

Are we on the same page? Collaborating when attitudes on teaching and learning differ

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Approaches to FYE

The increasingly diverse student cohorts commencing in first year tertiary education calls for a continuous review of first year experience (FYE) approaches. Earlier curricular and co-curricular approaches have been brought together into an integrated whole-of-institution transition pedagogy as a third generation approach (Kift et al. 2010, p.15). Of crucial importance to the implementation of an institution-wide approach to FYE is the building of sustainable partnerships between academic and professional staff.



Barriers to successful and sustainable relationships between LLAs and Academics

The relationship building process can however be problematic due to many factors, such as competing demands on time and diverse and changing expectations of all parties. It has been observed that one of the barriers to successful and sustainable relationships is related to how Language and Learning Advisers are positioned in their institutions (Grossi & Wright-Neville 2015).

Collaboration within the discipline of Social Work

This paper delves on aspects of relationships formed between LLAs and Social Work academics during a two year period of collaboration. During this period, it has become apparent that although working within the same discipline, some of these partnerships have strengthened and developed to enable a collaborative and systematic approach to supporting students, while others have not progressed further than the occasional/remedial support offered in the form of a workshop, development of a resource, or presence of LLAs in unit discussion boards.

Type of support provided	Collaboration A	Collaboration B	Collaboration C
Workshops on general academic skills (e.g. assignment planning, time management, referencing)	●	●	●
Workshops on specific skills (e.g. reflective writing)	●	●	
Discussion board within Unit Site	●	●	
Individual support sessions (face-to-face, Skype, email) students referred by academic	●	●	
Individual support sessions (face-to-face, Skype, email) initiated by students		●	
Assessment tasks and assessment rubric review and modification	●	●	●
'Drop in with a draft' sessions		●	



Type of support provided	Collaboration A	Collaboration B	Collaboration C
Tailored resources to address recognised student needs		●	
Joint deconstruction of assessment questions and creating a plan/mind map for writing		●	
Continuous presence, activities and support throughout the Trimester (pre, during and post assessment)		●	
Detailed feedback on excerpts of student writing		●	

Differences in the nature of the collaborations

Besides in the types of support provided, differences were perceived in regards to:

- Existing power relations, positioning of the LLA
- Frequency and continuity of collaboration
- Levels of involvement and power of LLA in decision making on approaches, content and activities
- Evolution of support

Questioning the different levels of success

Reflections over these collaborations, all in the same discipline and undergraduate level, has lead to questioning why some were more and other less successful.

Reflections over the more successful partnership (Collaboration B) prompted the importance of shared understanding between LLAs and academic staff about the notion of transition 'as a process, not an event' (Kift et al. 2010), independent learning, learner responsibility, and beliefs about teaching and learning.

Reflections over the less successful partnerships (Collaboration A and Collaboration C), consequently, indicated that sustainable collaboration might have been to some extent impeded by **differing beliefs about teaching and learning** held by LLAs and academic staff.

Personal theories of teaching and learning

'Each of us has his or her own personal theory of teaching which both reflects and influences all aspects of the way we go about our jobs' (Fox 1983, p. 152).

Bullough (cited in Ambler 2012, p. 184) recognises that 'what teachers believe about teaching and learning and self-as-a-teacher is of vital concern to teacher education; it is the basis for meaning making and decision making'.

Self-reflection as a tool for better understanding

Self-study and reflection are important and necessary to form a better understanding of our own personal theories of teaching and learning, and thus enable professional growth.

This project was initially envisaged to explore personal beliefs about teaching and learning held by Academics through the use of interviews. However, it has become apparent that it is firstly necessary to gain a better understanding of the researcher's own personal theories of teaching and learning. Self-reflections were used to these, and the recurring themes were then linked and further analysed in accordance with relevant literature.



Self-reflections

As soon as I asked myself 'What do I mean by teaching? What is my personal theory of teaching?', numerous ideas rushed into my mind, based on professional and personal experiences. The more I reflected, the more difficult it became to frame my beliefs into an overarching theory.

'Teaching and learning are elusive concepts, very difficult to pin down' (Fox 1983, p.152). To think about the process of teaching and learning, different people may use different conceptual models or analogies.

While working on a project with a colleague, I needed to find a metaphor that would serve us to describe an undertaken teaching and learning cycle. I felt that the metaphor of driving a car, was appropriate to illustrate the teaching and learning approach we used.



Self-reflections

The student is the one who is doing the driving, while we are in the backseat providing the initial roadmap and support when needed.

The journey is not straightforward and not all students follow the same route.

It is not always predictable and although we have more experience on the road, we do not have complete knowledge of and experience in all terrains. We learn more with every trip, together with our students and often from our students. It is often a matter of trial and error, taking alternative routes, reversing and going back to the start, or taking shortcuts.

Teaching theories

A number of studies have shown that there is a range of conceptions or educational theories held by tertiary teachers (Samuelowicz & Bain 1992). A few studies agree that held conceptions can be arranged on a continuum 'from information presentation to facilitation of student learning (including changes in students' conceptions)' (Biggs; Dall'Alba; Martin and Balla, cited in Samuelowicz & Bain 1992).

Prosser et al. (1994) propose six categories of description of Academics' conceptions of learning, which although different, they fall into two strongly contrasting subsets, transmission and acquisition category and a conceptual development and change category.

Fox (1983) proposes two dimensions of teaching theories: one contrasting teacher-initiated learning ('simple' theories) with student-initiated learning ('developed' theories), while the other contrasting an emphasis on subject content with a focus on the changes occurring in students' conceptions, attitudes and skills. He maintains that each teaching theory is a combination of values on these two dimensions.



Simple and developed teaching theories

Fox (1983) proposes four basic "theories of teaching"

- The **transfer theory** which treats knowledge as a commodity to be transferred from one vessel to another.
- The **shaping theory** which treats teaching as a process of shaping or moulding students to a predetermined pattern.
- The **travelling theory** which treats a subject as a terrain to be explored with hills to be climbed for better viewpoints with the teacher as the travelling companion or expert guide.
- The **growing theory** which focusses more attention on the intellectual and emotional development of the learner.

Fox (1983, p.151)

Conclusion

Developing an understanding of our own personal theories of teaching and learning, their origins and how they affect our teaching and attitudes to student learning, can assist in initiating a discussion and aid in the recognition and resolution of misunderstandings between teaching colleagues stemming from differing views.



References

