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Student-centred learning: the role and responsibility of the lecturer

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A student-centred approach to learning encourages students to have more responsibility for their learning and is a process that relies heavily on professional confidence to 'let-go' of traditional teaching responsibilities. This paper describes the introduction of a student-centred approach within one further education college in Ireland, explores the facilitation role of the lecturer and identifies strategies that have enabled effective transition from traditional pedagogical practice. The research incorporated semi-structured interviews with five lecturers who adopted student-centred learning in their teaching, focus group sessions with 36 students who engaged in a student-centred module and two classroom observations. The research identified some common understanding of a student-centred approach, although the emphasis differed slightly between lecturers and students, highlighting some implications for on-going practice.

Keywords: student-centred learning; facilitator; pedagogical practice; higher education

Introduction

Teaching within higher education has undergone a pedagogical shift in recent years, with new approaches to improve student motivation, autonomy and achievement (Fernandes, Flores, and Lima 2012). As pedagogical and administrative demands have become increasingly diverse, an alternative approach to traditional teaching practices has acquired growing recognition (Moulding 2010; Struyven, Dochy, and Janssens 2010; Meyer and Land 2005). This is evidenced internationally in The Bologna Declaration (1999) to reform the structures of higher education, and locally in the review of Irish third level education (DES 2011, 43) which emphasised the need '*... to stimulate active, not passive learning, and to encourage students to be critical, creative thinkers, with the capacity to go on learning after their college days are over.*'

The aim of this study was to investigate the practice of a student-centred approach with a group of students and staff in one Institute of Technology in Ireland and to consider the facilitation role of the lecturer. The study explored the following questions:

- (1) What are lecturers' and students' understandings of a student-centred approach?
- (2) What is the role of the lecturer as a facilitator in a student-centred approach?
- (3) What strategies work best in engaging and encouraging students in a student-centred approach?

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Developing a student-centred approach

The developmental origins of a student-centred approach (see for example, Dewey 1916; Rogers 1983), with its emphasis on core generic skills and transversal competencies such as critical thinking, problem-solving and independent learning (OECD 2012; O'Neill and McMahon 2005; Light and Cox 2005) mean that they tend to be considered pedagogically superior to the surface delivery commonly associated with a teacher-centred approach (Blackie, Case, and Jawitz 2010; Barnett 2008; Akerlind 2003). A student-centred approach encompasses four fundamental features: active responsibility for learning, proactive management of learning experience, independent knowledge construction and teachers as facilitators (Geven and Santa 2010; Attard et al. 2010; Maclellan 2008). Developmentally, alteration to the respective authoritative-passive roles of teacher and student (Hua, Harris, and Ollin 2011) represents a new cooperative relationship that is '*...central to the philosophy of [student-centred learning] which sees learning as taking place in a constructive interaction between the two groups*' (Attard et al. 2010, 4). Research on the connection between a student-centred approach and deep learning suggests an interface characterised by a range of variables, including teacher orientation (Baeten et al. 2010; Garrison and Cleveland-Innes 2005), teaching behaviours (Diseth 2007; Valk and Marandi 2005), clarity of purpose (Diseth et al. 2010; Richardson et al. 2007), assessment (Gulikers et al. 2008; Segers, Nijhuis, and Gijsselaers 2006) and feedback (Valk and Marandi 2005; Lawless and Richardson 2002). Other research has identified some correlation between deep learning and subject discipline (Kember, Leung, and McNaught 2008; Smith and Miller 2005), student age (Edmunds and Richardson 2009; Furnham et al. 2007), gender (Tetik, Gurpinar, and Bati 2009; Chamorro-Premuzic and Furnham 2009) and disposition (Swanberg and Martinsen 2010; Arteche et al. 2009); although the evidence on some of these domains is inconclusive.

A successful student-centred approach requires a collective organisational, philosophical and pedagogical shift (Attard et al. 2010; Elen et al. 2007; Walsh 2005), and for teaching staff this presents both rewards and challenges. The readiness of teachers is pivotal and research has identified common difficulties, including limited preparation, competing timetables, resistance from other staff, student reluctance and lack of confidence (Blackie, Case, and Jawitz 2010; Kember 2009; Gilis et al. 2008). It follows then that any re-alignment of curriculum should identify those variables that nurture the teacher–student dynamic (Gilis et al. 2008; Guest 2005).

