeting point between natural aptitude and personal passion” (p. 21). The outstanding lecturers were in an environment where they were working in their potential.

Another theme was the priority of their classes and the amount of care the outstanding lecturers took to simplify difficult concepts (Ramsden, 2003; Sherman et al., 1987; Sternberg & Horvath, 1995). Silly questions would be handled respectfully in class and the lecturer would also be available for students if they needed help.

Some of the outstanding lecturers had achieved success in spite of gender, cultural or political barriers. The interviewees could describe what the lecturer did in class and the immensely positive impact they had on the interviewees’ career paths. However, when investigating “how” the outstanding lecturers influenced the faculty or advanced the profession, the interviewees could only reflect from their own perspective (Bain, 2012). Some lecturers worked in unconventional ways ranging from open ended seminars, creative assessment tasks and challenging current theories. They were aware of the backlash which ranged from lack of promotion to even death threats for one lecturer. What was apparent was the value the outstanding lecturer placed on student learning.

The first two parts of the research began to reveal common themes outstanding university lectures had in common. Previous research has focussed on “what” they did differently rather than “how” and “why”. The interviews with the outstanding lecturers began to provide answers to the qualities which set them apart and why they were considered exceptional.

Part Three

The final part of the study was to interview outstanding university lecturers. Six Outstanding lecturers were selected based on recognition in their teaching through public awards as well as recommendations by several peers. The interviews were semi-structured based on general questions of their lecturing style, philosophies of teaching and future plans. From the interviews as well as the previous research, a new combination of characteristics were created. They were; expertise, holistic approach to learning, engaging the student, open door policy and ambitious altruism.

Expertise

The assumption that an outstanding university lecturer would be an expert in their chosen field was evident in the study as well as the supporting literature. Experts in their field are defined by their expert knowledge, complexity and sophistication in their thinking (Dunkin & Precians, 1992; Sternberg & Horvath, 1995). The outstanding lecturers were regarded by

their professions as experts in mathematics, education, chemistry, history, biology and entrepreneurship. This was manifested in their approaches and innovations to improving learning in the discipline.

One paradox was that the outstanding lecturers were humbled by being labelled as “experts”. Outstanding Lecturer F commented: “Expertise, it’s a word that makes me very uncomfortable. I’m very capable of operating in the space successfully, but I don’t think it’s easy to be an expert in my field”.

They also did not consider themselves to be outstanding lecturers. Prior to turning on the recording device, many of the outstanding lecturers commented that they must have contacted the wrong person and what they were doing was not that special. Their humility was most touching.

What is shown here is even if they were world experts in their profession, they were not afraid to acknowledge that they still could learn much more.

Holistic Approach to Learning

Outstanding lecturers displayed a worldly approach to learning and teaching which has been defined here as holistic. There were two major ways this was displayed; firstly their life paths to become lecturers; and their openness to collaborate and learn from other disciplines. The ability to make connections and cross boundaries was an important factor in their success and their teaching (Bain, 2012; Metcalfe & Game, 2006a; Rice, 1986). Their career was more than a job, but an all-encompassing vocation. Moreover, their unconventional life paths made them open to new ideas and most fascinating to talk to.

Outstanding Lecturer E commenced a business studies degree, then changed to history: “So, the business degree had been around vocation whereas this was a passion which also in a way was vocational but in a different sort of way”. Outstanding lecturer B commenced in philosophy and was now working in education teaching social psychology. Outstanding lecturer C made a most interesting observation: “I’ve had a strong interest on not just my discipline, my field, but the faculty and university, and that ends up being the case that you provide information across courses”.

Outstanding lecturer F had a most fascinating background. After failing every year at school, he became a bricklayer and labourer before starting a registered company at age 21. After an unfortunate legal issue, lecturer F lost a million dollars and became bankrupt. The only way to get legal aid was to be unemployed or a student so chose the latter. “That background is pivotal to me to being a good educator.” These tangential paths to academia gave them a more balanced and worldly view.

Some of the outstanding lecturers had scheduled the interviews between meetings to collaborate on new projects. Outstanding lecturer C, a chemist was apologetic when arriving ten minutes late after collaborating with the engineering faculty, then was meeting up with someone from medicine after the interview. Outstanding lecturer F had scheduled the interview around a whirlwind of overseas trips as a guest lecturer and consultant. The breadth of knowledge and interest across disciplines enhanced the outstanding lecturer’s ability in teaching.

Engaging the Student

The priority for outstanding university lecturers is student learning. They know that passion, inspiration, enthusiasm and humour create the environment for positive learning.

