

Notions of Effective Teaching: An Exploration of Students' and Lecturers' Perceptions of First Year Education Undergraduates

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Abstract — This article reports on a piece of research designed to explore both students' and teachers' perceptions of what constitutes effective teaching in a modern UK university. Definitions of effectiveness, based on work in both the schools and university sectors, are explored and summarised into four domains: providing a supportive elearning environment, having high expectations, scaffolding learning and providing clear explanations. The research was undertaken with the co-operation of undergraduate students reading Early Childhood Studies, Special Needs and Inclusion Studies or Education Studies. This case study adopts a phenomenographic perspective. Evidence from three focus group interviews, observations of three tutors, and from the reflections of 22 tutors on the characteristics identified by students, informs this paper. The article concludes by suggesting that notions of effectiveness are predicated less on having high expectations and more on providing a supportive environment and that the students themselves have a pivotal role as collaborators in the process of developing understanding and thus making teaching effective.

Index Terms — Effective teaching, Lecturers' reflections, Undergraduates' perceptions

1 INTRODUCTION

The climate of accountability in higher education in the UK is gradually shifting the emphasis from quality assurance to quality enhancement, an evolution which has resulted in a movement away from discipline audit trails to institutional audit and a concomitant 'explicit focus on institutional strategies for improving the quality of learning opportunities' (QAA, 2007, p. 3). An example of one of these strategies is the establishment of 74 Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, "to recognise and reward specific areas of excellence in higher education institutions and to promote its further development to benefit students, teachers and universities and colleges' (HEFCE, 2006, p.18). At an individual level, the national teaching fellowship scheme was expanded in 2004 to provide rewards for excellence in promoting learning to 50 HE lecturers. As the authors have argued elsewhere, 'this strong interventionist stance is serving to harness significant resources to enhance student learning and to promote and provide the opportunity for successful participation in HE to everyone who can benefit from it' (Allan & Clarke, 2007, p. 64). Whilst quality assurance processes have long taken into account students' perceptions of the teaching they receive, their views have not been as influential in the UK as, for example, in the

United States where, according to Shevlin *et al* (2000, p. 38) information from student evaluation of teaching 'can be used for faculty decisions about conditions of employment such as salary and promotion'. However, the introduction in England and Wales of the national student survey in 2005, which seeks final year undergraduate students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the teaching they received against predetermined criteria, underlines the increasing influence of 'student voice' in HE.

Paradoxically, there is a dearth of research relating to students' conception of effective university teaching (Reid and Johnston, 1999). In fact, studies which use a mixed methodology to ascertain both students' and tutors' perceptions are not common in the current literature. This article reports on a piece of research designed to explore both students and teachers' perceptions of what constitutes effective teaching in a modern UK university.

2 DEFINITIONS OF EFFECTIVENESS

A study of extant literature on effectiveness in teaching in both schools and higher education reveals that defining 'effectiveness' is inherently contentious. Evans and Abbott (1998) suggest that there can be no consensus about what characterises effective

teaching until the aims of higher education are agreed upon. Debates about the purpose of higher education proliferate, and the emphasis placed by tutors on the rapid acquisition of evolving knowledge or the development of high level cognitive and personal skills colour diverse notions of the aims of HE and hence of 'effectiveness'. Biggs (2003) posits that the purpose of higher education teaching is to promote the development of high order learning processes which he suggests appear to come naturally to high-achieving undergraduates but not necessarily to all students. Taking a constructivist view of education, Biggs sees the secret of quality teaching as ensuring that there is 'alignment between what we want, how we teach and how we assess' (p. 27) in a system where all components address the same agenda. Thus 'the students are entrapped in the web of consistency, optimizing the likelihood that they will engage the appropriate learning activities, but paradoxically leaving them free to construct knowledge in their own way' (p. 26). This suggests that any measure of effectiveness should take into account contextual issues, a point reflected in recent work (Mortimore, 1998; Hopkins & Reynolds, 2001; Campbell *et al*, 2004) which recognises that social, economic and political factors have an impact on notions of effectiveness.

In order to avoid becoming embroiled into complex debates and analysis about the purpose of education, much of the teacher effectiveness literature with some notable exceptions (e.g. Dunne & Wragg, 1994; Kyriacou, 1997; Campbell *et al* 2004; Berliner, 2005) posits a model which is assumed to be value-free, effectiveness being measured through student *outcomes* which are maximised by establishing the most efficient institution and classroom processes. Campbell *et al* (2004, p. 456) argue that that an output model:

'despite appearances, [it] is not value-free so much as based in a value system of instrumental pragmatism, in which ends are taken for granted and means pursued without reference to them. The consequence has been that the literature has insulated effectiveness research from both the larger moral frame of education, and from the need to see this reflected in more specific values underlying the teaching process'.

