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Publication Details

Smith, L, Teachers' conceptions of teaching at a Gulf university: A starting point for revising a teacher development program, Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: Gulf Perspectives, 3(1), 2006. Copyright Zayed University 2006. Original journal article available at: http://www.zu.ac.ae/lthe/vol3no1/lthe03_01_02.html

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Teachers' conceptions of teaching at a Gulf university: A starting point for revising a teacher development program.

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Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: Gulf Perspectives

Vol 3 No 1, January 2006

Abstract

As universities are increasingly attracting students from a wider range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds, one of the challenges faced by educational developers is preparing academics to teach in a cross-cultural environment. In order to do this, teacher development programs often need to be adapted and up-dated. A widely-recognised starting point in this process is the examination of teachers' conceptions of teaching. This paper presents a small-scale, qualitative study which looks at the conceptions of teaching held by lecturers from different ethnic and educational backgrounds at a multicultural university in the United Arab Emirates. The university in question is a small, off-shore campus of a western university. Building on existing research in this field, a phenomenographic approach is taken in which the participants were interviewed and the resulting transcripts were analysed for emerging categories of conceptions of teaching. Four qualitatively different categories were found, which had some similarities to previously established categories, but which also added some interesting dimensions to the particular context of this study, especially the emphasis placed on the syllabus. The categories are: syllabus transmission; syllabus comprehension; syllabus adaptation; and independent learning. The categories found are hierarchical and represent a general move from a teacher-focused approach to one which is more student-centred. The findings of this study were used as a starting point to revise the teacher development program at the university. Although the study is confined to one university, it is relevant to educational developers in similar off-shore institutions in the Gulf region.

Introduction

As western universities expand their student base, especially through establishing off-shore campuses, they are increasingly attracting students from wider cultural and ethnic backgrounds. The cross-cultural environment which is becoming the norm in many institutions raises issues about teaching and learning within such a heterogeneous student body. In particular, teacher development programs need to be responsive to these changes in order to best meet the needs of academics and students alike. I have been involved in this process in my role as an educational developer responsible for adapting an introductory tertiary teaching program for a university situated in the Arabian Gulf. Higher education is a relatively new phenomenon in this region, with a public sector which caters almost exclusively to the small national population, and a private sector which is expanding rapidly and caters to the large expatriate population, as well as nationals. Private institutions tend to have close ties with overseas institutions, mainly in the West, and attract academics from a range of cultures and educational backgrounds. The university in this study is one such private institution, which is an off-shore campus of an Australian university.

Living and working in the region for some time, especially at the university in question, I have worked with students and academics from a wide variety of educational and cultural backgrounds. Through this experience I have become aware of varying conceptions of teaching and their effects on approaches to teaching and learning. In my role as an educational developer I was given the task of introducing a teacher development program to the institution, which was to become compulsory for all academics. This introduction to tertiary teaching program was well established at our Australian campus, but was new to our Gulf campus. Before proceeding with the program it was vital that it should be up-dated and adapted to meet the local needs of academics. In setting about this task I first decided it was necessary to look at the academics who would be participants in the program and to explore their views on, and approaches to, teaching. However, I was aware that if the program was to make a real impact on teaching and learning at our institution, it needed to not only present views and approaches to teaching, but, more importantly, address current conceptions of teaching as well. Indeed, as Kember (1997) states, "attention to teaching approaches without a corresponding change in beliefs may negate any educational development initiative" (p. 271). Therefore, the starting point for adapting and up-dating the introduction to tertiary teaching program was necessarily an exploration of conceptions of teaching.

Bearing this in mind, I set about a small research study into currently held conceptions of teaching amongst academics at my institution. My sample focused on academics who would form part of the first cohort on the introduction to tertiary teaching program. I was interested in discovering these colleagues' varying conceptions of teaching, so that planning and developing this program, and future programs, could better address the needs of academics and students at our institution. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to address the question: what are the conceptions of teaching held by some of the participants in our teacher development program?

