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Learning about tertiary teaching: placing the lecturer at the centre of the learning experience

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Abstract

The attributes of effective university teachers are well documented (Ramsden, 1992). If universities wish to improve learning and teaching they need to provide academic staff with programs through which these attributes can be developed. A wide variety of courses now exist in Australian Universities that aim to develop academic staff as effective teachers (Martin & Ramsden, 1994). Some focus on developing skills through workshops and study packages, others on developing conceptions of teaching at a theoretical level or through reflective practice.

LEARNING ABOUT TERTIARY TEACHING:
PLACING THE LECTURER AT THE CENTRE OF THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

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Introduction

The attributes of effective university teachers are well documented (Ramsden, 1992). If universities wish to improve learning and teaching they need to provide academic staff with programs through which these attributes can be developed. A wide variety of courses now exist in Australian Universities that aim to develop academic staff as effective teachers (Martin & Ramsden, 1994). Some focus on developing skills through workshops and study packages, others on developing conceptions of teaching at a theoretical level or through reflective practice.

At the University of Wollongong the Introduction to Tertiary Teaching (ITT) course for academic staff is a highly effective mixed mode course (Bell, 1997). The three major components are: a set of Independent Study Packages; a series of Experiential Workshops; and the Teaching Development Program (TDP). All three components support ITT Participants' development in the three major teaching skill areas of planning and design; implementing teaching/learning activities; and assessing and evaluating, however the TDP focuses specifically on the second skill area.

The TDP is a learner-centred collegial program with its foundations in reflective practice through action research methodology. ITT Participants work within a structured process to plan, implement and evaluate discrete teaching experiences such as lectures or tutorials. They work with a colleague (Support Person) through four TDP cycles during one semester see Figure 1.
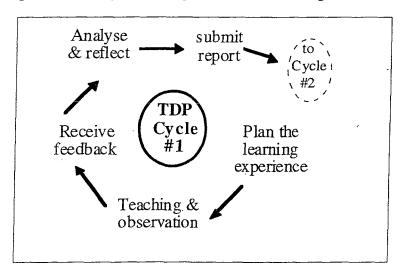

Figure 1: TDP Cycle.

In three of the cycles the Participant plans a teaching session which is observed by the Support Person who provides feedback on aspects of their teaching implementation. In one of the four cycles the roles are reversed such that the Support Person is observed and then explains their teaching philosophy and methods to the Participant. After each of the four discussions the Participant reflects on the experience in writing and then receives further written feedback on their report from the ITT Coordinator. This written dialogue between Participant and Coordinator enables the Coordinator to support the Participant in learning from their own experiences within a collegial environment.

At the end of the cycles a final report is completed in which the Participant reflects on their learnings, their feelings about the TDP process, their strengths and areas for development. The TDP is formally assessed according to the satisfactory achievement of specific assessment criteria.

The Martin & Ramsden (1994: 59) report indicates that: " ... the most effective programs are characterised by the holistic, experience-based approach ... wherein skills, reflection and the experience of actual teaching are integrated within a cooperative learning environment."

The TDP is such a program within a broader course. It is a highly effective learner-centred developmental program. However it is not without its difficulties, some of which relate to learner-management as will be seen from the reported participant comments (in italics).

Background - Action Research, Reflective Practice and Teaching Observation

School teachers have long been improving their teaching skills using a cyclic process of collegial evaluation, planning, implementing and reflection at least since 1949 (Corey, 1949). This process is a form of Reflective Practice, "a dialogue of thinking and doing through which I become more skilled" (Schön, 1987: 31). It is more specifically defined as Action Research (Lewin; 1946) because it is a methodology that involves a group of professionals researching a common problem in practice through reflection on practice.

Critical reflection is the basis of reflective practice but it is not simply thoughtfulness about action. Rather it is a challenging process of reconstructing experiences; accepting and analysing feedback; evaluating one's skills, attitudes and knowledge; an exploring new possibilities for action.

