

Effective teaching

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CETL Briefing Papers – Effective Teaching

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Aims of the Initiative

This initiative focuses on providing an understanding of both students' and teachers' perceptions of effective teaching in a modern UK University. Through utilising a phenomenographical perspective, the research identifies that teacher effectiveness is a combination of providing a supportive environment and including students in the process of developing understanding. This research has been carried out in four schools within the University of Wolverhampton and five constituents of effective teaching have been identified.

Description of the Initiative

This case study was undertaken from a phenomenographic perspective (Marton, 1981; Marton & Booth 1997) of students' perceptions of, and insights into, effective undergraduate teaching in the first year of their study. 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). The study follows this research specialisation in its quest to describe analyse and understand (Marton, 1981) how students construe effective teaching, however, we do not seek to explore in depth the variation in these conceptions; as such it cannot be said to be a phenomenographic study in its purist sense.

In total 195 students studied education-related non teacher training programmes in the academic year 2007/8. All students were invited to take part in the study; there was no coercion exercised and no penalties for non-participation.

Figure 1 shows the number of students who participated in the data collection.

Data collection methods	No. of respondents	Response rate
Initial focus group interviews	16	N/A
Focus groups	65	N/A
Likert questionnaire	80/195 students	42%

The study explored two interrelated questions: (1) what do students perceive to be effective teaching in their first year in HE? (2) What are the qualities of teachers which first year students perceive to promote their learning? The research was organised in three phases:

- In the first phase data were gathered from three focus group, a pilot group consisting of four students, and two groups each made up of six students; a total 16 students, six of whom were male and 10 female. The interviews were conducted on a semi-structured basis which enabled the group to enter into and extend the discussion (Lichtman, 2006). Students were asked not to name specific teachers but to identify the characteristics they believed effective higher education teachers displayed. Participants' opinions were recorded on a flip-chart and amended throughout the interviews. In this way conversation and discussion were facilitated (Holliday, 2007) and a degree of consensus relating to students' perceptions was built into an iterative process. The function of the focus groups was thus to provide a grounded perspective of students' beliefs. The facilitator for

each of the initial focus groups was a tutor/researcher who taught some, but not all, of the students. Students were given an outline of the research before the interviews took place and chose whether to participate. Students were assured of the anonymity of any of their comments and were asked not to name specific teachers, rather to identify the characteristics beneficial to their learning that effective teachers displayed.

- The data collected in the first phase were analysed and grouped into 4 broad categories: teaching skills; subject knowledge of lecturers; personal qualities of lecturers and aspects of teaching that may hinder students' learning. These were then presented to a further 5 focus groups each comprising between 10 and 12 students who were asked (a) to discuss and modify the original statements and (b) to add any additional statements as appropriate and record their responses on flipcharts. These focus groups were led by a final year student who had been given some support in interview techniques. The function of the second set of focus groups was to refine, develop and validate the initial ideas.
- The data from the first phase of the study were summarised into 33 statements incorporated into a Likert questionnaire (see Appendix 1). As our respondents were first year undergraduates, the term 'lecturer' rather than 'teacher' was used in the questionnaire to signal to the respondents that the locus of the study was their current experience in university and not their perceptions of their teachers in school. The questionnaire was distributed to 121 first year undergraduate students, having piloted within the target group and necessary modifications having been made. There were 80 responses giving a return rate of 66%. The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale allowing respondents to express strong disagreement (1), disagreement (2), neutrality (3), agreement (4) or strong agreement (5) in response to each of the 33 statements included. Each statement identified a potential characteristic of effective teaching in HE. An open-ended question was also added to afford respondents the opportunity to express further facets of effective teaching should; they so wish; 36 of the 80 respondents did so.

Evaluation and impact of the Initiative

Analysis of the responses to the Likert questionnaire in Table 2 shows the five responses with the highest proportion of strongly agree and agree responses.

Table 2 The top 5 statements describing effective university teachers the most positively.

Item effective university teachers....	% of strongly agree and agree responses
demonstrate excellent knowledge of their subject	99
include group activities during sessions	95
encourage discussion	94
are approachable	91
start sessions on time	91

(Total number of responses for each item = 80)

The first item 'effective university teachers demonstrate excellent knowledge of their subject' was reinforced by respondents in the focus groups who expressed a strong belief that excellent subject knowledge was a necessary attribute of an effective

teacher. What emerges from this research is not, as Reid and Johnston (1999) suggest, that students have little appreciation of teachers' research, but rather that they value the rigour this can bring to teaching.

