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Reflections on a 'sustained teaching excellence' award

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Introduction

In 2014 I was very proud to receive a student voice award for sustained teaching excellence, after previously receiving a University Education Excellence Award in 2013, another student voice award in 2012, and several other smaller prizes throughout my nine years at City University London. It has been interesting to think about what excellent teaching is, and how it is achieved, and I have been asked to share some related thoughts with colleagues through this article.

In this paper, I am hoping to identify some of the lessons I have learnt over the last 15 years as a teacher, and how I think these might contribute to excellent teaching[1]. I will concentrate on four key areas, and discuss how I think these relate to excellent teaching in relation to my own work[2]. My aim here is not to preach to the converted, or even to suggest that these are areas all teachers want, or need, to focus on. Instead, my aim is to discuss my approach to these four key areas of teaching, which, I have found to be crucial in achieving excellence.

Key areas of teaching excellence

Content

An important lesson for me has been to realise that not all content from a discipline automatically needs to be included in a course of study. When I arrived at City as a theoretical linguist, it was a steep learning curve to adjust to my new role teaching the *clinical* aspects of linguistics to Speech and Language Therapy students. I had to accept that not all topics from my beloved subject are equally relevant in clinical contexts, and that it therefore makes little sense to include material that will probably never be used (even implicitly) in clinic, especially when there are constraints on the time available for teaching linguistics. Instead, I eventually realised the value of emphasising those aspects of the discipline which *will* be used in clinic, and showing *how* they can be used. The biggest lesson for me here has been that my teaching is improved when I remove this 'irrelevant' content (even content that is close to my heart) in order to make sure students really understand those aspects of the discipline which are most relevant to their future work.

Structure

Much writing on teaching, such as the seminal work by Biggs, e.g. (1999, p.74) stresses the importance of a clear structure for our teaching. However, even when a clear structure has been achieved, it is crucial that students know this structure, and that it does not simply exist in the minds of the lecturer. It became clear to me fairly recently that, although there is a

[1] Whilst I am known for my use of educational technologies, I will not refer to these directly here. For me these technologies, which I use extensively (podcasting, public response handsets, virtual learning environments, videos) are ways to facilitate the key areas I discuss in the text, rather than being crucial in and of themselves.

[2] I assume here that there are many valid measures of excellence, including but not limited to module feedback, student achievement, recognition by colleagues, and a person's own sense of satisfaction in their teaching role

clear notional structure of some modules on our programmes, this structure is only really visible from a position of complete knowledge, and is therefore not accessible to students at the start of their studies. For example, most linguists will agree on a notional hierarch of linguistic levels, ranging from those that deal with smaller units (phonetics and phonology) to those that deal with larger units (pragmatics). A major change to our teaching has been to introduce students to this structure early on, in fact in the very first linguistics lecture of the course. This structure then provides students with a framework on which to hang their ever deepening knowledge and increasing skills.

Interacting with students

Much of my teaching style has been informed by my time as a student, where I was lucky to be exposed to a variety of models of teaching excellence. I always remember from this time that students want their lecturer to know them as an individual, and that, in turn, they want to know things about their lecturer that make that person seem real and human. To address the first of these points, I now try hard to learn students' names and something about them, especially those things relevant to our work, such as their accent or other languages they speak. I also create opportunities for personalisation of assessments, for example by students choosing passages of their own to analyse, whereby they often choose poems they have written, or extracts from favourite books, plays or religious text. In order that students can know (some) things about me as an individual, I frequently use examples from my own background, my favourite music or films, or my own educational experiences in my teaching. For me the issue of interacting with students is encapsulated in the somewhat overused phrase 'be yourself'. Whilst being oneself can be a challenge in front of tens or hundreds of students, I find it is the most comfortable situation for students and lecturer alike.

Fluidity

An issue that has occurred to me only recently is the necessity of developing fluidity in my teaching. Introducing fluidity might seem a tall order when I am also stressing the importance of the content, and the structure, and getting to know our students individually. In fact, fluidity probably only develops after some time teaching and reflecting on that teaching, when other key areas have already fallen into place. There were times when I was very junior when I felt rather panicked if students had no questions to ask in my carefully scheduled time at the end of a lecture. And, even fairly recently, I've had the experience of feeling stressed if what felt like too many questions and comments were cutting into the time I had scheduled for a particular aspect of content. In short, I had too little room for manoeuvre and was overly constrained by my content, structure, and activities for getting to know students. This situation changed dramatically when I discovered the work of Deborah Natoli, at *The Learner* Conference in 2012, where she discussed the importance of fluidity in teaching. Deborah discusses fluidity as a key aspect of the best teachers, and one which comes to pass after the uncertainty, and over-certainty that can occur in earlier stages of a teaching career. So, now, I try to be a little more laid back in my teaching. Occasionally we finish early, and sometimes we don't get though everything I had planned, but the teaching sessions feel natural and relaxed, and for me this is a true measure of excellence, which puts students at the centre of my teaching (cf. Bain 2004).

Conclusion

It is widely acknowledged that there are a large number of dimensions which affect teaching excellence, whether we measure this by student achievement, or student evaluations of teaching (e.g. Feldman, 2007). I do not suggest that the key aspects I have discussed here are crucial for all teachers, or that the aim should be to replicate them, simply that they have been crucial areas of focus for my teaching. Instead following Bain (2004) and Natoli (2012), I would like to suggest that the development of excellent teaching rests in each individual reflecting on their own practices and identifying their own formulae for success.

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