

TEACHING IN UNIVERSITIES IN GHANA: THE TENSIONS AND DILEMMAS

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Abstract

This study explored lecturers' experiences of teaching and learning within an expanding higher educational system. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore lecturers' perceptions and experiences of teaching an undergraduate module. Interviewees raised issues pertaining to the wider departmental, institutional and socio-political context. The findings suggest that lecturers perceive numerous external factors to impinge upon their teaching impacting on their roles as lecturers, and attempt to militate against these in various ways in order to achieve ongoing enhancement of learning for students.

Introduction

While a vast literature exists on students and their learning, similar research on lecturers and their teaching lags behind. Yet, such parallel work is essential, as research findings suggest a relationship between the way that lecturers approach their teaching and students approach their learning in higher education (Prosser, Ramsden, Trigwell, & Martin, 2003; Trigwell, Prosser, & Waterhouse, 1999). Moreover, since the evidence suggests that learning outcomes are influenced by the approach taken by students to their study (Lizzio, Wilson, & Simons, 2002; Trigwell & Prosser, 1991), it seems that examining lecturers' experiences of teaching should be significant. Dall'Alba (1991) identified seven ways in which teachers conceive of their teaching. These experiences range from teaching as simply presenting information through to teaching as bringing about conceptual change. Such 'taxonomies' of teaching classify how lecturers approach their teaching, and theoretically order the range of possible positions along a continuum from more teacher centred to more learner centred.

This, however, disallows both the possibility that an individual's teaching may vary depending on the content and context of the teaching situation. That is, the way a teacher teaches may be teacher centred in one lecture and learner centred in another depending on the context.

Biggs (1999) and Prosser and Trigwell (1999) offer more scope. Biggs proposes three 'levels of thinking about teaching'. At level one, the teacher is largely viewed as transmitting information, which students differentially absorb. At level two, Biggs argues that the teacher is still in the business of transmitting information but also feels responsible for, and concerned with, the delivery of that information. However, the focus is on the teachers themselves, and not on what the students are learning. At level three, teaching is conceptualized as more interactive and seen to support learning. Here, the teacher employs a range of teaching methods in order to facilitate understanding in the student, operating very much in the teaching and learning context. Prosser and Trigwell (1999) propose a model of teaching which parallels Biggs'

(1999) model of student learning. They argue that teachers, like learners, enter higher education with prior conceptions of teaching based on their own personal experience. These are then influenced by the teacher's perceptions of the teaching context, and as a consequence, teachers will adopt different approaches to teaching, which will lead to different teaching outcomes. Indeed, Prosser et al. (2003) note that:

... research into teachers' experiences of teaching shows that the way teachers approach their teaching and perceive their teaching context is a function of their previous experiences of teaching and the way the department in which they are teaching structures the teaching context (p. 39).

This focus on the lecturer in context represents a constructive theoretical move away from the lecturer as displaying a fixed approach to his/her teaching more or less regardless of context. While everyone would agree that lecturers should provide good teaching (with good outcomes for students), and that learning to teach is an important aspect of lecturer development, an understanding of the complexity of teaching in the current higher education system and an appreciation of change at the individual, institutional and/or national level may be appropriate. Lecturers may have in mind a number of contradictory beliefs and draw on each of them in their working lives, either to meet pragmatic demands or to justify their teaching practice.

It seems that little research has really taken notice of the demands and pressures faced by academics in higher education today and considered their impact on their practice. While Biggs (1996) argues for greater consideration of higher education institutional pressures on the teaching and learning process, and highlights the

difficulties individual teachers face in juggling the "conflicting demands of bureaucracy and of learning quality" (p. 14), he does not, perhaps surprisingly, bring this argument into his model of either teaching or learning.

Given the changes that have dominated the expanding higher education system in Ghana in recent times, and as a consequence the demands placed on University lecturers, this study adopted a qualitative methodology to explore lecturers' experiences of teaching and learning within the current expanding higher education climate.

Methodology

A qualitative design involving semi-structured interviews with lecturer-participants from three public universities (University of Cape Coast, institution A; University of Science and Technology, institution B; and University of Ghana, institution C) was used. This approach to data collection was used to gain information around participants' teaching in relation to undergraduate modules for which they taught extensively. The interviews were designed to allow participants to focus in depth on their individual experience in managing and teaching undergraduate modules. What emerged from running these interviews was that lecturers talked about a range of broader factors that influenced their teaching on the modules that they were discussing.