To discover the conceptions of teaching held by the participants in this study, this research takes a qualitative approach and an ontological perspective that reality is internal to the relation between the individual and the phenomenon, (in this case teaching), rather than something external. Therefore, conceptions of teaching can be investigated by exploring teachers' descriptions of how they view teaching. In the same way, phenomenography, the method on which this research is based, is grounded in a relational epistemology where knowledge is contextualized and found in the relational experience between the individual and the phenomenon (Laurillard, 1993, p.35). This paper will draw upon a well-recognised and documented tradition of a qualitative approach to researching conceptions of teaching.

Teachers' conceptions of teaching

Research into teachers' conceptions of teaching has tended to come out of the tradition of studies into student conceptions of, and approaches to, learning, such as those conducted originally by Marton (1974, cited in Marton and Fai, 1999) and Saljö (1982), and subsequently by researchers such as Laurillard (1993) and Biggs (1979, 1987, 1993). The approach used by a student and the processes used during learning are related to the quality of his or her learning (Biggs, 1979, p.381). It has been found that student approaches to learning can generally be divided into 'deep' and 'surface' approaches (Biggs, 1999), and that these qualitatively different approaches have a significant effect on learning outcomes, with a deep approach tending to lead to more desirable learning outcomes. Developing out of this research into student approaches to learning, teachers' approaches to teaching were examined by Ramsden (1992) and Biggs (1999) among others.

Kember (1997) conducted a significant analysis of the various independent studies into perceptions of teaching and learning, and found a high degree of consistency among the categories described, although differing terminology was applied. He found that, despite different research methods, the results were surprisingly similar, and thus claims this commonality strengthens research in this field. He compared the various categories found in research carried out over a number of years and in different countries, and devised an organizing framework based on the relationship between the teacher, student and content. Thus, his framework ranges from teacher-centred / content-oriented to student-centred /

learning-oriented orientations. Beneath these orientations he places five conceptions of teaching which he describes as existing along a broad developmental continuum. The five conceptions are: teaching as imparting information; teaching as transmitting structured knowledge; teaching as student-teacher interaction/ apprenticeship; teaching as facilitating understanding; and teaching as conceptual change/ intellectual development. Following on from Kember's work, Samuelowicz and Bain (2001) also conducted a review of current research into teachers' conceptions of teaching and learning, and they too identified orientations ranging from teacher-centred to learning-centred, with an additional intermediate orientation which focused on facilitating learning. Within these broad orientations they constructed a framework of nine belief dimensions ranging from teaching as imparting information to teaching as supporting student learning.

The reviews of research into conceptions of teaching by Kember (1997) and Samuelowicz and Bain (2001) involved studies using a range of qualitative methods. However, a significant proportion of research into conceptions of teaching has been phenomenographic, particularly the work of Prosser and Trigwell. In their definitive work (1999) they identified six qualitatively different, hierarchical categories of conceptions of teaching: teaching as transmitting concepts of the syllabus; teaching as transmitting the teacher's knowledge; teaching as helping the student acquire concepts of the syllabus; teaching as helping students acquire the teacher's knowledge; teaching as helping students develop conceptions; and teaching as helping students change conceptions (pp.145 - 147). These conceptions are hierarchical in that the higher conceptions contain and develop elements found in the lower conceptions. Prosser and Trigwell then looked at whether teachers' conceptions of teaching influenced their approaches to teaching. They found a fairly consistent relationship between a teacher's conception of teaching a particular subject and their approach to teaching that subject. In general, teachers who have a teacher-focused approach to learning had a less complete conception of their teaching and of student learning than those who had a student-focused approach to teaching (p.154). The five approaches they identified closely resembled their categories of conceptions of teaching. For example, approach A (a teacher-focused strategy with the intention of transmitting information to students) is similar to conception A (teaching as transmitting concepts of the syllabus). They found that teachers who in the main adopted approach A, also held conception A, which they describe as a less complete way of thinking about teaching. Thus, they suggest that for teachers to develop more complete approaches to teaching, they first need to consider, and possibly re-evaluate, how they conceive teaching.

