

Leading part-time teaching staff to achieve excellent teaching

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ABSTRACT

The article points out the significance of hourly-waged tutors to the quality of the teaching-learning procedure in mechanical engineering department. Existing research shows that higher education faces many challenges in its attempt to keep pace with the needs of the student body for effective learning. The changing nature of higher education is presenting many real challenges within academic practice. Therefore the discourse of performatives is pervasive. A recent study has concluded that essential elements of what it means to be an excellent teacher: individual attributes of the teachers, their ability to deal with complex human interactions and relationships, a concern for "weaker" students, a commitment to student-centred methodologies and a commitment to ongoing professional development. In 2009, 30 hourly-waged tutors completed self-reflective written statements, based on van Manen's framework to explore the reflective processes of teachers. Once hourly-waged tutors had completed the statements they attended a development session where they shared and discussed their experiences and then collated, anonymous data. The content of the teaching material and the teaching methodology are discussed based on the hourly-waged tutors' self-reflection process. Effective teaching is both a relational and an intellectual practice. Based on the findings of this study, the mechanical engineering department must design and provide a professional development program addressed to part time tutors.

Keywords: Reflection, Excellent teaching, Leaderships

INTRODUCTION

The massification of higher education is now a global phenomenon that has brought multiple challenges with regard to pedagogy and presented practical problems for academics in dealing with ever larger and more diverse student numbers. The number of part-time staff, including tutors, has substantially

increased all over the world, USA (Quinn 2006), UK (Mouzaka 2009), Australia (Kift 2003).

During the last two decades the working environment in Greek tertiary education has changed dramatically. There was great pressure to increase the number of students that entered tertiary education. The Greek government decided to offer more places in the universities -90% of the secondary graduates have secured a place-. The Universities, in order to cover the extensive demand of the society, created new departments to order. Technological Educational Institute (TEI) of Patras has created 8 departments, an increase of 100% as shown in Table 1. However, due to the economic crisis the Greek government reduced significantly the government financial support per student linked to tertiary education. Also the private sector that traditionally supported research projects has also reduced the available funding. Additionally, a large number of professors decided to take early pension schemes. The number of full time professors in TEI of Patras has reduced from 190 in 2006 to 130 today.

Table 1: Number of new departments in TEI Patras.

	Existing departments	New Departments	Total Nos of departments
1999	8	3	11
2002	11	3	14
2006	14	2	16

Additionally, the number of prospective students in classical subjects, for example mechanical engineering, has dramatically increased while the number of full time professors continuously reduced as shown in Table 2. The ratio of full time professors to full time students indicates the extremely difficult circumstances in which to offer quality education to students. Based on this evidence the department was forced to hire 94 of hourly-waged tutors during the academic year 2009-10 (88% of the total tutor force).

Table 2: Number of students/full time tutors.

	Number of students	Number of Full time tutors	Full time tutors / students
1999-2000		3	11
2004-2005	1	3	14
2009-2010	1	14	16

It is quite clear that in order to provide quality education for our students we must improve the quality of the teaching-learning procedures that are offered by the part time tutors. The purpose of this research is to evaluate the effectiveness of the self-reflection process that tutors may use and to explore the teaching-learning practices that tutors were focused on. The self-reflective activity in our tutor development seminar was a directed reflective process that was aimed at supporting conceptual expansion based on Bell's and Mladenovic's (2008) framework. The department till now does not provide a tutor development program. Based on the findings of the study it is expected to design a suitable development program.

DEFINITION OF REFLECTION

Teaching in higher education is not simply about mastering a set of techniques or skills and following rules and prescriptions for practice, but it is relational and involves recognizing and dealing with problematic ethical issues such as supporting student learning (Macfarlane 2004). The process of reflection supports tutors to achieve high quality teaching-learning outcomes. The definition of reflection depends upon the context. At the simplest level, reflection is 'a form of response of the learner to the experience of learning. It is a generic term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciations'. Reflective practice is an iterative process rather than a one-off event, involving 'repeated cycles of examining practice, adjusting practice and reflecting upon it, before trying it again' (Grushka et al., 2005). Kahn et al. (2006), argue that reflective processes involve creating meaning around practice. This is inherently collaborative. The resulting understanding . . . provides a starting point for adapting practice'. Although academics might often reflect on their teaching in a spontaneous and natural way (Eley 2006), reflection can be facilitated using what Kahn et al. (2006) called 'directed reflective processes'. According to Ferman's study (2002), collaborative activities were regarded by academics as highly professionally enriching. The importance of the social aspect of reflective processes was also identified in a literature review by Kahn et al. (2006). Teaching and learning communities are vital in re-conceptualizing common professional identities, which I would argue is even more important at times of rapid change and uncertainty. In this paper, I want to analyze and reflect on how such communities are formed and developed, but with a focus on the role of guided self-reflection.