The provenance of an outcome-oriented approach can be traced back to Tyler's (1949) rational curriculum model which emphasises

the importance of objectives, selecting and organising learning experiences and evaluating the outcomes achieved. However, each of these elements of curriculum design carries value assumptions and encompasses fundamental issues in HE namely: What counts as learning? What kind of learning experience do students need to satisfy the curricular intentions which have been specified? How can the learning experience be best organised to maximise the possibility of the students achieving the intentions? What methods of assessment are the most valid to assess the student outcomes that have been realised? As Campbell *et al* (2004) point out, most studies in school teacher effectiveness take achievement against standardised tests as the benchmark for an outcome measure, with the implication that these tests stand 'as a proxy for other kinds of learning' (p. 457). In a contemporary HE context these 'other kinds of learning' may be defined as: becoming an independent learner; developing meta-cognitive skills e.g. improving one's own learning performance, solving problems, acting on feedback, and assessing one's strengths and weaknesses; and acquiring generic study skills e.g. communicating effectively, making effective use of technology to promote one's own learning, working effectively with others and efficient time-management (Allan & Clarke, 2007). The promotion of these skills is as difficult for university teachers to assess as it is for school teachers, but if such learning is embodied in the expected learning outcomes, then a valid model of an effective university lecturer must logically include this assessment.

In teasing out just what might be meant by an effective university teacher, Yates (2005, p. 687) suggests that it is 'crucial to differentiate between the 'notion of the "effective teacher" (indexed by student learning criteria) from that of the "good teacher" (indexed by professional respect and humanistic criteria). Berliner (2005) perceives these as conceptually separate parts – he suggests that 'good' is normative representing what is expected of a professional in a teaching post, 'in contrast, effective teaching is about reaching achievement goals, it is about students learning what they are supposed to in a particular context, grade or subject'. (p. 207).

Paradoxically, the research into teacher effectiveness implies, 'that the primary indicator of effective teaching is located at the level of the student, rather than the teacher' (Fenstermacher and Richardson, 2005 p. 687). The implication of this is that

assessment of teaching effectiveness should derive more from research relating to the level of student engagement and outcomes than from overt measures of teacher behaviour and peer assessment the latter being more properly relating to teacher evaluation or appraisal than an indicator of effectiveness. This interpretation is wholly consistent with a learning outcome model of learning (Allan, 1997 & 1999; Allan & Clarke, 2007; Otter, 1992) and with Shuell's (1986, p. 411) assertion that, 'it is helpful to remember that what the student does is actually more important in determining what is learned than what the teacher does'.

3 DIMENSIONS OF TEACHING EFFECTIVENESS

Although Patrick and Smart (1998) claim that there appears to be little agreement on the nature and number of dimensions that represent teaching effectiveness, this is a view which is not shared by most researchers in the field. For example, working in the context of schools Harris (1998, p. 169) asserts that, 'despite the diversity of approach, there is a degree of consensus about the generic features of effective teaching' and Ramsden, (1991) focusing on HE comments, 'although "good teaching" is undoubtedly a complicated matter, there is a substantial measure of agreement among these empirical studies about its essential characteristics' (p. 131). Comprehensive critiques on effective teaching research which have been undertaken in Australia by Yates (2005), and in the UK by Harris (1998), support the existence of some consensus.

While the focus of these studies is on school teaching, their findings both inform and have resonance with the body of knowledge relating specifically to teaching in HE. Hopkins *et al* (1997) posit three broad dimensions of effective teaching. The first is 'teaching effects' which embraces both teaching skills and teaching behaviours - what teachers do in the classroom - e.g. management of time, promoting independent working, establishing clear routines, being well organised. The second dimension relates to the acquisition of effective teaching models or distinct teaching approaches and describes particular types of learning environment that the teacher establishes in his/her classroom. The third dimension is 'teacher artistry' which 'emphasises the personal responsibility for creating the conditions for effective learning undertaken by the teacher. While effective learning can take place in the absence of effective teaching, optimum results will occur

when there is a good match of the two' (Harris, 1998, p. 179).