Nevertheless our research suggests that, at least in their first year in HE, students only value research which is relevant to their studies. These perceptions align strongly with the analysis presented in Table 1 in relation to both the importance of creating a supportive learning environment and scaffolding learning, and notably with Biggs' (2003) work on the role of constructive alignment. It is not unexpected that first year undergraduates in a modern university rate highly teachers who ensure the relevance of their sessions to the module being studied; indeed this facet of effective teaching also features highly in Table 3. This is wholly consistent with an 'achieving' (Biggs, 1987,) or 'strategic' (Tait et al, 1998) approach, and, given the political influence on education discussed in this article, with enhancing 'performativity'. The high value placed by students on including group activities and encouraging discussion in sessions, chimes with the consensus of teachers' views on the contribution that varying ways of teaching content, promoting active learning, and assuring a high level of engagement make to promoting effective learning. Given the ranking of both of these items, it was somewhat surprising that respondents did not add any further comments relating to them in either the focus group discussion or the open ended section of the questionnaire. Conversely, the fourth ranking item, being approachable, was accorded a strong emphasis by the students. For some students the notion of approachability was linked with promoting self-efficacy and to creating a climate of trust. For others this was associated with their teachers having sufficient time:

Explicit references were made to lecturers clarifying assignment requirements finds resonance in a study undertaken by Bloxham and West (2007, p. 84) who reported that students value those tutors who provide verbal clarification or "almost a translation into language that they could understand" which prompted them to posit that "effective teachers, at least in students' initial engagement with HE are those that can slip effortlessly from subject to 'everyday' discourse and back again" (p.85). The strength of this assertion is further supported by the positive responses reported in Table 3 in respect to the salience of preparedness to explain. That said, the importance that students accord to teachers specifically having *time* for their students does not find resonance in current literature. This perception perhaps arises from the increasingly high staff student ratios which are prevalent in modern universities together with the ever widening demands that are being placed on university teachers to both undertake research and to generate income through external projects. The unexpected presence of the fifth item in Table 2 that effective lecturers arrive on time, further suggests that students do indeed regard in high esteem those teachers who prioritise their teaching.

The second tranche of items cluster around those that received the smallest number of strongly disagree and disagree ratings in the questionnaire are shown in Table 3 with the exception of 'demonstrate excellent knowledge of their subject' which had no negative responses but is included in Table 2. This item had the most positive and fewest negative responses, and thus, by inference the fewest responses in the not sure category and is thus the most highly regarded factor.

Table 3 The top 5 statements describing effective university teachers with the least dissension.

Item effective university teachers....	% of strongly disagree and disagree responses
ensure the relevance of information within sessions	0
are patient	0
respect students' opinions	0
are enthusiastic about learning	0
are prepared to explain	1
give clear guidance when asked for help	?

(Total number of responses for each item = 80)

Whilst it does not feature in any of the literature reviewed, being patient is perceived by fresh undergraduates as an important characteristic of an effective university teacher. Interestingly this item was linked by students to the recognition of individual differences. This was further developed by a number of students who regarded the recognition and appropriate responses to different learning styles amongst students as an important attribute of an effective lecturer.

This factor does not feature in extant research into teacher effectiveness in HE, but, given the radical diversification of students resulting from the widening participation agenda, it begs the question as to the extent to which 21st university undergraduate curricula should be predicated on a pedagogy modelled on the principle of differentiation.

The second personal attribute which students agreed upon was the role that respect plays in effective teaching. Two facets which qualified respect emerged, the first, its importance in promoting motivation - *'if there's no respect, it discourages student motivation'*, - was congruent with the perceptions of all the students in the focus group where it was discussed. This stance is explicit in Table 1 and is supported by Biggs, (2003, p. 13) who argues that 'motivation is a product of good teaching, not its prerequisite' and that effective teachers create learning environments where students experience the need to learn.

The final personal attribute identified in Table 3 is that of enthusiasm which respondents associated with engendering a high level of engagement. Research undertaken by Bauer (2002) in the States with 130 first year college chemistry students placed strong emphasis on enthusiasm which was the category in this study with the most positive responses. Further, the link with engaging students in learning is not unexpected; this finds support in the literature summarised in Table 1 which recognises the centrality of engagement in scaffolding learning.

Policy Implications

Stakeholders

- This research raises a number of important issues relating to the policy of generating an effected learning and teaching environment. It proposes that staff should show enthusiasm for their subject as well as enthusiasm for sharing information with students. Staff should also be respectful towards students and

deliver lectures and seminars in a way that is not patronising, and does not rely on the use of jargon or PowerPoint presentations.

- Feedback is also very important to students. Teaching staff are encouraged to provide feedback that will help students progress and provides examples and is transferable.
- Group work is also important to students. It is important to involve students in the learning process through group projects and discussions.

HE Sector

- The up-skilling of staff is crucial. Staff development should not only include the Post Graduate Certificate Higher Education for all new teaching staff but also continual professional development in teaching and delivery skills.
- Mentoring of all teaching staff is important to help enhance and update the skills set of teaching staff.
- Teaching staff should be encouraged to share best practice with peers.

International Market

- Further research with international participants to be carried out to assess generalisability of these findings to the international market.

Business Case

- Effective teaching leads to greater learning and enhanced learning experience. Further this leads to progression, greater retention and ultimately to graduation.

Expert Contacts and Links

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Publications

Allan, J. and Clarke, K. (2007) International Journal of learning and Teaching in Higher Education (Vol 19, no.1, pp64-76): Nurturing Supportive learning environments in HE through the teaching of study skills: to embed or not to embed? International Journal of Teaching and Learning in HE (Accepted Oct 2006, June, 2007)