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative methodology, drawing on a sample of staff and students from the Business Department of the Institute. It is acknowledged that the small-scale nature of the study within one Department did not enable comparisons, although it is intended that the findings will be disseminated amongst colleagues in other Departments of the institution. The research instruments comprised focus group interviews with students ($N=36$) who are completing a Hospitality Management module, semi-structured interviews with staff ($N=5$) who currently uses a student-centred approach and observation of this staff ($N=2$) in their teaching. The students were purposively chosen by their applicability and accessibility to the researcher. Within the focus groups, five cohorts of 6–8 students engaged in a 30-minute discussion. Staff interviewees were selected in response to an invitational email and on the criterion that they had delivered at least one module using a student-centred approach. Ethical approval for the study was

granted in accordance with University protocol. The data were collated and analysed thematically.

Main findings

Introducing a student-centred approach

Lecturers in this study reported no formal training in a student-centred approach and their understanding of its pedagogical principles was commonly described as intuitive teaching practice supplemented by related literature. One lecturer acknowledged that she had '*... delivered this way before but wasn't aware there was a particular title for the instinctive approach to delivering the material*' (Lecturer E), whilst another indicated that he had been '*... exposed to the literature about the subject but no formal training on the methods of delivery ... this literature gave me the language of what I intuitively felt was the best approach to delivering the material*' (Lecturer C). Overall, lecturers revealed a developmental aim to '*... show students how to do it, to take ownership of their learning and give them the time to adapt and engage without penalising them*' (Lecturer E).

Lecturers provided an induction session at the beginning of the module to ensure that the students understood the rationale, objectives and pedagogical parameters of a student-centred approach; this was supplemented by regular feedback since '*... more communication to the group could aid transition – every few days say that you should be doing this now or the next thing you need to look at is [this]*' (Lecturer A). Overall, students welcomed this new approach to teaching and learning and commonly described it in terms of the autonomy it offered, to express '*... freedom of ideas*' (Student FG2), to assume '*... the responsibility of deciding what happens*' (Student FG5) and to explore '*... parameters [which] are a lot broader in this compared to other subjects*' (Student FG5).

Lecturers conceded that the transition from passive to active learner could be a fundamental stumbling block for some students, particularly where a prevailing goal-oriented education culture could lead some to '*... question what they need the information for*' (Lecturer D) while others '*... want and expect you to be the master.... [and can be a] ... little miffed that you are not doing your job*' (Lecturer A). It was suggested that the first year was an optimum time to implement a student-centred approach since, '*... they come in the door in first year and are expecting a huge change in their experience; this is the ideal time to adjust our delivery as the students will be more open to the change and kind of half expect a change*' (Lecturer E). At the same time, formative pedagogy to '*... re-phrase questions asked to make it more reflective for the students so they could come up with the answers*' was an ongoing and necessary professional challenge (Lecturer B) along with consistent adaptation of content and delivery since '*... every class can be a different group and last year's approach may not engage the same way with this year's group*' (Lecturer E).

Implementing a student-centred approach

Lecturers agreed that a student-centred approach offered mutual benefits; for the former it was '*... interesting from the lecturer's point of view, with an opportunity to learn from the students*' (Lecturer C), whilst for the latter, they '*... enjoyed taking an active role in what they were going to study*' (Student FG5), '*... enjoyed the responsibility of deciding what*

happens' (Student FG5) and '*... enjoyed sharing the opportunity to learn new skills with their peers*' (Student FG1).

For the lecturers in this study, students' growing appreciation of deep learning '*... to interpret their thoughts and think critically*' (Lecturer C) was demonstrated during Observation A where, following group presentations, students actively critiqued their peers, querying content and concepts, and, in a number of instances, suggesting alternative approaches. For their part, many of the students identified the developmental rewards of learning within a team through '*... developing new skills with new people*' (Student FG1), '*... satisfaction within the group on completion*' (Student FG2) and '*... helping our peers achieve their goals*' (Student FG5).

For lecturing staff, an independent learning culture represented an opportunity to redress a student mind-set that was '*... conditioned to success through mimicking and regurgitating [but]... are they conditioned to think for themselves?*' (Lecturer E). It was recognised that institutional and professional emphasis on a content-driven curriculum often meant that students were '*... focused on what I need to know to get me the result I need rather than deep learning*' (Lecturer D). This was confirmed by some of the students who reported '*... the module was enjoyable and it was good to have control over our event, but our main focus was still on getting the best grade*' (Student FG5).

