

Unpalatable truths: when doing the right thing costs!

Or

I don't want your love, I want your money!

"Good teachers possess certain virtues
whose acquisition is a practical matter"

Winch, 2004

Pedagogy - "a cloistered and unsung virtue"

Yorke, 2000

But this might involve a descent "into the
swamp of important problems"

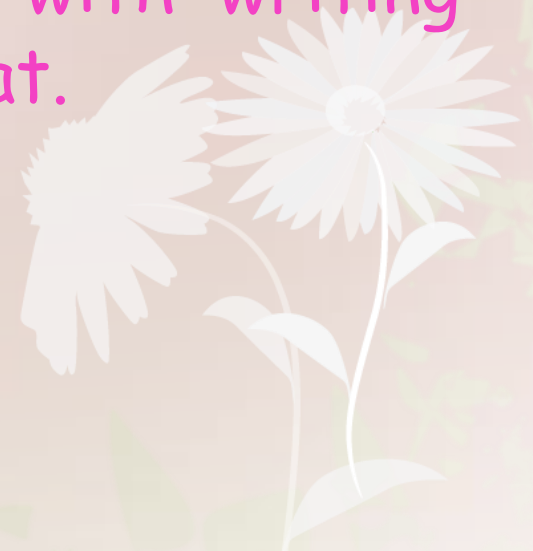
Schön, 1987

Two “virtuous” interventions

1. Improving undergraduate essay- writing skills (Freestone, 2009)
2. Improving progression and retention through an “enhanced” personal tutor system

Background to first intervention

In a multicultural institution like Kingston wedded to the progressive Widening Participation agenda many of the students may not be familiar with the unwritten rules, contexts and conventions of academic life (Anyon, 1980) or comfortable with writing complex material in essay format.



The “problem” identified:

This, allied to greatly increased student numbers may lead academic staff to restrict their use of essay writing as an assessment tool for the advancement of student learning.



The "cure"

Strategies I use to improve essay-writing

1. Use workshops to introduce essay-writing assignment
2. Restrict question to something very specific but give students a choice.
3. Assess relevance of resources found
4. Formatively assess drafts
5. Summatively assess final essay

Evidence underpinning strategies



1. Use workshops to introduce essay-writing assignment

Workshops and tutorials designed to give formal instruction on how to write essays were the most valued feature for students in a study by Elander (2003).

2. Restrict question to something very specific but give students a choice.

Students actively interested in and having some personal investment in the topic under discussion do better at essay writing tasks than students with no choice in their topic and no interest in the subject matter (Hughes-Jones, 1980).

3. Assess relevance of resources found

The tutor in this context is ideally placed to guide students in their selection of literature relevant to the question being addressed (Harris, 2001).



4. Formatively assess drafts

Students who used strategies of “minimal drafting” obtained poor results whilst those students who used strategies of “detailed planning and drafting” performed better (Torrance *et al*, 2000).

5. Summatively assess final essay

Students who put more effort into finding appropriate references, wrote preliminary notes and constructed arguments within their work had a better understanding of the assessment criteria and received higher grades (Campbell *et al*, 1998).



What did adopting these strategies do for student attainment at Kingston?



Results

	Control	Treatment	Statistical significance
Year 1	30.1 ± 2.2 (n = 67)	46.1 ± 2.9 (n = 68)	p < 0.0001
Year 2	31.1 ± 2.25 (n = 73)	52.8 ± 1.9 (n = 55)	p < 0.0001
Year 3	48.7 ± 1.83 (n = 74)	50.1 ± 2.3 (n = 39)	n/s
Year 4	43.6 ± 1.69 (n = 77)	57.2 ± 2.3 (n = 42)	p < 0.0001

Students' comments

- ✿ "I liked the workshops designed to help with examination questions"
- ✿ "I *liked* the essay assignment" ?????
- ✿ "Workshop assignments had prompt feedback"
- ✿ "Confidence levels are raised"
- ✿ "The best feature was the level of feedback"
- ✿ "Workshops focussed on exam performance"

Unequivocal evidence then
of benefit to students?



Background to second intervention

Student engagement depends on an institution's structure - Porter, 2006

Student engagement is affected by different teaching cultures - Umbach and Wawrzynski, 2005

Gains in student learning are related to an institution's culture - Toutkoushian and Smart, 2001

An evolved personal tutor system is associated with improved student retention - Trotter and Roberts, 2006

So academics descending into “the swampy lowlands” can increase student engagement, retention and learning.

A personal tutor system may be one way of doing this.



Strategy employed

To increase the frequency and to underline the importance of the tutor-tutee relationship, it was decided that personal tutors should mark short, small stakes summative assessments.

In addition tutors were also enjoined to sign off student self-evaluations of progress via an electronic personal development portfolio process.

As a result student retention and progression improved.

61-73 % of the students progressed to the second year in the 4 years preceding these types of intervention.

85-96 % progressed in the 4 years after these initiatives were embedded into local practice.

More good news????

Not necessarily!!

Unpalatable truths

Allowing students to repeatedly draft formatively assessed essays leads to a hugely increased workload.

Asking colleagues to do more work "for you" is a politically sensitive task which may have repercussions in the work place.

The greedy institution!

Currie et al (2000) - "the greedy institution" academic staff make increasing personal and professional sacrifices to conform to contemporary university systems of working.

These have been informed by a university context which is 'increasingly economic and managerial'

This isn't likely to change any time soon

How can staff be incentivised to participate in interventions that have been proven to improve the student learning experience?

Recognition?

Promotion?

Reward?



A recent report stated that:

"Promotions and appointments criteria and processes do not invariably reward teaching"

Reward and recognition of teaching in higher education - HEA report, 2009

Do institutions know which of their staff are actively engaged in critical reflection of their pedagogic practice?



Possibilities of Promoting Promotion to Progress Pedagogy

Joint Royal Colleges of Physicians' Training Board

Multi-source feedback

Audit Assessment

Direct Observation of Procedural Skills - DOPS

Patient Survey

Case-based Discussion



Going through a pay bar

Several (many?) observations across a number of different teaching settings by an independent panel.

Union objections to the use of peer observation for appraisal can be circumvented if this strategy is only used when lecturers themselves apply for promotion up the scale.

Any other suggestions??

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