Generally, research into teachers' conceptions of teaching has focused on fairly traditional academic subjects, but there have been some examples of studies involving practice-based disciplines (for example, Drew and Williams, 2002). This paper also diverts slightly from traditional academic subjects and focuses on teachers in a foundation, or pre-university program.

Method

As stated above, and in keeping with the relational approach adopted in the research design, this research uses a primarily phenomenographic method. It is non-dualist in that the individual is not considered to be separate from the phenomenon or object under investigation (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999, p.10-11; Trigwell, 2000). Phenomenography exists within the interpretive paradigm, where the intention is to enter the subjective world of the individual and see the world from within (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p.22) It is necessarily a 'second-order' depiction (Laurillard, 1993), with the emphasis on the participant's perception rather than the phenomena itself. Thus, the methodology used in this paper aims to explore the participant's 'lifeworld', or view of reality; specifically, how they view the phenomenon of teaching.

One of the issues associated with using phenomenography, as with other qualitative methods, is the intrusion of the researcher's own beliefs and assumptions, which can threaten the validity of the research (Webb, 1996; Ashworth and Lucas, 2000). In this research paper the issue has particular significance as I was acutely aware that I hold quite firm beliefs about teaching which could influence my questioning of participants and my data analysis. One way

of dealing with this issue, and thus promoting validity, is to 'bracket' the researcher's views and presuppositions – that is to acknowledge them and try to set them aside (Ashworth and Lucas, 2000). However, Strauss and Corbin (1998, p. 97) point out that it is not possible for the researcher to be completely free of bias. Instead they suggest that it is better to acknowledge our biases and look for ways to move beyond them. This was the approach I favoured, and I spent some time examining my own beliefs and assumptions about teaching, and about the participants, before I began my analysis. As well as researcher biases, another aspect of 'bracketing' relates to fitting data into predetermined categories. I was aware that, as a relatively novice researcher, it would be easy to fall into that trap and rely on categories identified by researchers with more experience than myself, so I avoided looking at any previous research findings during the analysis phase of my research and tried to focus directly on my data. In addition to 'bracketing' the researchers presuppositions and assumptions, it is also necessary to be aware of the presuppositions and assumptions of the participants. I was conscious of this during the data gathering and analysis process, and indeed I felt that there was evidence of it in the use of specific terminology (such as 'facilitator') by most of the participants. However, I found that as I asked participants to develop the terms and give meanings to them, individual variations occurred.

Data gathering

As this was an exploratory piece of research, data was gathered using semi-structured interviews with six lecturers on the university foundation program. The participants were from various educational and ethnic backgrounds: four were Indian, one was British and one was American. They taught a range of subjects: Mathematics, Statistics, Computer Programming, Business Studies and Study Skills. They represented all of the subjects taught on the foundation program and were fairly typical of the fifteen or so teachers on that program in regard to background. In addition, they were all to be participants in the introduction to tertiary teaching program for which this study was intended to help prepare. It is important in phenomenographic research to choose a sample which will give the necessary variation in responses. Despite my efforts to do this, my choice of participants was limited by time and the availability of participants. For ethical reasons I felt I had to rely on friends and close colleagues with whom I have an established degree of trust, so that they would feel confident of my assurances about the nature and scale of the research (Mason, 2002, p.201) – that is, that their responses would be treated anonymously.

Phenomenographic research relies on a fairly unstructured interview technique to uncover the richness of the participant's experience of the phenomenon. This type of interview is a necessary part of the research design because it allows the respondent's perceptions to be revealed, although it recognizes that responses do not always have a single meaning. The epistemology behind my research design adopts the constructionist view that responses can be described as "displays of perceptions" (Silverman, 2001, p.112). The phenomonographic researcher attempts to discover these varying ways of describing a phenomenon (Marton and Fai, 1999).