Kahn and colleagues' review (2006) noted the following benefits of reflective practice for academic development: increased capacity for reflective processes; enhanced capacity for practice; development of personal qualities (e.g. increased self-confidence); establishment of supportive relationships between those involved in the reflective processes; and transformation of practice. There are few published studies on reflective practice as an aspect of hourly-waged tutor development. Most of the 2401 part-time tutors surveyed at the Open University of London had learned to teach 'on the job' and wished they had learned how to teach by "'social learning"' that is learning through consulting others' (Knight et al., 2006).

CATEGORIZATION OF REFLECTION

Reflection is a very personal and subjective procedure. Based on this fact there is no ideal way to categorize reflection. We have selected a modified version of van Manen's framework (1977) as it is cohesive and can help individuals to develop more clearly interrelationships among the variety of other positions on reflective teaching already considered. The three categories of reflection identified by van Manen (1977) are technical, practical and critical. Even though the categories are very generic they served our intention to let the colleagues express themselves freely. Technical reflection is concerned mainly with means rather than ends. This type of reflection is focused on timing, equipment and resources (van Manen 1977). Also it is related to maintaining order and achieving predetermined outcomes. Practical reflection has its focus on an interpretive understanding both of the nature and quality of educational experiences, on connections between principles and practice and on student engagement (Grushka et al. 2005). Critical reflection involves "the question of the worth of knowledge..... a constant critique of domination, institutions, and repressive forms of authority.

The above issues in guided reflection process extend awareness beyond the classroom to moral and social issues (Killen 2007). They should mainly try to answer the question 'what merely seems good to me and what is really good for my students'; taking into consideration what is good and best for me to do now, given the limitations of my present state of knowledge, as well as what is good and best unqualifiedly. The three categories give an indication of the quality of the reflection, but they should not be seen as hierarchical. The practical and technical issues are part of the reality of teaching, and reflection on these aspects of teaching is valuable (Killen 2007). The answers of the tutors are categorized in the Table 3.

Table 3: Tutors' reflective statements.

	Number of answers (%)
Technical	44
Practical	17
Critical	18
Other/unknown	21

Representative quotations:

1. I will definitely start using power point slides for graphical explanation
2. I will make good use of visual aids
3. The equipment of the class-rooms are not working properly
4. The maintenance of the labs equipments is very poor and the devices are not available all the time.

5. The students are not interested in the quality of their studies.
6. I don't receive appropriate feedback from my students
7. The students are not able to understand difficult concepts especially in mathematics, physics and chemistry. I must help students to consolidate their understanding and grasp important concepts
8. I am trying to find out my style of teaching
9. There is no formal way to learn from the styles of the experienced colleagues
10. I would pose more questions to my students in order to increase their interest in the classroom
11. Give students more space and autonomy in constructing their own answers
12. I would start to increase the amount of homework offering my students the opportunity to cooperate with their class-mates (create a learning community).
13. I will try to give real problems to be solved in order to increase the interest of my students. Integrate theory with problem solving
14. Teaching is a process of continuous learning and improvement
15. Incorporate real world applications of theory so students have a better understanding of the concepts and how theory and practice are interlinked
16. Balance between what students must learn and what students might want to learn
17. There are areas in which I have to improve and it would have good impact on the quality of my work.

THE STUDY

As it has been mentioned in the introduction our department employs around 90 tutors to teach to undergraduate students. The departments' internal assessment procedure in 2007-08 revealed that the quality of teaching offered hourly-waged tutors left a lot to be desired. Each tutor had a different approach to the teaching model that was suitable for our students' characteristics, due to cultural differences. The department decided to provide a professional development program based on the findings of this study. In February 2010, 30 tutors completed self-reflective written statements following their participation in a three hour course regarding self-reflective procedure as a professional development practice. Tutors were free to express their teaching-learning experience without any limit, provided that they could support their views. One of the benefits of reflection is that it can help academics transcend a purely emotional response to teaching incidents (Brookfield, 1995), while it can certainly encompass and help to make sense of emotions.