There is now a wealth of evidence that critical reflection is an essential teaching competence (Ballantyne & Packer, 1995; Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993; Zuber-Skerritt, 1993; Peters, 1991; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985). This competence enables practitioners to articulate the components of their work that lead to successful outcomes, thus supporting their own professional development and their ability to mentor and develop others. It is also an essential skill for lifelong learning (Mezirow, 1991; Brookfield, 1987; Shor, 1980) as much for the academic as learner as for the student.

The TDP brings together the direct observation of teaching with the principles of Reflective Practice within a modified Action Research methodology.

The ITT Coordinator (Educational Developer) Role

The ITT Coordinator is responsible for supporting the Participant through the program and for ensuring the action research-type methodology is followed. The Coordinator provides written feedback on each reflection and final report as well as face to face, phone or email discussion where requested by the Participant, Support Person or Coordinator. The Coordinator facilitates adult learning by helping the Participant to "... research their own problems, build confidence, examine action alternatives, anticipate consequences, identify resources ..." (Mezirow, 1985: 29). The role is not always clear cut or easy. Brookfield (1987) writes of the tightrope the educator walks when teaching critical thinking, a "... balance between respecting their integrity, so that they do not resist our efforts and ensuring that sufficiently hard and challenging questions are asked to prompt them to scrutinise habitual assumptions." (Brookfield, 1987: p72).

The Coordinator walks this tightrope in providing feedback on the Participant's TDP reports. The purpose is to both challenge and support their analysis and self-evaluation. It is vital to Participant self-motivation that they receive positive feedback on their reported activities and on their openness to observation and feedback. At the same time they need critical questioning of any assumptions, unsupported theories, ineffective practices. It is also vital to monitor the Support Person's feedback. The Coordinator needs to know when to step in to improve the tenor of the program if necessary, perhaps by reminding the Participant to reflect on their strengths not just areas for development. Monitoring can lead to gentle deflection of over-critical feedback, intervention where a Support Person is highly critical or dictatorial, and even counselling and deferral of the program where a Participant is having emotional difficulty dealing with the process. The Coordinator can often suggest alternative techniques, available resources and practical ideas where relevant.

Why the TDP has been Effective

Participants almost always report very positive learning outcomes despite a variety of associated feelings ranging from apprehension to fearfulness. Evaluation indicates strong agreement that the TDP is an effective process for the development of teaching skills. The TDP is effective because:

- it is learner-centred;
- detailed written feedback is provided promptly;
- it leads to immediate practical outcomes and real long-term change;
- it has a foundation in collegial relationships.

The TDP is learner-centred.

A TDP is a learner-centred program that it is concerned both with "the external technical and the internal reflective dimensions", a necessary condition for independent learning (Brookfield, 1986: 59). Participants choose the technical dimensions and design their own program content according to their professional development needs and teaching interests. Mezirow (1995: 29) writes that in an adult education environment learners should be able to "... research their own problems, build confidence, examine action alternatives, anticipate consequences, identify resources ... and assess relevant experience ...". The TDP enables Participants to carry out this process.

> "In this observation I wanted my observer to focus on my general lecture presentation, the flow of the lecture, the appropriate use of visual aids and the amount of material presented."

> "I ... wanted to focus on better use of questions to direct lecture discussion ..."

Adults learn from their own experiences (Knowles, 1973). They also learn through confronting dissonance between what they think they do and what they actually do, their "espoused theories" and their "theories-in-use" (Schön, 1983). In the TDP such dissonance often occurs when feedback from the Support Person conflicts with the Participant's espoused theories of teaching. Through critical reflection the Participant recognises situations where their teaching practice conflicts with the assumptions that underlie their beliefs and the contradictions become a stimulus for development.

> "... the TDP has 'shaken me up' a little – not in the sense of reducing my confidence or harming my self-image, but in the sense that I have recognised a hitherto hidden 'tension' between what I say (or think) about teaching and what I actually do."