The research design uses interviews to supply the richness of data that can be missing in a purely quantitative approach. Throughout the research process I was aware of reliability and validity issues. As far as reliability is concerned I have adopted Mason's advice and tried to demonstrate, by describing the research process, that my data generation and analysis have been "appropriate to the research questions, …thorough, careful, honest and accurate" (2002, p.188). I have addressed issues of validity as they arose during the research process. In particular, I used the constant comparative method of data analysis, and focused on issues of researcher bias.

The questions were designed to be diagnostic and to reveal the different ways the interviewees understand the phenomenon in their context (Bowden, 2003). However, I felt the need to have some initial questions to work with, otherwise I was not sure that I would get the kind of data I needed, and this would compromise the validity of my research (Mason, 2002). I was helped here by Linda Drew (of Drew and Williams, 2002), who kindly allowed me to use her questions as a basis for my interviews. Examples of some of the questions used are:

How do you prepare for teaching this subject?
What would you say your role is?
Why do you want your students to learn those particular concepts?

Prompts were used as follow-ups to the initial questions as a means of getting interviewees to reflect on what they said, and to illuminate their understanding of the phenomenon. The six interviews were tape-recorded and lasted around twenty minutes each. The interviews were transcribed verbatim by myself.

Data analysis

Phenomenographic methods of analysis do not follow a single, prescribed path, although the aim is ultimately to produce qualitative variations in the way particular groups of people experience a phenomenon (Trigwell, 2000). Mindful of validity issues, I chose to use the constant comparative method (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Silverman, 2000) of starting with small samples of data (responses to individual questions and the individual profiles) and then developing categories which were tested using an 'expanding data corpus'(Silverman, 2000) which describes the process of testing the categories against increasing amounts of data. This aids validity by ensuring the researcher is constantly testing the hypothesis, or developing categories, during the analysis process. Because I followed an iterative process of reading and re-reading, I became intimately familiar with the data.

After an initial perusal of the transcripts, they were re-read and the responses to the same or similar questions were divided into draft categories (Bowden, 2003). After this, it was difficult to know how to proceed because there seemed to be many similarities and not many variations emerging. On reflection I realized that this was not surprising given that the teachers interviewed taught similar subjects, or were from fairly similar educational backgrounds. Yet, I felt there were fundamental variations in their conceptions which I had still to uncover. In order to move my analysis forward I went back to the tapes again. Listening to the nuances of speech in the dialogue helped me focus on the individual voices which had become a little lost in my analysis so far; a criticism often leveled at phenomenographic research (Bowden, 2003). Subsequently I followed Ashworth and Lucas's (2000) advice and prepared individual profiles of each participant. Dwelling on each participant's 'lifeworld' allows the development of empathy, which is necessary before the researcher can move away from the individual to focus on comparative experience (Ashworth and Lucas, 2000, p.303). It also adds to the internal validity of the research. Once each interview had been summarized, themes began to emerge. These were then grouped into categories using constant comparative methods with individual quotations. However, I was aware of the need to keep in mind the context of the utterances, as decontextualisation is not compatible with the relational nature of phenomenography (Marton, cited in Bowden, 2003).

As Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggest, putting names to concepts does not really help in understanding their meaning; microanalysis is needed to discover the range of potential meanings. Therefore, my analysis proceeded by developing categories and subcategories which I tried to link at a conceptual level (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). A process of continually sorting the data, testing and re-testing the definitions of categories against the data continued until a stable system of meanings came about. Finally, four distinct categories emerged which I felt expressed qualitative differences in the participants' conceptions of teaching.

The categories are described below in the 'outcome space' (Trigwell, 2000) as a hierarchy, and quotations are used to express characteristics of each category. In the interests of validity, I tried to ensure that the slices of data selected are the ones from which the explanations were derived, rather than quotations simply used as illustrations (Mason, 2002, p.183).

Categories of Description

The categories described below are hierarchical, and internally-related with some elements of the previous category contained within each new category. They are not based on one particular individual participant's conception: indeed I found that some participants exhibited characteristics of more than one category, as Kember (1997) describes. Because they are so closely linked, the conceptions contain elements of approaches to teaching and some perceptions of student learning.