The review and re-design of existing modules were viewed as a necessary part of the transition process but all lecturers stressed that the longer term educational rewards offset any initial effort. There was general agreement that '*... a huge amount of paperwork was generated to self assess, peer assess and product assess*' (Lecturer B) and that '*... students all felt that they worked much harder than in other methods of delivery*' (Lecturer C). Associations with an increased workload tended to be due to efforts to align the existing traditional course content against new methodologies '*... the module content didn't always lend itself to this approach ... some of the material would suit a didactic approach which could be adjusted should the opportunity allow*' (Lecturer B).

The role of the lecturer

Lecturers described a relationship with students that was premised on an understanding that '*... you have to let go, stand back and give them ownership ... guide them without directing them ... without giving them the answer [and] phrase the questions [so they] realise that the direction they are going is not the right direction*' (Lecturer B). Integral to this was a safe learning environment so that students felt the '*... classroom is their space*' (Lecturer C) with '*... the freedom to make mistakes in a controlled environment*' (Student FG5). This arrangement included physical as well as academic parameters where a teaching room that was conducive to structured, yet relaxed, interaction was perceived to foster higher order learning opportunities. For example, the impact of physical environment was highlighted in Observation B where the classroom layout in circle format was organised to minimise formality and facilitate interactive group discussion so that the students became '*... more comfortable in participating*' (Lecturer A).

Students readily identified the skill set of lecturers; these included an ability to give direction, to constructively criticise and advise, to prompt and to provide guidance so that the lecturer '*... was more like a silent manager, didn't always play an active role but was always there for guidance*' (Student FG1). As an example, in Classroom Observation B the lecturer's tactical use of reflexive questioning prompted students not only to think for themselves but to begin to question each other. For many students, the inherent advantage

of these techniques lay in the knowledge that the '*... lecturer's input was of value; we found he was present if required, but allowed us to learn from our own mistakes*' (Student FG2).

Lecturers agreed that adoption of a facilitation role required professional confidence to surrender control of the information process and to '*... stand back and provide the students with the tools to get information themselves rather than getting it for them*' (Lecturer B). Empathy was identified as a key characteristic of effective facilitation, enabling students to '*... learn from doing*' (Student, FG4), supported by lecturers who would '*... guide them to their own discovery*' (Lecturer C) and provide '*... enough free reign to motivate them, make them feel empowered and let them feel part of the process but with guidance so they know there is a point to this and someone is taking care of this*' (Lecturer E). It was also agreed that in such a reciprocal relationship lecturers should accept that '*... they [students] have a lot of knowledge themselves and appreciate that I may not have all the answers*' (Lecturer D). The success of this balance, however, was dependent on a skilful facilitator who could '*... tailor the approach based on the dynamic of each group*' (Lecturer A), with the ability to be '*... sensitive and intuitive [and] ... able to read the room and sense reactions*' (Lecturer E).

Discussion

The findings of this study are discussed in relation to three core issues: understandings of student-centred learning, the facilitation role of the lecturer and best practice in development and implementation of a student-centred approach.

Understandings of student-centred learning

The findings reinforced a core interpretation of student-centred learning as a shift in responsibility from lecturer to student with the latter assuming greater ownership of their learning. The students in this study were active participants, demonstrating the characteristics of autonomous, proactive and constructive engagement that have been reported in studies elsewhere (Hua, Harris, and Ollin 2011; Macaulay and Nagley 2008; Hybels and Weaver 2005). Whilst there are underlying dimensions common to both traditional and student-centred approaches (Kember 2009; Taylor 2000), lecturers in this study stressed the importance of balance to ensure a level of contribution that encourages motivation and active participation. In this way, the findings confirmed that the classical foundations of teacher competencies still hold significant importance not least since '*... conceptions of teaching influence approaches to teaching which impact on students' approaches to learning, and in turn affect learning outcomes*' (Kember 2009, 2).

Students are not a homogeneous group and all interviewees rejected any alignment of a 'one-size-fits-all' model as neither an appropriate nor a productive option (Attard et al. 2010). The potential to engage with a more academically diverse student body undoubtedly creates rich opportunities for deep learning (Hardie 2007; Biggs 2003), and in this study lecturers sought to incorporate a range of strategies, including group work, blended learning and peer teaching. Teaching staff recognised the need to accommodate the learning profile, ability and motivation of students, reflecting evidence of successful practices in other higher education institutes in Ireland (Murphy and Higgs 2009; Higgs and McCarthy 2008; O'Neill, Moore, and McMullin 2005). Similarly, students' preference for balanced direction and feedback echoed the interactive approach

advocated by Lea, Stephenson, and Troy (2003), whilst the re-distributed ownership evident in their transition from passive to active learners endorsed the mutual benefits of this cooperative approach (Gillies 2007).