Participants

Fifteen academic staff members from the three public universities, holding a range of academic positions and drawn from various disciplines (including subjects within the humanities, science and engineering, business studies) participated. A mix of disciplines was used to elicit more

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variation in perspectives (Samuelowicz & Bain, 2001).

Instrument

The interviews were guided by semi-structured interview schedules as the aim of the study was to generate detailed and contextual data. Issues addressed included the participants' general philosophy of teaching and personal objectives for the module in question, their understanding of how students learn, constraints and benefits in teaching the module, and an evaluation of how well the module was currently achieving the stated learning objectives.

Procedure

All participants were briefed as to the nature of the study prior to commencement of the interview and their consent was sought for the discussion to be tape recorded. The interviews took the form of a 'conversation with a purpose' (Willig, 2002), enabling the establishment of rapport and a relaxed interaction. The interviews were conducted in the participants' offices at their request and lasted between 45 and 70 minutes.

Analysis

The interviews were transcribed fully, open coding was conducted and Grounded Theory was used to analyze the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1997).

Findings

Analysis of data collected showed that most of the talks of lecturers who took part in this study focused on their subjective perceptions of their teaching grounded in two themes. The first theme, 'the higher education context', includes both government and university level factors that place pressure on, and in some instances present barriers to teaching. The second theme, 'dealing with the higher education context', concerns what lecturers described

they did in order to teach in the face of the difficulties they confront in the current context of higher education.

While there was considerable enthusiasm for teaching, participants spoke about the impediments to providing quality teaching and learning within higher education. These pressures arose from the wider social, economic and political context within which higher education operates. A key aspect of the argument was what participants described as a culture that privileges research over teaching; the perceived low value placed on teaching and learning, especially in relation to the perceived high value placed on research. Participants spoke about the pressures that staff members are under to produce publications, and the perception that this aspect of academic life is central to successful career development. However, the pressure to research impacts on the proportion of time that lecturers can spend on teaching related activity. Moreover, the preparation and delivery of modules, essential for students' learning, require a significant amount of time. While most lecturer-participants consider that teaching is their prime duty, others see research and publication as "... the only way to make progress in career terms" (Participant 1, institution B).

Essentially, lecturers experienced a conflict, at least part of the time, between teaching and research responsibilities. This tension frequently left them feeling that they should "be doing the other" (Participant 3, institution A). That is, if they were spending time with students, they should be working on research; and if they were working on research, they should be engaging in teaching and learning activities. Majority of the participants, though, adopted the former approach despite their view that this would have an adverse effect on their career development.

Second, participants expressed disappointment about diminishing state funding for higher education in Ghana generally. A consequence of perceived reduced funding was the inability to replace out-dated and sometimes sub-standard equipment. This was particularly the case in the science disciplines. Concerns were expressed not only about the adverse effect that this can have on students' learning, but also with regard to the potential impact that this may have on the knowledge and skill base of graduates, and ultimately on the level of excellence achievable in science within the country. The issues associated with a lack of funding were perceived to impinge well beyond the classroom to the workplace and ultimately to the state of the economy as the following participant described:

If we have teaching learning resources such as slides, flow chart of life cycle on screen, students can make contributions even as the topic is discussed. As it is, the whole school of biological sciences has only one projector for power point. The lecturer has to book an appointment which may not be successful. At level 100 and 200 where class sizes are usually large, students are not really involved in teaching and learning. In level 300 and 400 when the class size gets smaller as they choose areas of specialization, students' contributions seem to improve. Even then you can see they have a lot of defects since they have not developed the attitudes to contribute at lectures and do independent critical thinking. Within that short time, even though we may try to mould them, I don't think we are actually able to impact their lives through the training as expected. Those who are good develop with the little guidance/exposure and pick up and develop their talents and express themselves – do independent work – come to see me and ask

how to relate what they have found on the internet with what have been taught. So we end up getting exceptionally good students. A few students are able to do that. Majority are those who will fall within average and then we have those who are extremely weak (Participant 2, institution A).