Conception A: Syllabus transmission

(Teaching is conveying aspects of the syllabus which the teacher feels are important for the students.)
In this conception of teaching the teacher draws on her own experience to focus on the parts of the syllabus which she feels will be useful to students in their later studies and working life.

Q: …why do you want the students to learn…what you have talked about…the things that you want them to learn?
A: There are two things. One thing is that I have experienced, I have gone through it, I have realized that they are very, very important, not just as a student, as a lecturer also, because earlier I used to teach at undergraduate level, so I know what is expected in the go ahead, in the advance. So, keeping that in mind, I include those topics which are really going to be useful to them.

Teaching is mainly done in lecture-style classes with the emphasis on what the teacher does. The teacher leads by example and the students follow until they can solve problems on their own. In this way there is a linear progression from simple to complex concepts. Teaching is making the content interesting for the student and relating it to their future needs. There is recognition that students need some input to the learning process, but this is limited to question and answer sessions where the teacher does the questioning and the students answer.

Q: OK, and how do you go about preparing for teaching in this subject?
A: Basically.. er .. if they have to understand a topic I need to give them a theoretical background, and why that topic is important and relevant, so in the beginning sometimes I mention the applications: this is the situation and why you want to learn this. So once they understand that, ok , whatever they are going to learn is something useful, .. then they start paying attention, so the main approach is inductor, deductor and drill. I solve one problem on the board and ask them to solve similar problem.

Conception B: Syllabus comprehension

(Teaching is helping students understand the syllabus.)
Again the teacher wants to convey the syllabus to the students because she feels it will be important in their later life, but there is more of a perception of guiding students through the syllabus and encouraging them to apply it in their own situations. This is done by providing real-life examples and supporting students as they work through the content. This is still a process of linear progression led by the teacher.

Basically, first I start with things which are simple, and if I feel they have understood that, I try to ask them questions that are like real-life examples, and then I date with real business studies, case studies…a real company, a real organization and ask them to apply what they have…what I have taught in such cases.
The teacher acts as a guide and corrects students when they are wrong. Teaching is done using interactive methods, often group activities. There is still a recognition that the teacher needs to keep the interest of the students in order for learning to take place. Although students play a more active role in the learning process than in Conception A, the teacher is still very much in control overall. Teaching is seen as helping students discover the right answers.

Q: OK, er.. when you are in this role as facilitator…you said you don't want to act as a dictator…but what…can you explain a little more your intention… when you are actually in that facilitating role?
A: It's not to become a peer…
Q: uh..uh..
A:…but it's not to become the one who's all knowing…it's the one who's going along with the process…er…never too far ahead, always just assisting them step by step to come to the correct answers.. to come to the correct conclusions. To demonstrate a *skill* correctly.

Conception C: Syllabus adaptation

(Teaching is adapting the syllabus to meet the needs of specific groups of students.)
This conception contains most of the elements found in Conceptions A and B, and in addition there is the recognition that the syllabus and the teaching methods need to be adapted to meet the needs of specific classes or groups of students. There is an emphasis on flexibility as the key to good teaching.

…I think you have to be prepared to change and adapt to the situation. If teachers are prepared to do that, there's no one way of doing something, if something doesn't work in one particular way, approach it from different angles and try and choose the best possible angle to get out of the students what you need. One thing doesn't work for everybody, so you have to be constantly aware of that, be prepared to change what you teach and how you teach.
The teacher is still seen as a guide to the syllabus, but the aim is to help students deal with problems they encounter, rather than just to lead them to the correct answers.
Teaching is done in groups with the teacher giving specific help on an individual basis. With this conception there is recognition of the importance of prior learning as well as a perception of teaching as preparing students for later studies. There is also recognition of the importance of peer learning.

…especially in a class discussion, in a group discussion,.. some students are working,.. so some students' experiences are different from a student who has never worked before, so basically my objective was .. even other students pick up from other students' experiences.. you know…. So there are certain things in which I myself may not know because certain students have a lot of industry experience, you know, they are studying after some years.. so then other students are able to learn that these students think differently, so the students learn from one another.

