Forum Insights

TEACHING HEROES
Accounts of their Personal and Professional Approaches to Teaching

Introduction

This Forum Insight paper summarises key findings from a piece of qualitative research undertaken by the National Forum to explore the personal and professional approaches to teaching of the first group of Teaching Heroes (2014). The research was conducted in two phases: an online anonymous survey which posed 10 open questions on the Teaching Heroes' perspectives towards teaching, 47 of 53 Teaching Heroes voluntarily completed the survey. Respondents were given the option to participate in an extended interview with the researchers, 24 respondents voluntarily engaged in interviews. The interview schedule was derived from a preliminary thematic analysis of responses to the open questions in phase 1.

Rationale

Commentaries from students who nominated staff for teaching awards were over-whelmingly positive and highlighted characteristics and behaviours of teachers which students found to be personally very impactful. Analysis of data from student nominations for Teaching Heroes (2014) were reported in an earlier Forum Insight: http://www.teachingandlearning. ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/27-02-2015_Teaching-hero-Feb-2015-3.pdf. The Teaching Heroes research project was undertaken to complement the understanding of impactful teaching generated from the student accounts by exploring the ways that Teaching Heroes undertake their teaching.

The research questions & analysis

An important assumption underlying the study was the recognition that Teaching Heroes were unlikely to view themselves or their practice in "heroic" terms. The research questions were informed by Kreber's (2010) concept of authenticity in teaching, the convergence of personal and professional values which inform teaching practice, as well concepts of teaching expertise. The research questions adopted were:

   What personal values characterise Teaching Heroes' orientations towards teaching?

   What professional values characterise Teaching Heroes' orientations towards teaching?

   How do Teaching Heroes identify and measure the impact of their teaching?

   To what extent do the approaches reported appear to represent signature teaching practices?

   How have Teaching Heroes responded personally and professionally to the award?

The data analysis methodology adopted for the survey and interview open responses was content analysis. Data were coded according to categories of meaning and the relationship between categories derived from the data.

Overall Findings

- Learners are central
- Learner engagement is actively pursued
- Communication is varied and adaptive
- Student feedback and evaluation of teaching is valuable
- Teaching Heroes have valued receiving the award personally and professionally

Learners are central

A striking and recurring theme from the Teaching Heroes accounts of their approaches to teaching is the centrality of the student as a focal point for their practice. This was especially evident in the groups' reporting of the top three characteristics of good teaching, where the most important aspect identified was establishing and maintaining good quality learning relationships with students. When explored further through the interview process, responses were consistent in the language used concerning student-relationship building as the cornerstone of successful teaching and learning. Word frequency analysis of responses showed that knowing students featured centrally and in their accounts the Teaching Heroes described establishing good and effective relationships early: *"I guess I would say is that it's all about trust ... that you need to have some form of rapport with the class". "I make it my business to get to know their names from day one. I think that is really important that their identity is created from day one"*. This resonates with the theme of care as one of the positive and impactful behaviours which emerged from students' nomination texts.

Learner engagement is actively pursued

Interviews permitted a fuller exploration of the approaches and practices employed by teachers to engage their students, from the range of approaches identified it was evident that teachers prioritise engaging students in order to build learning relationships and create a good learning environment. A frequency analysis identified interactivity in the learning environment as well as actively demonstrating respect for the students as a means of fostering engagement. 23 out of 24 interview respondents cited interactivity as singularly important in their teaching practice and described specific teaching approaches including: moving lectures to a workshop format; group work settings and getting experientially diverse students working together. Values such as respect and empathy along with knowing the student and wider group emerged with high frequency as important elements in engaging students effectively, as these quotes illustrate: *"for me to be a good teacher, the question is basically what do I see the relationship between the teacher and the learner, it has to be mutual respect". "you understand that they are just learning that they have just started out"*. This theme links to two of the topics identified from the students' texts, creativity in teaching approaches and care.