Over the past 30 years a remarkable portrait of the effective HE teacher has emerged from a range of research studies. The summary of these dimensions depicted in Table 1 is based on the work of, Marsh, (1987), Swartz *et al*, (1990), Entwistle & Tait, (1990), Ramsden, (1991), Lowman & Mathie, (1993), Brown and Atkins, (1993), Porter and Brophy, (1988), Patrick & Smart (1998); Biggs, (2003); and Yates (2005). This Table also provides the organisational framework for the presentation of the research findings.

TABLE 1
FINDINGS FROM EFFECTIVENESS RESEARCH:
DIMENSIONS OF EFFECTIVE TEACHING

Supportive learning environment

- *provision of intellectual excitement and a stimulating environment;*
- *creation of a 'suitably challenging academic environment' (Ramsden, 1991);*
- *respect for, and interest in, students;*
- *climate of approachability;*
- *provision of a motivating environment: 'motivation is a product of good teaching, not its prerequisite' (Biggs, 2003, p. 13)*

Academic expectations

- *high level of expected output;*
- *expected outcomes expressed directly in academic terms— explaining to students what they are to learn and why;*
- *clarity in standards and assessment criteria;*
- *appropriate workload and level of difficulty.*

Scaffolding Learning

- *varied ways to teach content;*
- *anticipation of misconceptions in students existing knowledge;*
- *appropriate pace for the group being taught;*
- *high level of engagement;*
- *excellent management of student behaviour;*
- *systematic, well organised and well structured sessions;*
- *students work collaboratively with both their peers and their teachers;*
- *effective and timely feedback;*
- *encouragement of student independence;*
- *encouragement of active learning.*

Clarity

- *strong unambiguous presentational skills;*
- *high quality explanation.*

While this summary incorporates dimensions grounded in the views of both tutors and students, unlike a study undertaken by Reid and Johnston (1999) it does not seek to describe variations in their perspectives.

This work adopted a phenomenographic approach (Marton, Hounsell, & Entwistle, 1984) to explore the direct experience of how effective teaching was understood by tutors and students in a HE context. Their findings suggest that students showed no appreciation of the role that tutors' research played in enhancing teaching and that tutors demonstrated little or no awareness of the importance students place on tutors' approachability. In addition, students were 'three times as likely as their teachers to identify "interest" as a characteristic of good teaching, whilst teachers are, by about the same margin, more likely to emphasise "participation" and "active involvement" of students in the teaching process' (p. 277). Thus the literature suggests that whilst lecturers find the engagement of students to be extremely important, this ranks less highly for students than the interest of a topic, the lucidity of presentation and the approachability of tutors.

4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Given the complexity of the concept of effective teaching in HE, it is a difficult task to posit an appropriate methodology to further research in this area. Shevlin *et al* (2000, p. 398) suggest that the question is, 'whether we are measuring the most important variables of teaching effectiveness or whether some variables are becoming more important just because they are measurable'.

Campbell *et al* (2004) argue that the use of self-evaluation as an instrument for assessing effectiveness facilitates the inclusion of values. MacBeath, (1999; MacBeath *et al*, 2000) has advocated self-evaluation as an integral part of an approach to studying school effectiveness and improvement. This approach allows differences in values to be acknowledged because self-evaluation anticipates that individuals or the institution will define their position regarding the purpose of education and the educational values which underpin in situ notions of effectiveness. Indeed this is the model on which the QAA subject review methodology was predicated in England and Wales in the 1990s. However, it should be noted that unless it is broadened by inclusion in a mixed method approach, by definition self-evaluation excludes the perspectives of other stakeholders such as students, funding agencies and educational communities.

Issues of validity can arise in approaches which incorporate students' perceptions of the effectiveness of their tutors. Shevlin *et al*

(2000) suggest that student rating of effectiveness is distorted by the extent to which they perceive their teachers as being charismatic rather than relating to their ability to promote learning. Evans and Abbott (1998) found that students value highly an experience which results in high grades and that the majority of students were found to be more impressed by innovative teaching than by more traditional approaches.

To overcome bias inherent in adopting a single method approach, studies in effectiveness research in HE predominantly use questionnaires and factor analysis (Shevlin *et al*, 2000; Patrick and Smart, 1998; Ramsden, 1991). This is coupled with a strong reliance on analysing students' and lecturers' responses to predetermined factors which have been gleaned from the literature. In contrast, this study takes a grounded approach, exploring perceptions of effectiveness in the context of a sample of students and tutors, then ascertaining the extent to which these perceptions are shared by a larger population.

