

Transferring teaching expertise: What enables one person to succeed where another fails?

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Why is it important?

The primary concern of many post graduate certificate courses in tertiary teaching is to bring about positive change in participants' perceptions of teaching and learning with the goal of developing reflective practitioners (Gibbs & Coffey, 2000). The course that we are investigating at Otago shares these aims. It is expected that conceptual change will lead to more effective teaching practice, and ultimately better student learning e.g. (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004; Ho, Watkins & Kelly, 2001).

As might be expected, the participants in these courses represent a diversity of teaching experience, conceptualisations and practices. Two participants, a female in her early 30s and a male in his 40s, share some similarities in their experience, but important differences in how they apply this experience in a relatively new area for each of them, large-class lecturing. These participants each have at least ten years' experience in teaching in small-group workshop settings, in which they articulate and practice a student centred approach, and each characterised their teaching style as "mentoring". However, as they moved into lecturing, one participant was seemingly able to transfer these skills into the new setting, whereas the other appeared to shut down her previous approach in this new context, and struggled to articulate the source of her difficulty.

Large-class lecturing is one of the principal ways in which teaching takes place at universities, and so presents a crucial context for educators. Therefore the factors that allow lecturers to apply positive conceptions of teaching in this environment are of great interest. In the present case studies there are at least two key differences that might explain the relative success of one participant in transferring his skills to the large-class context. These relate to the greater maturity and life experience of "M". Literature from educational psychology suggests that the learned person is more able to move across contexts, whereas the knowledge of novices is context bound (Anderson, Reder & Simon, 1996). In addition his maturity might allow him to be less reliant on the tangible approval of his students, giving him greater freedom in the large-class context where such cues are less available.

How the session will be run

The case studies will be presented, and a brief rationale will be given for each of the theories proposed. Participants will be invited to discuss the plausibility of these theories in the light of their own experience and understanding. They will also be welcome to present alternatives. These will be summarised. The goal of the session is to seek to use the combined knowledge and experience of the group to illuminate an interesting phenomenon in our research and thereby elucidate the application of key teaching and learning concepts to large-class lectures.

References

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