Another went on:

...you've only got to go around science laboratories to see that there is no intention anywhere of investing in the teaching infrastructure. The situation is bad with practicals. For instance, when students are working with microscopes, we may have groups of four students to a microscope. How can they focus on observing the specimen to draw? Somebody may not even look into the microscope. We deal with microscopic organisms and the students need to have a clear view of the specimen. There are no slides. If we have slides, students can mount these slides and all features that you discuss with them, they can observe them. That in a way helps students to think and be able to relate structures to functions. Even though we may draw, it does not appeal as when students mount these things under the microscope and then view more or less the actual specimen. The same students who pass through with these difficulties are the same students who end up teaching in the secondary school. The deficiencies experienced by undergraduates are manifested by teachers in the secondary schools. If they cannot handle or mount specimens by themselves while in university, of course you don't expect them when they go to teach in secondary school to deal with topics on microscopic organisms or organize practicals that deal with microscopic organisms. They are not comfortable with such topics. These shortcomings, therefore, negatively impact on their students' performance. The lecturer himself is limited in a way in terms of what

he can do because of lack of facilities (Participant 2, institution C).

Third, the perceived lack of appropriate value associated with teaching, was aggravated by government policy to increase and widen access to higher education. Participants noted that the repercussions of this policy are that teaching associated activities take more time than they used to (i.e. increased marking load, organizing large classes for effective teaching, diversity of student needs both academic and non-academic, etc.), putting pressure back onto lecturers. For example, one lecturer with over 300 students in his class noted:

In a large class like ours, you can't set essay questions. It's not practicable. Tutorials are impossible. It's counter productive. You have to face the whole class. That is the problem. The result is we are not challenging students. The interaction is not close enough. It is anonymous. You assume they would do what you said (Participant 4, institution B).

Some participants also felt ill equipped to deal with the complex problems and felt that neither support for their new role, nor a proper appreciation of the additional time and resources required was forthcoming.

Fourth, these problems are perceived to be compounded by the nature of secondary education in particular, which lecturers argued, does not adequately prepare students for independent learning and critical thinking. One participant described the problem as "I should be building on what they have already learnt in secondary school but rather I am repeating what they have already done" (Participant 3, institution C).

While lecturers agreed to the need to adjust their courses in order to enable

students to adapt to learning in the higher education context, they reported that developing appropriate teaching and learning styles in large classes with diverse needs is challenging in itself. The belief that this work is perceived as low status and is not sufficiently resourced, yet is absolutely necessary creates tension in their endeavour to teach.

While participants described in detail the way in which these external influences affect their teaching, they also reported various ways of managing these pressures.

This theme concerned how lecturers attempted to deal with the higher education context that they perceived as impacting on their role. Majority of participants, as noted, were aware of and readily able to articulate the complex pressures that they felt impinged upon their teaching and their students' learning. Both academic and non-academic student related activities were of concern to most participants. For example, although aware of the relevant issues, a high proportion of participants expressed feeling important to change the way in which the University environment can impact negatively on the students' experience. This comment by a participant resonates the views of others:

... the environment in which students find themselves, in lecture rooms which are inadequate, inadequate facilities, teaching and learning in a building site with builders hammering, banging at the walls so they feel they're just not valued by the institution, that's how it comes across (Participant 4, institution B).

Of course, a substantial building programme to improve teaching and learning facilities inevitably impacts on University life. However, physical context was not raised in isolation but seen as part of a multifarious set of issues which are

interrelated, including finite teaching resources, diverse student needs, research pressure on staff, etc. The awareness of this complex interplay of factors led participants to report a need for a highly responsive and flexible stance in response to these pressures.

The issue of increase in enrollment was one that revealed differences in participants' responsiveness and flexibility. A couple of participants were not particularly responsive to, and therefore, flexible in the face of students' needs. One participant said "I go tell them what they have to know about the topic, take questions and come back. That's what I do" (Participant 2, institution C). In contrast, other lecturers tried to be responsive to their students' needs. A lecturer explained the situation thus: "we have constraints on us that limit what we can do and we try to do the best we can within that but it is not as good as it could be" (Participant 2, institution B). Others described how they found appropriate teaching space if what they had been time-tabled was not appropriate or they changed the format of a session to better facilitate student learning. Ultimately, the aim for the majority of lecturers was to engage students in the teaching learning experience. However, all participants bemoaned the increase in student numbers and the implications that this had for them as teachers. In so doing, they demonstrated a clear awareness of the issues. However, they were not particularly responsive to the 'problems' they saw generated, possibly because they felt overwhelmed by the difficulties.