5 METHOD

This case study adopted a phenomenographic perspective (Marton, 1981; Marton, Hounsell, & Entwistle, 1984; Marton & Booth 1997) of students' and tutors' perceptions of effective teaching in undergraduate education tutors in the 'real life' (Yin, 1994) context of a post 1992 university. Phenomenography explores how concepts, principles and phenomena are perceived, experienced and understood in specific contexts and is thus concerned with the direct exploration of experiences (Marton, Hounsell, & Entwistle, 1984). It is an approach which is used to tackle "questions of relevance to learning and understanding in an educational setting (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 111). This is a second order perspective in which the world is described by individual learners and their tutors and where participants describe their construct of reality. Additionally, the researchers also construct a view of this particular world through their critical analysis of the data (Kozulin, Gindis, Ageyev and Miller, 2003).

Qualitative methodology, based around an 'appreciative inquiry' model (Brighouse and Woods, 1999), was selected because it afforded the researchers and the participants 'the opportunity to extend their understanding and [it] has the potential to lead to experiments to try out more effective practices' (Carnell, 2007 p. 28).

In total, 200 undergraduate level 1 students

studied Education Studies or Early Childhood Studies or Special Needs and Inclusion in the academic year 2006-07. All students were asked if they wished to take part in a focus group interview. A self-selection method was used whereby students were given an outline of what the research was about and then invited to participate. There were no penalties for non-participation. 16 students agreed to take part in the focus group interviews for the research: three male and one female in the pilot group and one male and five female in the other two groups.

The three tutors who were observed teaching had been at the university for between eight and ten years and were accustomed to being observed for appraisal, peer observation or for external review. Data from student evaluation forms, feedback from staff student consultative committees and module results had identified them all as effective teachers.

All 22 full-time tutors on the undergraduate course contributed to a detailed discussion in which the items raised by the students' focus groups were compared critically with staff perceptions of effective teaching. The items that emerged were recorded. The data were gathered from student focus groups, three observations of teaching and a discussion with university tutors. One pilot focus group was conducted followed by two focus groups each comprising six students. The pilot groups consisted of four final year students whose views reflected their perceptions of the effectiveness of the teaching practices they had encountered during their time at the university. The other focus groups comprised six students on the second year of their course and six first year students. The focus group interviews (see Appendix 1) were conducted on a semi-structured basis; this enabled the group to enter into discussion and express their views (Lichtman, 2006; Holliday, 2007). The interviewer taught some, but not all, students from each group. Clearly ethical issues arose but parameters were established before the start of the interviews: students were asked not to name specific lecturers but rather to identify the behaviours and characteristics that they believed effective tutors display. It was agreed with the participants that these items would be shared within the group and then recorded on a flip chart. All participants were invited to comment and amend the items if they so wished.

The observations were non-participatory and each tutor was observed for one hour. As a colleague of the observees, the observer made every attempt to remain as unobtrusive

as possible. Lichtman, (2006) and Frankel & Wallen (2006) suggest that observation should be confined to between three and five aspects of behaviour, as it is difficult, if not impossible, to note all the complexities that occur when people interact with each other. With this in mind, the following three foci were selected:

- the delivery style and teaching methods;
- the relationship and interactions between tutors and students;
- the effectiveness of the strategies observed in engaging the students.

Notes were shared (see Appendix 2 for the schedule) and observees were given an opportunity to discuss the data which emerged. In order to assure validity, one of the observations was undertaken with a final year undergraduate student who was examining teaching methods in higher education for her final Honours project. Following the observation, the researcher and student researcher exchanged notes and discussed the items that had been observed. Prior to each event, the students of the observed sessions were informed of the process and purpose of the observation.

The third method of data collection used a staff development session: tutors were given summaries of the student focus group interviews and asked for their comments and reflections. The aim of this was to explore congruence and dissonance between the students' perceptions of effective teaching and those of their tutors.

6 FINDINGS

The dimensions of effective teaching which are presented in Table 1 provide the framework for the analysis of the data with the sub-headings of providing a supportive learning environment; academic expectations; scaffolding learning; and clarity.

Providing a supportive learning environment

Non-verbal communication cues such as open body language, non-verbal affirmation, and non-threatening eye contact were observed during the observations of effective tutors. Each had highly tuned listening skills and used humour judiciously, both of these behaviours serving to create a climate of approachability. Students raised the following items in this category:

- creating a warm atmosphere;
- offering encouragement - 'you know smiling';

- not using a patronising tone of voice;
- making students feel comfortable asking question;
- sensitivity to students' responses;
- being approachable to students;
- being courteous to students;
- making the sessions interesting and exciting.