Conception D: Independent learning

(Teaching is encouraging students to become independent learners.)
This category goes beyond seeing teaching as just conveying the syllabus to students, however useful it may be in their later life, and focuses on the development of an independent approach to learning among students.

Q: OK, and when you are doing this kind of teaching…in the classroom, how would you describe your role?
A: As a monitor and overseer rather than, em…someone who stands there and dictates to them. I'll…I'll…walk around and see how they are getting involved…if they need my help. I'm there to be called upon to help…em…I don't believe in spoon-feeding them too much, I feel they ought to try and do things for themselves…become independent learners. So that's why I'm there more as a monitor, and an adviser, really, more than anything else.

The teacher still acts as a guide, accompanying students step-by-step, not simply through the syllabus, but also through the learning process. Teaching is about processes, not just content. The teacher wants the students to do more than achieve good grades. As in Conceptions B and C, teaching methods are heavily reliant on group work, and the teacher uses this as a means to target individual students for particular help. As with Conception C, flexibility is the key to good teaching. Although the teacher is still in control of the learning process, it is recognized that teaching must be student-focused.

…I think a lot of the time teachers might lose focus…you know, that they have to think that the *students* are the most important people in the class and try to get as much out of the students as possible. They shouldn't be too teacher-centred. A lot of the focus, and the way activities are done should be student-centred rather than teacher-centred.

Discussion

The four categories of conceptions of teaching I have identified broadly fit into the previously described continuum from teacher-focused to student-focused orientations, with conceptions A and B being at the teacher-focused end, conceptions C, and more so, D moving towards the student-focused end. As with the conceptions described by Prosser and Trigwell (1999), in the teacher-focused conceptions there is an emphasis on teachers transmitting, or delivering, the syllabus. There is little recognition of prior learning in these conceptions, and the teacher is seen as the transmitter of knowledge to the students. The role of students is to follow the teacher's lead. I found that teachers who expressed these views felt a great responsibility towards their students, as they considered themselves to be solely responsible for the teaching and learning which takes place in their classroom. Having worked in a number of institutions in the Gulf region, I have frequently found this conception of teaching in a number of my colleagues from a range of cultural backgrounds. In my experience, this often manifests in extremely hard-working and conscientious teachers, and can lead to a teacher-dependent culture in institutions. I have found this type of culture to be prevalent in the Gulf region, although many educators are working hard to establish a more student-focused culture which promotes independent learning. However, teacher-dependency is often encouraged by institutional policies which discourage students from taking responsibility for their own learning, such as compulsory attendance. These kinds of policies are common in higher education in the Gulf region, and to some extent they reflect the wider traditional and cultural norms of society.

This conception of the teacher as being responsible for learning was an important finding for the development of the introduction to tertiary teaching program at my institution and it led me to introduce more activities which encouraged participants to reflect on what and how they wanted students to learn, and their role in the process. I also introduced a series of case studies which reflected the institutional and regional context and were specifically designed to raise issues such as responsibility for learning and the place of the syllabus in learning outcomes.

A key feature of the categories found in this study is the importance of the syllabus, with only conception D moving beyond the notion of teaching as directly related to the syllabus, to that of teaching as primarily promoting the learning process. So, amongst the participants in this study, course content was a significant influence on conceptions of teaching. This focus on the syllabus is a common feature of the more teacher-focused orientations found in conceptions of teaching. However, the more developed, or complete, categories described by Prosser and Trigwell (1999), amongst others, were not really evident in this study. Conception D, which recognizes the need for students to become independent learners and which has a student-centred focus, does not really go as far as Prosser and Trigwell's conception F (1999, p.147) in which teaching is viewed as helping students change conceptions. A possible reason for this lack of development is the small-scale nature of the research, but it could also be true that teachers in this particular context have not developed a conception of teaching as involving challenging students' conceptions, and facilitating a change in those conceptions. Through my work in the Gulf region, I have found that my own teaching has often involved challenging students' conceptions, but that it can be difficult to facilitate changes in those conceptions. In challenging students' conceptions, particularly in relation to learning, I have found that I have had to reflect on and revise my own conceptions. For example, I have found that culture has a far greater influence on conceptions of learning than I had previously thought. This is also true in regard to teachers' conceptions, particularly conceptions about teaching. That is why I felt it was important to identify the conceptions held by potential participants in the introduction to tertiary teaching program as preparation for adapting it to the local context. To encourage participants to view teaching as challenging and changing student conceptions, and also to challenge their own conceptions of teaching, I included a