CODING AND DATA ANALYSIS PROCESS

In order to analyze tutors' self-reflective reports I had to perform a content analysis that involves the systematic analysis of documents through the development and use of coding systems to identify and quantify information (Cozby, 1997). Tutors' self-reflective comments were fairly evenly split between

the three categories of reflection (Table 3). Most tutors reflected in all three modes as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Types of reflection identified in each statement.

Reflective statement	Technical reflections	Practical reflections	Critical reflections
1	-	2	1
2	2	1	1
3	3	-	-
4	3	3	2
5	2	1	1
6	1	1	1
7	2	2	2
8	1	2	-
9	2	1	-
10	4	2	2
11	2	-	-
12	3	1	1
13	1	1	1
14	1	1	-
15	2	-	1
16	2	1	1

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Adler (1991) argued that there is no 'one best way' of promoting reflection; however, it does seem that this exercise was an effective way to prompt tutors to reflect on their teaching. The voluntary nature of the activity and the low level of participants (16 participants out of 94 (15%)) proved that it is an absolute priority to establish a professional development program that each year the newly appointed hourly-waged tutors would obligatorily attend.. For all of them it was the first time that they heard the term "teaching reflection". The majority of them expressed their fear to participate in a development seminar following a self-reflective practice. It is common at first to feel anxious and uncomfortable about reflective experiences. The short exercise helped tutors articulate and formalize their teaching-learning concept from the peers' views and comments while it created an opportunity for reflection, without which it might not otherwise occur (Pedro 2005). The program must be based on the argument that tutors, to be effective, not only need to know about the subject matter and how to teach, but to understand as well the appropriate pedagogies for that particular subject, topic, or concept. It is expected that a common culture between the full time teachers and the part-timers would be developed. In that way the actions of the educators will be motivated by shared values and beliefs about teaching and learning through a common language and creating an informal network of cultural players.

The author investigated the reasons why they did not participate in the training course. The majority of the non-participants argued the fact that the head of the department had not stressed the significance of their participation. Nevertheless a minority of them thought that it was a means of pushing them to work harder. It is very clear that the Head leadership is not the appropriate one.

It was found that the majority of participants were novice teachers who reflected more at the technical level. Based on the answers that the tutors provided during the course, the author concluded that the quality of the critical reflection was very limited and poor. They used their attention to find the weak points of the facilities and the organization of the Institute rather to reflect on their knowledge, skills and attitude. The majority of them complained that the level of basic knowledge that the first years master students had in the department was very poor, and they were not able to teach them effectively. They proposed to add a preparative year in order to prepare the students for their studies. Only a couple of participants were concerned about pedagogical matters and issues beyond the classroom. The spread of our results across the three categories could partly be done because we took a broader view than previous researchers of the practical and critical modes of reflection.

The fact that the exercise occurred on a small scale and was discussed as a small group meant that the activity did not impact on organizational learning and change. The exercise did not enhance part time tutors' awareness of the teaching community and common issues, which is particularly important for tutors in tertiary education.

It proved that the initiative of delivering a free of charge training course without any obligation on behalf of the part time teachers is very poorly evaluated and only a few tutors see it as a personal development opportunity. The tutors who did not participate admitted that they had very limited knowledge regarding the reflection procedure and could not foresee the future benefits. Some of them claimed that there is no time available during the academic semester. If the above argument is true then it is very important to study in detail the workload of each part time tutor and their level of private satisfaction.

FUTURE PERSPECTIVE

It is very obvious that the department encounters a more complicated problem: culture identity. Hoy and Miskel (2001) suggest that culture consists of shared assumptions, values and norms. The large number of part time tutors dominates the climate and the culture of the department. Based on the fact that the department enjoys high levels of independence and autonomy, relatively free from any sense of management, commercial responsibility and accountability, a realistic self evaluation is a critical priority to be performed at the earliest possible opportunity. A key part of that realistic self-evaluation is an understanding of the way in which culture is understood by all stake holders (full time tutors, part time tutors, students etc). The head of the department is the key player as he is the only person who has the authority to materialize the much needed cultural changes. The

accuracy of the widely held assumption that leaders are able to shape and mould the culture of learning within their organizations needs to be explored rather than taken for granted. His responsibility is to lead the department in keeping on track the dynamic relationship between leadership, learning and culture. Understanding its internal culture and the need to improve the quality of the teaching-learning procedures, the head of the department must urgently develop an effective management framework that would measure employee contribution in a fair, transparent and robust manner.

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