These items align to what Hopkins *et al* (1997) term 'teacher artistry' or the creation of a learning environment conducive to learning. Whilst the students value the sessions being made interesting they do not emphasise the importance of a challenging academic environment to the extent found in the literature, rather the items identified suggest that students value the provision of an environment which is supportive to themselves as learners.

Academic Expectations

None of the students' responses alluded to the importance of high academic expectations. The importance placed on this facet in the literature suggests that further research is required to identify if this is a dimension that students believe contributes to effective teaching but which they have failed to identify or if the omission is valid.

Scaffolding learning

Effective tutors drew upon a wide repertoire of strategies in their teaching and were aware of, and responsive to, feedback from students. A high level of student engagement and 'academic learning time' (Yates, 2005) and a focus on developing students' metacognitive strategies was observed in each teaching session. The items the students raised in this category can be divided into those which relate directly to the teacher as a 'deliverer' of knowledge:

- possessing a high level of subject knowledge;
- linking theory to practice;
- being well prepared;
- providing full references for all sources;
- using handouts judiciously;
- not giving too much information in one session;
- not giving irrelevant information and examples;
- not constantly reading from PowerPoint or notes;

and those which describe how effective teachers support learning:

- ensuring that reading from one week is followed up the next week;
- making sure that formative assessment

relates to summative assessment so that students need to see the point of doing them;

- using PowerPoint presentations to stimulate discussion;
- asking open-ended questions and then using the information given in response to raise further issues/concerns;
- checking on what has been learned;
- encouraging discussion in small groups focussing on a set task or a topic chosen from a list.

These items align broadly with the literature reflected in Table 1. However, excellent management of student behaviour was not cited by students. This omission was deemed to be congruent with students' perceptions in a School of Education where unruly behaviour is not normally encountered.

Clarity

The observations revealed that the effective tutors had considerable expertise in making complex ideas and concepts accessible to students through clear and cogent explication. They were also very skilled in repeating points by expressing them in different ways to the extent that students were not always aware of the repetition. Students in the Higher Education study undertaken by Reid and Johnson's (1999) identified 'lucidity' as the second most important characteristic of an effective teacher surpassed only by promoting 'interest'. Students raised the following items in this category which relate to how effective teachers 'deliver':

- refraining from jumping from one thing to another without proper explanation;
- explaining new terms clearly

and to how they are sensitive to the difficulties that their students may have in grasping knowledge:

- revisiting points to ensure that there is understanding or that the topic is clear;
- commenting on the responses that students give to questions;
- providing clear answers to questions that students ask;
- not saying 'look on WOLF' (the university intranet) to find an answer rather than explaining it themselves.

While these items align with Table 1, the students place more emphasis on the provision of clarity in relation to their engagement with their tutors than on clarity of explication.

7 CONCLUSION

This study suggests that the context of a modern, post 1992, teaching-intensive university is providing a profile of an effective Higher Education teacher which is not wholly consistent with extant literature. The provision of a supportive learning environment, where tutors actively scaffold learning, is perceived as being an important facet of effective teaching by both teachers and their students in this sample. Whilst there is evidence to suggest that teachers do have high expectations for their students, the students themselves do not cite this item as a requisite for effective teaching. Rather the students' responses tend to emphasise facets of teaching which relate to the interaction *between* themselves and their tutors and to actions that lead directly to the enhancement of their *own* learning. The students posit items that refer to the creation of an environment and processes which are conducive to developing their own understanding and grasp of issues and which demonstrate that their teachers are appreciative of the challenges that they face and that they are approachable. This suggests that the students' notions of an effective teacher are predicated on their seeing themselves as partners in learning not recipients of knowledge; students thus have a pivotal role in making teaching effective.

This has been a small-scale study, with a sample of 28 participants. The generalisability of the findings is further limited because they are based on a case study of the perceptions of students studying education and education-related subjects and their teachers. Further research is required to investigate the extent to which the characteristics which have emerged have resonance across disciplines.

APPENDIX 1: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Think of a lecturer that you perceive as being effective. What makes them effective?
2. What sort of qualities do think an HE lecturer should have?
3. Would you choose a module on the basis of who was teaching it?
4. Do you get higher grades with the lecturers you perceive as being effective? Or does it make no difference?
5. What about the support you get from the lecturer?

6. What sort of teaching methods are used?
7. What about feedback?
8. Use of technology?

Any other comments?

APPENDIX 2: THE OBSERVATION SCHEDULE

Behaviour to be observed	Comments from observer
1.The delivery style and teaching methods	
2.The relationship and interactions with students	
3. The effectiveness of strategies in terms of student engagement	

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