The lecturer as facilitator

Lecturers' interpretations of student-centred learning emphasised the shift in teacher–student responsibility and the success of any transition was viewed as more than simply stepping back and letting students to take control. This perception confirmed Knowles' (1984) process model of the effective facilitator as someone who ensures students are cognisant of what is expected of them and have sufficient capacity to accept ownership of their learning. This study, reflecting research elsewhere, suggested that lecturers' perceived role was to engage and motivate students, creating a safe, participative environment conducive to the acquisition of knowledge and deep learning beyond assessment purposes only (Attard et al. 2010; Gilis et al. 2008; Elen et al. 2007).

Student perceptions of the facilitator role have a direct impact on the extent to which they actively embrace new approaches to learning, and in this study students viewed their lecturer's facilitation as that of a silent manager, reflecting a pedagogical shift towards a more balanced and shared relationship (Kember and Gow 1994). These findings also suggested that the transition is not always easy and the term 'letting go' was used frequently by lecturers to describe an adjustment based on confidence in students' capacity to think and learn for themselves (Attard et al. 2010; Donnelly and Fitzmaurice 2005). Whilst it can be argued that student-centred learning is simply an extension of good pedagogy and classroom practice (Lea, Stephenson, and Troy 2003), for some teachers adaptation to its principles can be difficult (Mangan 2008). Research suggests any change in practice should involve a degree of risk and uncertainty (Blackie, Case, and Jawitz 2010; Barnett 2008), offering transformative potential to academic staff as well as students. In this instance, the introduction of tailored staff development programmes proved to have a positive impact on student-centred conceptions of teaching, reflecting practice elsewhere (Blackie, Case, and Jawitz 2010; Bamber 2008).

Best practice in applying a student-centred approach

The correlation between student-centred learning and adapted teaching practices has helped to identify characteristics of good practice (Tan 2007; Tucker 2006). In this study, the employment of a range of constructivist, active teaching strategies effectively reinforced the student-centred orientation of courses and served to consolidate higher level cognitive competencies promoted elsewhere (Moulding 2010; Cortizo et al. 2010; Maclellan 2008; Macaulay and Nagley 2008). Student feedback indicated that the interplay among active teaching methods, supportive facilitation, relevant course content and autonomous learning provided an environment for more productive, critical and reflective learning. Research has endorsed the incentives of a collaborative student-centred community (Gilis et al. 2008; Maclellan 2008; Hardie 2007), although it is inherent deep methodology can be an anathema for some. Integral to this is a realistic time frame for effective implementation (Lea, Stephenson, and Troy 2003; Felder and Brent 1996), an observation that was evident in this study where lecturers confirmed some student reluctance, particularly amongst those more accustomed to traditional didactic teaching approaches. In this instance, an established induction process reflected

good practice, identified by Attard et al. (2010) who suggested that the 'unfamiliarity' of a student-centred approach could be applied as a motivation tool to enhance students' involvement as well as the facilitative role of the lecturer.

Developmentally, the success of a student-centred approach is aligned to confidence in lecturers' discipline expertise as well as their capacity and willingness to address the different learning styles and abilities of the student group (Attard et al. 2010). In this study, professional knowledge combined with a flexible, reflective teaching style was readily identified by students as integral to the development of deep learning skills whilst lecturers welcomed opportunities to review and refine their pedagogical skills, reflecting studies elsewhere (Blackie, Case, and Jawitz 2010). It is a situation that reflects the pivotal interplay between the interactive and shifting dynamics of student-centred and teacher-directed strategies (Moulding 2010; Gilis et al. 2008; Macaulay and Nagley 2008; Light and Cox 2005) and that requires higher education institutions to respond '... to changes in the composition body, to new technologies and their potential for enhancing the learning experience' (DES 2011, 52).

Conclusion

There is a clear requirement for high quality, innovative pedagogy in third level institutions, and the growth of a student-centred approach has demonstrated new options for lecturers and students alike. Its cooperative nature has transformative potential for conceptions of teaching and learning, not least in relation to how and why students learn. The precept of joint responsibility for learning is a fundamental starting point that enables lecturers and students to re-define traditional roles and boundaries. It is from this that a genuinely productive, critical and reflexive educational relationship can emerge.

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