> "... I moved from a position of obdurate 'wall of talk' [sic: from 'wall of sound'] approach to lecturing, to a position of mutually negotiated teaching/learning interaction ..."

High levels of professional growth can result from learner-centred programs such as this.

Detailed written feedback is provided promptly.

End of cycle reports are commented on in detail, the Coordinator both supporting and challenging as appropriate. This dialogue between colleagues changes the relationship from 'teacher assesses learner' to 'colleague provides feedback to colleague'.

> "It was good to receive individual feedback ... I read it carefully and with interest."

> "I was very impressed with the written feedback which was detailed, professional and useful."

The TDP leads to immediate practical outcomes and real long-term change.

Often Participants make immediate changes to the design and implementation of learning activities.

> "I was able to overcome some of my weaknesses during the TDP cycles."

> "In the remaining two observations ... I tried more interesting introductions ... to achieve class attention ... I also tried more anecdotal information ... which made theory more relevant ..."

Ideas that involve future improvements and long-term change often surface during the TDP. Changes in conceptions of teaching and learning, understandings about professional development and methods of evaluating the effectiveness of teaching are also evident.

> "...there is one practice which TDP taught me that transcends the specificity of the techniques which I was encouraged to adopt to improve my teaching. That practice is the habit of reflection, and the confidence to try different things ..."

> "By the end of the cycles, however, it became apparent that I needed to rethink my whole approach, not just 'tack on' a few new techniques ..."

The motivation to try different teaching techniques in what can be a threatening environment, and the effective learning that results from reflecting on such trials, can largely be attributed to the learner-centred nature of the program and the collegial relationship between Coordinator ('teacher') Participant ('learner') and Support Person ('critical friend').

A TDP has its foundations in collegial relationships.

Fear of the program becoming an appraisal can be overcome when colleagues work together to mutually enhance their professional skills. The Participant is less likely to fear being judged as inadequate or incompetent and the notion of 'judgement' can sometimes be dismissed altogether.

> "Having found the appropriate observer it was a good way of finding realistic ways of improving my course."

> "The meetings with my support person and facilitator has helped me to articulate my strengths as well as identify teaching skills for further development." (sic)

> "The feedback was very useful - more so than I'd imagined it was going to be."

The culture of Australian Universities has not in the past encouraged collegial observation of lecturers yet observing other teachers in action is a useful form of learning.

> "{The Support Person's} buzz groups are nicely integrated into his lecture ... materials. Moreover his buzz groups allow students to articulate the ... problem in their own words ..."

> " He {Support Person} utilises {students'} knowledge to explain, clarify and extend his ideas."

> "I benefited enormously from observing {the Support Person's} class because I saw how he emphasised student ... participation and the positive outcomes ... on student learning ..."

Support people often mention that they benefit from discussing their approaches to teaching, the opportunity to observe a colleague teaching – people fairly new to teaching often provide refreshing new ideas for experienced academics – and the broadening of their educational leadership role.

Difficulties

The TDP is not without its difficulties. Foremost among these are:
* a learner-centred program requires learner management;
* the skills, attitudes and knowledge of Support People vary;
* there is a strong possibility of emotional discomfort for the Participant.

A learner-centred program requires learner management.

Not all Participants carry out the four cycles according to the process. Occasionally a 'Final Report' will appear without any prior reports having been submitted or feedback received. In general when process is not followed the final report indicates wasted opportunities for learning.

> "{My Support Person} could find no fault ... he had nothing but praise for my efforts."

A first cycle report from this Participant would have prompted the Coordinator to intervene. First with the Participant to explain the concept of reflective practice and the TDP process. The Participant could have been encouraged to focus on further refining aspects of their excellent teaching skills and to ask for more specific feedback. With the Support Person the Coordinator could have explored different observation methods and the nature of positive feedback.

While some Participants complete the program outside the process, some others do not finish.

> "In the end I just ran out of time."

Some learners have not yet learned to manage their own learning well. It should be noted however that most Participants enrol in the ITT course as a condition of their first appointment. Those that do not finish are generally placing a higher priority on more important and self-chosen tasks.