Communication is varied and adaptive

Teaching heroes described using a range of communication approaches to further engagement and tailor approaches to students' learning examples included: encouraging dialogue; using technology and social media; non-verbal communication and listening to the student voice. Encouraging dialogue and questioning was the most relied on form of communication between teachers and students, with teachers describing the students' articulation of questions in class as an important part of the learning process. Interestingly, forms of non-verbal communication were described as both an aid to teaching as well as a source of feedback for reflection on teaching. 17 out of 24 teachers identified student observation and non-verbal responses.   One respondent describing the importance of both dialogue and non-verbal communication said, *"you try to make your language as clear and as positive and as engaging and as non-threatening as you can. But you're constantly reading the temperature in the room, you're reading the body language, the eye contact, their comfort, their level of energy"*. Observation was used reflectively to adapt communication methods and styles for particular subject matter or diverse student groups, as another respondent said *"There are a lot of difficult concepts in my subject and despite the fact that I have been lecturing a long time, I would still say that there are many areas that I am singularly unsuccessful at getting across ... so I am looking for the key that opens the door for them and the key that opens the door – its different for different people"*. The main communication features as described by teachers as central to their practice are focused purposefully on facilitating and supporting students' learning.

Student feedback and evaluation of teaching both inform strategies in action for teaching

Respondents described a range of professional strategies in action for their teaching and learning, including the use of student feedback, reflection on their own practice, flexibility in lecture from and content, being prepared, being accessible and available to learners. Several forms of student feedback were mentioned and this was the most frequently talked about strategy in use, 18 out of 24 cited student feedback as a two-way process . Feedback as interim evaluation of the success of teaching approaches from the student perspective was described by one respondent: *"the reason I do it in the middle is I want their feedback to matter ... and if I can do things differently, I will do them differently, because I don't see the point in evaluating a course at the end when its not going to impact on the directly"*. Feedback responses from teachers on students' work to support learning were described as *"not just formative assessment or summative, it is actually concurrent feedback you are giving to the student over a period of weeks"* or as another said, *I've a lot of fairly detailed feedback sheets .. students always comment that they appreciate it and it gives them a bit of guidance"*. Providing high quality feedback was also regarded as important, *"provide timely and high quality feedback ... It is important to show them how their work could be improved with actual examples"*. The value of students' assessments as an instrument for reflective practice was also evident in the respondents commentaries, *"Assessments can be a judge on a particular area, if the whole class of the majority isn't able to do something that is an indication you didn't teach it properly"* and as another said this *"tells me what I'm going to need to explain in greater detail"*.

Professional and personal responses to the Teaching Hero Award

The online survey asked respondents to comment any impacts, either positive or negative, that they had experienced as a result of gaining the award and 37 responses were recorded. All responses provided were positive and described feelings of personal achievement, although these were tempered by recognition that there were many other good teachers and expressions of personal humility at having been recognised, *" I was very honoured to receive the award and humbled"*. Consistently many of the responses valued the student led nature of the awards *"I was delighted I got recognition from students – means a lot as I put great effort into my teaching practices"*, or the motivational influence for future practice, *"I am determined to try and push myself and others to place more value on the potential impact of our behaviours as lecturers on students"*. Impacts were consistently described as having an important affirmative and confirmatory influence, such as on: how respondents viewed their teaching identity, *"It has given me great self belief in being an effective teacher"*; improving practice *"provides encouragement to maintain teaching standards"* and developing practice *"It has prompted me to continue to be innovative but has also validated my current teaching strategy... and I am looking for new ways to be creative, engaging and a professional role model"*. In the interview phase of the research respondents described the enabling potential of the award as a mechanism for creating a peer network for exchange of practice *"I want to actually hear my fellow good teachers comments because they will say actually that did work ... I trust their interpretation"*.

Conclusion

Following an extensive investigation into the National Forum's Teaching Heroes awards system, the respondents highlighted 5 key themes that could be used to identify what constitutes impactful teaching. These were:

• Learners are central

• Learner engagement is actively pursued

• Communication is varied and adaptive

• Student feedback and evaluation of teaching is valuable

• Teaching Heroes have valued receiving the award personally and professionally

These themes have the potential to inform future policies and practices to enhance staff approaches to teaching that can impact positively on student learning.