Passion to enable learning was a topic close to the outstanding lecturers. Outstanding lecturer C created a series of events in his own time to promote science and learning. He described the rationale for a science fair for primary school children: “I did it because I want to try and get kids interested in science”. He arranged orientation days for students before the semester, and developed the pre-examination revision process to enable greater student success.

Outstanding lecturer D taught histology in a medical research centre. He spent much free time developing digitized microscope slides to facilitate and engage student learning as well as peers. As a result he was an Apple Distinguished Educator for developing the software.

His first year students were also invited back to demonstrate in his practical classes. “Giving a solid foundation, in which they can choose any field, and that’s what I find important, and I feel paternal when I see them move into PhDs.” His current project was creating a virtual pathology museum for medical students, and an interactive eBook because it is “something which I love”.

Understanding different learning styles was a priority. Outstanding lecturer D’s philosophy was, “If we can provide students with many different ways to learn because people learn in different ways then it can only be good”. Outstanding lecturer F concurred, “I accept that there is a huge variance in the room, and I accept that some people don’t get it”. He described how students could present assignments however they wanted ranging from video, verbal presentations to “16 balloons in the office numbered 1 to 16 and he wrote his assignment on the balloons”.

The outstanding lecturers wanted to challenge their students and watch them succeed. Outstanding lecturer E mentored a talented undergraduate student to publish: “I’m encouraging...I’m encouraging them after a special topic to aim to publish that because they want to be an academic so on the doorstep of going into Honours even, I’m encouraging them to have the confidence to publish”. Another student had recently been awarded a Churchill Fellowship.

Outstanding lecturer F believed that conviction was the prime characteristic as well as compassion, excitement and energy. Outstanding lecturer B believed it was all about the understanding the new generation of students and appealing to their voice. Outstanding lecturer C discussed, “So my focus is less on the delivery of the content and more on how you actually support them in their learning”. Their passion for their topic engaged students to be curious and inspired to fulfil their intellectual and academic potential.

Open Door Policy

Having an open door policy was a small yet powerful indicator of how the lecturer regarded the students. This was consistent amongst the outstanding lecturers. Outstanding lecturer E explained how “it promotes this kind of scholarly environment”.

Some lecturers literally kept their door open and others were available through other forms of communication. Outstanding lecturer F commented, “I’m not always there, yeah, but students can come any time they want. If they email me at 12 o’clock and I’m awake, I’ll email them back”. Outstanding lecturer C discussed within five minutes of the interview how he has an open door policy: “I used to have my door always wide open”. Outstanding lecturer E liked the camaraderie “if I’m there and they knock on my door, 99 per cent of the time, of course, I invite them in”. Outstanding lecturer D mourned the loss of his private office when the department refurbished to open plan offices. He now was physically and psychologically removed from student contact. “I do miss sitting with the other students and having a chat to see how they’re getting on.” The outstanding lecturers prioritized the students and their

learning through creating and establishing an open door policy even if the systems would make this a challenge.

Ambitious Altruists

The final characteristic was entitled ambitious altruists due to the way they realized their own dreams. When raising the concept of ambition, the outstanding lecturers initially were reluctant and embarrassed to discuss this. Educational leadership was merely a means to an end. However, it was found that outstanding lecturers all were ambitious in some way. Outstanding lecturer E commented, "I would like to become a professor one day. I think one of the tricky things in my academic career is my time that I balance between my research and my learning and teaching because I'm very committed to both". However, administration was not enticing because "it takes you away from your research students". She was committed to her students and would not accept a management role if she could no longer teach.

Outstanding Lecturer D saw the outcome of a promotion as a means of providing "More control of what I do". With power, he would have conversations with primary and high schools to better engage them with learning. "University can play ball, and become a leading centre." Earlier on he commented, "It's tricky, I'm not particularly someone who is goal orientated... it's not about me..." Outstanding Lecturer E commented how "I wouldn't want to take ownership" of the success of students.

However, some outstanding lecturers were mindful that the chance of promotion was slim. The rationale was a lack of publications, professional jealousy, or going against convention.

Outstanding lecturer B had her career blocked due to her "too soft, too subjective" research. "It's scorned upon my relationship with the faculty." She had, nonetheless published books and has presented her ground breaking research on TED.

Outstanding lecturer D knew that promotion was directly linked to publications "that should be my goal, apparently". This was a sore point and he described the lack of rigorous publication as "one of my weaker sides". Outstanding lecturer F saw promotion and awards as a form of legitimacy for his work but was this not why he was a lecturer.

The concept of ambition, as described by Adler, can be linked with the ego, a way of camouflaging vanity (Butler-Bowden, 2007). Here ambition is beyond ego, that is, for the greater good of humanity rather than personal gain.