> "I was focused on finishing my PhD - that had to come first."

Here is another tightrope to be walked. How much responsibility should the Coordinator take in a learner-centred program? Constant reminders about timelines, the need for process and purposes of feedback are given – and many of these self-directed learners appreciate the reminders. Most of those who only complete part of the TDP still report it as a positive learning experience. Perhaps some lack of completion and the occasional less effective program is the price paid for learner-centred learning within a 'University-directed' program such as this. Nevertheless it is a problem that needs to be better addressed in the future.

The skills, attitudes and knowledge of Support People vary.

It is easy to disillusion an inexperienced teacher by providing a list of their 'problems' rather than helping them to identify some of their strengths and areas for development. Not all academics are used to listening and questioning first, then offering ideas rather than giving advice.

The most effective Support Person:
* is an effective teacher who can demonstrate and discuss their own and other's pedagogy;
* understands the threat and discomfort involved in being observed and is able to deal sensitively with emotional issues where necessary;
* can focus on teaching and learning processes rather than content;;
* is tactful in helping the Participant identify their teaching strengths and areas for development;
* encourages the Participant's own self-critique before offering their feedback;
* encourages the Participant's own ideas and offers theirs as options rather than rules;
* recognises that there are many effective styles of teaching that are different from their own.

The effectiveness of a TDP is highly dependent on the Support Person's attributes. The collegial interaction that occurs when the Participant chooses their own Support Person, combined with monitoring by the Coordinator, generally makes up for any lack of Support Person skills.

The possibility of emotional discomfort for the Participant.

Simply being observed by a colleague can be a very uncomfortable feeling regardless of expertise or experience. Most Participants attend the ITT course as a compulsory condition of appointment which raises the possibility of resentment towards the course in general (Gillett and Bell, 1996). Most Participants who feel some emotional discomfort still report positive TDP outcomes.

"It was useful but also very stressful which may be a high price to pay for some people."

"This has been a useful exercise on the whole although I found it very stressful ... even though the observer was an old friend."

Being confronted with one's own professional development needs can de-skilling.

"... mid-way through the TDP cycles I had been convinced that my preconceptions about the effectivity of my teaching were probably unfounded ..." (sic)

Any negative feelings need to be addressed by the Coordinator, through the Support Person or directly with the Participant. The counselling skills of the Coordinator are very important, both in written feedback and face to face meetings. At the beginning of the course the Coordinator needs to publicly state that feelings such as embarrassment, exposure or inadequacy are not uncommon in this kind of program. It is important to discuss the reasons for, and the meanings of, such discomfort and to offer empathy, support and encouragement.

Conclusions

The Teaching Development Program, monitored since the beginning of 1996 and described above, is a highly effective learner-centred program for academics learning about teaching.

During a TDP, individual change and the motivation to change result from critical reflection which, with the support of colleagues, enables the Participant to understand the meaning of their experiences and to act accordingly. The structured nature of the program supports incremental and educationally effective experimentation and learning. Reflective practice acts as a powerful force for professional development (Osterman and Kottkamp, 1993; Schön, 1987).

Not all academics are comfortable with the idea of opening up their lectures, laboratories and tutorials to the scrutiny of peers. The TDP helps open up the teaching experience and build professional teaching relationships within a culture where isolated pedagogy has often been the norm. The writer suggests that where Departmental and Faculty colleagues work together on teaching development programs such as this, university departments and faculties may eventually become more like the 'learning organisations' described by Senge (1990).

Participant feedback on this teaching development program suggests positive, learner-centred outcomes. Other Universities might effectively integrate similar action research methodology into their own teaching courses for academic staff. The writer believes that to be effective such programs need to be learner-centred and firmly based in a developmental approach where collegial understandings are developed and feedback is provided. They should be carefully structured, supported and coordinated as part of a formal teaching course under the guidance of an experienced educational developer.

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