Discussion of findings

Participants described their experience of higher education in terms of understanding the higher education context and trying to deal with the impact of that context on their teaching. This exploratory

research used a qualitative methodology to enable lecturers to talk relatively freely about the way(s) in which they engaged in teaching and facilitate learning, and in so doing to address contextual issues that were relevant to them. The analysis yielded a grounded theory that suggested firstly, that lecturers themselves felt the influence of context acutely in delivering higher education. This context included but extended beyond the classroom, the department and the higher education institution to government policy and practice. The participants talked about this broadly defined context a great deal and with little prompting. Moreover, they described its impact on their role as lecturers.

It is perhaps not surprising that lecturers raised a host of contextual issues in relation to their teaching, given the substantial change within higher education in recent times. Biggs (1999) notes that "the past ten years have seen an extraordinary and worldwide change in the structure, function and financing of the university system," (p. 1). Factors he highlights as impacting upon university teaching are the greater proportion of school leavers entering higher education, the increased diversity within the student body, and increased class sizes, among others. These factors, and the issues they raise for University lecturers, were among those raised by participants. Participants described in detail the way in which various factors followed them into the classroom, and created challenges to their teaching and student learning, demanding more of university teachers in terms of their 'teaching skill' (Biggs, 1999). Lecturers in this study spoke about their awareness of and responsiveness to contextual factors. Engaging, or not, with these contextual factors enabled lecturers to address the challenges of context or to ignore them.

Conclusion and recommendations

While this study achieved the aim of exploring lecturers' experiences of teaching within an expanding higher education context, there were limitations which may have affected the findings. The study was limited by the small sample size. While these findings need further exploration, the issues raised by lecturers resonate with many of the informal discussions that occur in higher education institutions in the country. For this reason, the study begins to make a formal contribution to exploring teaching and learning in the current expanding higher education system, despite its limitation.

This exploratory work suggests that contextual factors tend to frustrate lecturers' intended approaches to teaching, and therefore, a greater appreciation of the lecturer in context might lead to a more comprehensive understanding of teaching and learning in public universities. A fundamental appraisal of, and a radical approach to the problems of teaching and learning is now necessary. Consequently, the following recommendations are made:

- To harness the creative skills of lecturers, and to generate and sustain the necessary commitment to high quality teaching, the status of teaching must be significantly raised. Innovative and high quality teaching must be seen as one posing intellectual challenges and rewards comparable to those of conventional research, and therefore, treated on an equal basis with conventional research so that lecturers would see teaching as a rewarding occupation in terms of professional development and promotion.

- Income generation at the departmental and institutional level must be vigorously pursued. An articulation between higher education institutions and industrial organizations need to be arranged to get the maximum benefit from the opportunities which will arise.
- An indispensable element in any effort to arrest decline in quality of teaching and learning must be the adjustment of student enrolment to match human and physical resources (the number and quality of academic staff, classroom and library space). With the continuing rise in demand for university education, this will involve in the short term the reduction in student numbers. In the long term, it will take an expansion of infrastructure and staff strength to match enrolment.
- A series of measures need to be taken to strengthen teaching such as compulsory orientation programmes for new staff in methods of teaching large classes, while maintaining continuing education for all lecturers through appropriate staff development training programmes. Attendance of these training programmes should be a pre requisite for promotion. These training programmes can be extended to lead to a post graduate diploma in education (PGDE) degree.

- The use of teaching assistants for tutorials and marking is widespread in the higher educational system as a result of increase in student numbers, and that might have to become the pattern. However, there is a substantial risk in handing over crucial aspects of teaching to cheaper, but also inexperienced graduates, unless the employment conditions and payments made are

appropriate, and this category of staff are given proper training through regular courses on teaching, conducting tutorials, and quality assessment. These courses could be extended into a programme leading to a postgraduate diploma in education (PGDE) degree similar to those suggested for lecturers.