workshop entitled 'Teaching in a Culturally Diverse Campus' which looked at the implications of culture when choosing teaching approaches.

Another important point which came out of this study into teachers' conceptions of teaching at my institution is the general conception that group work and 'interactive' teaching are an integral part of teaching, This was evident to some extent in all four conceptions, but was more evident further up the hierarchy. However, the meanings given to these terms varied within the different conceptions, but were generally linked to teacher-focused thinking about teaching. When asked to describe 'group work' participants tended to cite examples in which they supplied the context and content of the assignment or task and the students' contribution was to complete the task together, sometimes taking specific roles in the process and sometimes working in a more informal manner. In my experience of teaching in the Gulf region I have found this approach to be fairly typical amongst teachers regardless of their background. Indeed, I have often found myself adopting what I consider to be a very 'interactive' approach to teaching only to find on reflection that the focus is still on me and what I am doing rather than on the students and their learning. Bearing this in mind, I endeavoured to introduce a more critically reflective element to the teacher development program, which challenged participants to look at the aims and objectives of their teaching activities rather than to simply focus on the activities themselves.

Conclusion

The findings of this study are consistent with those of previous studies in this area of research, and are also significant within their particular context, providing a useful starting point for adapting the introduction to tertiary teaching program in my institution. As well as indicating that there is a considerable range of conceptions of teaching even within a small group of academics, the key factors I felt necessary to keep in mind when preparing the teaching program were the central role the syllabus played in thinking about teaching, and the use of group teaching methods. It is essential that, if the introduction to tertiary teaching program is to improve and develop teaching practice, it must first work on broadening conceptions of teaching. By gaining some insight into the conceptions of teaching currently held by potential participants on the program, I was better able to design the program to promote a more student-focused / learning-oriented view of teaching, particularly by trying to develop the focus of teaching from purely on the syllabus to a broader outlook. In this manner I was able to link the conceptions of teaching held by participants with their approaches to teaching and the strategies they described, in order to encourage a more genuinely interactive approach to teaching.

So, despite the existence of extensive research in this field, I consider my research necessary to illuminate particular conceptions of teaching at my institution in order for academic staff development there to be effective. As the introduction to tertiary teaching program was new to the institution, I consider this study to be the starting point for further research into conceptions of teaching and learning in this institution and beyond. I feel that my research had a positive impact on the introduction to tertiary teaching program and was a factor in the success of the program, which has now been made compulsory for all academics, thus raising the profile of teaching at the institution. The next phase of my research will be an examination of student approaches to learning and a further exploration of teachers' conceptions of teaching, with a view to improving and expanding educational development services.

Whilst being relevant to my institution, the findings of this study could also have significance for other similar institutions in the Gulf region. As more and more western universities are establishing a foothold in the region, either through their own campuses or affiliations with local partners, they too will need to adapt their staff development programs to suit the local context in relation to teachers' conceptions of teaching. In this regard there is plenty of scope for more extensive studies into teachers' conceptions of teaching, especially across institutions within the region, which were beyond the scope of my study.

In addition to the practical application of my research in helping to remodel the introduction to tertiary teaching program, it also provided me with an opportunity to reflect on my own conceptions of teaching. During the interviews I often found myself agreeing with the comments made by the participants. Then, during the analysis as the categories emerged, I realized that whereas I had considered myself to have a student-centred / learning-oriented view of teaching, this was not always the case. Thus, this research study led me to re-assess my own conceptions of teaching, which is an important part of my on-going professional development.

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