



Concept Thresholds: The Key to Self-efficacy and Effective Teaching in Higher Education

New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work, Volume 9, Issue 2, 119-123, 2012

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ABSTRACT

A lecturer's self-efficacy needs to be informed through reflection with a sound understanding of the concepts or benchmarks that are indicators of effective teaching practices. A strong sense of self-efficacy will have a positive influence on students' learning and will impact on the lecturer's teaching behaviour. This article proposes that by using a framework of 'threshold concepts', the teacher is able to identify areas where they have transcended a threshold in their professional teacher development and, alternatively, areas where they have become 'stuck'.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education plays a pivotal role in the production of social capital and economic growth. This is a sector of education that should, therefore, have well-educated and highly skilled teaching staff. Roche and Marsh (2000) argue that some tertiary lecturers have not received pre-service or in-service professional development that specifically targets teaching pedagogy or the 'art of teaching'. They illustrate this point in saying that tertiary lecturers complete Masterate and Doctoral degrees and they are then deemed to be able to teach their subject (Roche & Marsh, 2000). It is expected that the lecturer will learn the art of teaching 'by doing' and that he or she will naturally know if his or her teaching is effective or not. This is not always the case. This paper takes the position that a lecturer's self-efficacy needs to be informed through reflection with a sound understanding of the concepts or benchmarks that are indicators of effective teaching practices.

SELF-CONCEPT OF EFFECTIVENESS

An integral part of tertiary pedagogy is the establishment of the lecturer's self-concept of effectiveness. The concept of self-efficacy is best defined as an individual's judgement about their capabilities within a given context (Kane, Sandretto & Heath, 2004). Teaching self-efficacy is, therefore, the self-judgement of the teacher, or in this case the tertiary lecturer. How a lecturer

feels about themselves as a teacher and the manner in which they rate their own teaching effectiveness will inform their teaching practice, their relationship with students and the attitude the lecturer brings to the classroom (Schön, 1987). The importance of self-efficacy becomes significant as a strong sense of self-efficacy will have a positive influence on students' learning and it will impact on the lecturer's teaching behaviour (Chang, Lin & Song, 2011). The lecturer who does not have a strong sense of self-efficacy and who does not have a clear understanding of effective pedagogy may be perpetuating poor teaching practices.

Self-efficacy is informed by the lecturer's understanding of what effective teaching is. It is important that any definition of effective teaching is contextualised; this includes the setting, manner of delivery, time and the relationship between the lecturer and the students. What is deemed to be effective within one tertiary institution may in fact be deemed to be ineffective in another. For example, the indicators of effective teaching within a large publicly owned university may differ from the indicators within a small privately owned tertiary institution. Equally, these indicators may also differ to those accepted as being evidence of effectiveness within a wananga or in an institution outside of New Zealand. A one-size-fits-all list of indicators of effective teaching will not suffice.

The concept of effective teaching as well as research into best practice are not new ideas in the field of educational research (Kane, *et al.*, 2004; Roche & Marsh, 2000; Schön, 1987). Traditionally, the evaluation of effective tertiary teaching has come from the perspective of observers, from empirical data such as course completion rates or from the students as a result of course evaluation surveys. As indicators of effectiveness and informers of self-efficacy, these forms of evaluation are highly problematic and, in particular, student evaluations are often criticised (Bart, 2011; Jandt, 2007; Roche & Marsh, 2000). It is claimed that students tend to place little thought into the end of course evaluation. Furthermore, the lecturer who teaches a challenging course may score lower in the course evaluation survey than the lecturer who teaches the less challenging course. Other issues that impact on the student evaluation process have also been identified by Bart (2011) such as the students who use the opportunity to express negative comments about a teacher. This may particularly be the case if a student feels that they have failed or are failing the paper. Jandt (2007) also noted that evaluations are often given to the lecturers well after the course has finished and the responses are culturally informed. Evaluations are often devoid of follow-up discussions and professional development that can contribute to the development of the lecturer's self-efficacy.

The multidimensional nature of teacher efficacy only adds further to the difficulty in defining the concept of effective teaching and informing self-efficacy (Kane, *et al.*, 2004). A lecturer may have a positive self-efficacy within their specific subject area that they know well but that same lecturer may experience a negative self-efficacy if asked to teach a subject that he or she is less familiar with. Other factors such as length of teaching service may also impact of self-efficacy, with longer serving lecturers typically having a greater sense of self-efficacy than the less experienced teaching staff (Roche & Marsh, 2000).

There are several research papers (Kane, *et al.*, 2004; Roche & Marsh, 2000; Schön, 1987) and in-house documents (The University of Auckland,

2011) that offer benchmark categories within which the lecturer may self-evaluate effective teaching. While benchmarks of effective practice have value, their application is limited if the novice lecturer is not shown what effective teaching is or how to evaluate his or her own teaching. Therefore, it is important for a lecturer in constructing a sense of self-efficacy that they become involved in some form of professional development that will assist in understanding the constructs of effective teaching.

THRESHOLD CONCEPTS

Meyer and Land (2003) use the term 'threshold concepts' as a way to explain the significant shift in perception and knowledge of a subject. Threshold concepts are not the 'core concepts' that inform a discipline; rather they occasion a significant shift in the perception of a subject and they are central to understanding and mastery of the subject. Threshold concepts are described as 'conceptual gateways' or 'portals' that lead to a previously inaccessible, and initially 'troublesome' way of thinking, interpreting, or viewing a phenomenon. These portals have been conceptualised as being key points in the learning landscape through which the individual gains a greater depth of understanding beyond epistemological dimensions to a new way of seeing things that extends to ontological dimensions around personal identity, feelings and values.

The threshold concept of an effective teacher includes the constructs that underpin effective teaching and learning within that context as well as an understanding of the indicators. Elton (2008) strongly advocates professional development as a means by which lecturers may be assisted in identifying the construct indicators of effective practice. This contributes to the development of the scholarship of teaching and learning and a greater sense of self. Once thresholds have been identified and areas of 'troublesome knowledge' have been located then targeted professional development programmes can be developed to address these issues.

An essential part of the identification of the threshold concept of effective teaching is critical self-reflection. The lecturer needs to be able to say what it is about this action or practice in their own teaching that contributes to effective teaching, and equally what does not make something effective. In developing a sense of self-efficacy, the benchmarks become tangible so that the lecturer will be able to alter their pedagogical practice, thus passing through a threshold in their understanding. Alternatively, and what is of concern, is if the lecturer does not have a clear understanding of effective teaching practices and they lack a sense of self-efficacy. There is the risk that he or she will then perpetuate ineffective actions (Schön, 1987).

Teacher critical reflection contributes to understanding the threshold concepts of effective teaching. The process of teacher self-reflection was described by Schön (1987) as being the critical self-analysis of the teacher's values, beliefs and perspectives against his or her pedagogical practices. Stein and Walker (2010, p. 4) further define this process as being the critical analysis of 'espoused theories of practice and actual theories-in use'. They also argue that the self-aware teacher will be better able to self-evaluate his or her practice and will have a higher potential of delivering effective teaching. But, again, this

can only take place if the teacher has a benchmark or threshold concept from which to work.

CONCLUSION

Traditionally tertiary lecturers learnt their craft by imitating the style of their own lecturers in a manner that Elton (2008, p. 205) refers to as being 'apostolic succession'. Imitation of a role model is problematic if the style being imitated is not effective and the lecturer is not able to see this. At the heart of pedagogical development is identifying effective teaching concept thresholds that are contextualised to the particular setting and in working with lecturers to support them in developing a strong sense of self-efficacy through professional development and critical reflective practice.

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