When interviewing the outstanding lecturers, they were humbled by their achievements and position and status was merely a means of obtaining resources for their worldly goals. Outstanding lecturers saw their work as a vocation and not only put the students first, but to freely give their time to students over and beyond the work requirements, a rarity in the tertiary environment. Their generosity has been described by Ramsden as magnanimous (2003). In this context, their generosity is beyond magnanimity to altruism.

Lecturers by nature are giving. They give their expertise and time. What sets outstanding lecturers apart is their motivation to create change for altruistic means. That is, they are being provocative and challenging the status quo for the greater good of humanity. There is an urgency for their visions to be realized and the university is the most appropriate means of achieving this (Fehy & Fischbacher, 2003). There is little personal or financial reward and often, these outstanding lecturers sacrifice their own careers for their altruistic endeavours (Palmer, 1998).

Outstanding Lecturer B described the characteristics of an outstanding lecturer as an altruist They required "...humility, to generally care about the students more than ones career, innovation, contextual... [t]o have integrity, to love ones subject, to love teaching, to really want to know how to get better all the time".

The term “maverick” was chosen for the title of this paper to describe how outstanding lecturers did things in their own unorthodox ways. The only way to achieve what they needed to do was to get on with it without other people’s knowledge or approval. Outstanding lecturer D replied after asked how colleagues react when having a new idea. “It doesn’t get to that. I just work away at my desk.”

Outstanding lecturer F was a self-described maverick. He was “always under attack for what people assume are very questionable practices”. At the early stages of his career, he was facing the sack for adopting criterion referenced assessment in 2002 when the bell curve was still employed. By 2009, criterion referenced assessment had been implemented throughout the university: “Have to fight a fight, not just for myself, but for my students”. He did not conform to structure and travelled frequently. “I don’t like being a prisoner to any structure.” Outstanding lecturer C developed her unorthodox theories of teaching knowing that she was actively sabotaging her own career path, and would also face constant criticism and backlash. The universities core business is teaching, but is valued very poorly against research (Baird, 1988; Boyer, 1990; Rowland, 2000). These outstanding lecturers are not only treated as second class citizens to their research colleagues, but victimized for their progressive yet unorthodox approaches.

The outstanding lecturers had a clear vision and purpose of what they wanted to do and what they wanted to achieve. Their ambition was from altruistic foundations rather than ego driven. They could see the potential in their students and wanted to ensure that the students had every opportunity for success, often sacrificing time for their own research to the detriment of their own career paths. Promotion and positions of responsibility were a means to the end in order to achieve their goals. However, they were often overlooked due to their unconventional and unorthodox practices which would, ironically sabotage their careers.

The university ethos as centres of knowledge have become under threat by corporatization. Academic freedom and critical thinking is at risk of disappearing where outstanding lecturers will be expected to confirm to a system teaching employment skills rather than expanding on existing knowledge and challenging the status quo. One has to ask is that a purpose of a university?

Future Recommendations

Outstanding university lecturers have the capability and the initiative to transform and make a difference. Their practices may be unorthodox and idiosyncratic with radical outcomes but without these lecturers, the university would not advance knowledge. It is up to the universities to not only acknowledge exceptional teaching but to support their talent. The alternative would not only be regressive but damaging to students and the academy.

Outstanding university lecturers have made a choice to work authentically according to their belief and value systems. This has often been at odds with their peers and immediate environment where they are not only misunderstood and isolated, but in fear of losing their job, the very thing in which they have devoted their careers.

Palmer (1998) in his seminal book “The courage to teach” talks discusses how teaching can revitalize education through social change. This can be achieved through finding like-minded and supportive people which he coined “communities of congruence” (p. 166). This concept which was developed by Wenger known as “communities of practice” are essential for these brilliant yet isolated individuals (Barnett, 1997; Jones, 2010; Wenger, 1998).

Universities need to create communities of practice for this small yet influential group. Listen to their needs, provide the resources then leave them alone to get on with their work.

They may be unorthodox in the practice, or unliked by peers but they have proven themselves of their worth and have the potential to achieve greatness if they are supported accordingly.

Conclusion

It is often easier to retain the status quo and let things work themselves out. Education has been shown to be the solution to the problems in society. An ordinary education will produce citizens with skill sets to replicate tasks in professions and trades. An education by outstanding lecturers will produce students capable of critical thinking and with the understanding of how to advance society. It is therefore up to the universities to acknowledge these outstanding lecturers, embrace their differences and support their message to be part of the change for the greater good of humanity.

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