New lecturers’ beliefs about learning, teaching and assessment in higher education: the role of the PGCLTHE programme

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This study was carried out with new lecturers on a two year Post Graduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education programme in a UK university. The aim was to establish their beliefs about how studying on the programme aligned with their teaching and learning philosophy and what, if anything, had changed or constrained those beliefs. Ten lecturers took part in an in-depth semi-structured interview. Content analysis of the transcripts suggested positive reactions to the programme but lecturers’ new insights were sometimes constrained by departments and university bureaucracy, particularly in the area of assessment. The conflicting roles of research and teaching were also a major issue facing these new professionals.

Keywords: teaching philosophy; teaching beliefs; PGCLTHE; university teaching courses; new lecturers; assessment, beliefs and practice

Introduction

Ever since the work of Argyris and Schön (1974) and their crucial distinction between ‘espoused theories’ and ‘theories in use’, there has been a body of research examining the way that university lecturers’ beliefs link with their actual teaching practices or intentions (Kane, Sandretto, & Heath, 2002). There is some evidence in the research literature to suggest that university teachers are not always able to put their beliefs into practice (Murray & MacDonald, 1997; Samuelowicz & Bain, 1992, 2001; Trigwell & Prosser, 1996a, 1996b). In order to test this, Norton, Richardson, Hartley, Newstead, and Mayes (2005) carried out a questionnaire study on teaching beliefs and intentions involving over 600 lecturers in four universities in the UK. Their findings suggested that teaching intentions reflected a compromise between lecturers’ conceptions of teaching and their academic and social contexts.

Despite these fairly robust research findings about a ‘disjunction’ between beliefs and reported teaching behaviours, there also seems to be a widespread assumption that formal training programmes will make better university teachers (Coffey & Gibbs, 2000; Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne, & Nevgi, 2007). Indeed, the Higher Education Academy’s system of accredited university teaching programmes in the UK is...
predicated on this assumption. At the same time though, there are powerful drivers as to why new lecturers may not want to engage with such programmes or with the scholarship of teaching and learning. They are often expected to be highly research productive, although there is still much debate about whether or not research enhances or detracts from university teaching (Hounsell, 2002; Jenkins, 2004); they need to ‘fit in’ with their departments (Becher & Trowler, 2001; Knight, 2002) and many of them, unfortunately, are on short term contracts. In order to investigate some of the competing pressures on academics, Fanghanel (2007) carried out an interview study with 18 lecturers and produced a useful framework of ten filters to capture the different influences on an academic which, she claims, operate at three levels of academic practice:

- the macro level which includes the institutional and external factors such as the research–teaching nexus;
- the meso level incorporating the department and the subject discipline; and
- the micro level meaning internal factors affecting the individual lecturer.

However they are conceptualised or described, it seems a reasonable supposition that such factors or filters may well make it difficult for new lecturers, in particular, to change their pedagogical beliefs and/or to put their new insights into practice. The research study reported here was designed to analyse what factors might lead to such a ‘compromise’ among new university lecturers. The specific context of enquiry was the part played by the Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (PGCLTHE) programme in shaping their beliefs about teaching, learning and assessment.

**Context**

The PGCLTHE at the institution featured in this research is compulsory, and is a condition of the probationary year for all new lecturers who are not registered Higher Education Academy (HEA) practitioners or who do not have an equivalent university teaching qualification. It was, at the time of this research, a two-year programme based on the core principles of the HEA and consisting of four modules:

1. Creating an effective learning environment;
2. assessment and evaluation;
3. curriculum design; and
4. managing the curriculum and professional practice.

The programme has a structured ‘taught’ element but course participants negotiate their way through the module, according to their own developmental and discipline needs, with the help and support of a subject mentor.

**The research aims**

The study was designed to establish new lecturers’ beliefs about learning, teaching and assessment in higher education and examining the factors that enabled or constrained them from putting such beliefs into practice. The specific research questions were:

1. How do new lecturers conceive learning, teaching and assessment in higher education (their espoused theories)?
(2) What factors, including the PGCLTHE, have shaped these learning, teaching and assessment beliefs?
(3) What contextual factors affect the disjunction between beliefs (espoused theories) and actual teaching and assessment practice (theories in use)?

The interview schedule (see Appendix) consisted of 13 open-ended questions to represent four main areas of investigation:

1. their overall beliefs and values about university teaching;
2. their views on the PGCLTHE programme;
3. their thoughts on learning and assessment; and
4. the challenge of balancing multiple roles as a university lecturer.

Throughout each of the themes there was a specific focus on asking participants if they felt their beliefs were helped or hindered in any way.

Participants
Ten out of a total of 30 participants on the PGCLTHE agreed to be interviewed, of whom nine were full-time, one was part-time, and one was on a one-year contract. There were four males and six females. The subjects they taught included biology, media studies, special needs, psychology, education, philosophy, English, and information and communication technology (ICT). Details were not recorded as to how many modules of the PGCLTHE each participant had studied, but the range spanned from one to four modules completed.

Procedure
The interviews were all carried out by a research assistant in the lecturers’ own offices, each interview was tape recorded with the participants’ permission and then later transcribed. Participants were also asked if their words could be used in any publications arising from this research with an undertaking that no individual could be identified. In the excerpts that follow, a letter of the alphabet has identified the lecturers.

In order to analyse the transcripts, an iterative analysis was carried out which was partly thematic and partly content analysis. This was decided in order to impose rigour in the analysis process in which the content analysis not only informs the categorisation of themes, but also gives some indication of the extent to which the participants mentioned a theme.

Findings
The analysis will be presented under each of the three main research questions with summaries and tentative conclusions, which will then be drawn together in the discussion section.

How do new lecturers conceive learning, teaching and assessment in higher education (their espoused theories)?

This was established in answer to two deliberately general questions asking the lecturers about what they thought university teaching was all about and their metaphors for teaching and learning.
Facilitating student learning was the most common response given with nine of the participants mentioning this:

I guess it is about nurturing the students. Getting out their best potential. Working on them. Finding out where they come from and what they know, and to treat them as individuals. (A)

There was also a widely recognised acknowledgment from eight of the participants that university was about preparing students for employment:

To give them graduate level skills and I think university performs that. (D)

But this view was not just about employment skills, as five participants mentioned what we have called transformative or lifelong learning, which has a focus beyond the subject:

To become much more self aware and also becoming much more confident and developing their own knowledge base but not only in the subject but wider than that. (J)

Surprisingly, only half of our participants made discipline related comments to this question, of whom lecturer F gave by far the most detailed response, a reflection perhaps of his subject discipline:

It is also to help people engage with the evolving body of knowledge. In a discipline [sic] that I am doing (philosophy) a lot of the arguments are engaging with people’s attitudes towards reality. It deals with the students’ relationship with the discipline as well. (F)

Given the fact that the interview study was introduced as a study about the effects of the PGCLTHE programme, it was also slightly surprising that only two of our participants mentioned their own role as teachers in response to this question:

The way we teach them should have an effect on the way they learn. (I)

It is a constant evolutionary process of learning for me. It is about learning information and communicating it to the students. (B)

When asked for their metaphors of teaching and learning, most of the participants found this a difficult question to answer; two were unable to do so, although one said it was the opposite of the empty vessel metaphor. Of the other eight, the metaphors included that of:

- a gardener, ‘…planting some seeds and giving it water it needs to make it grow…’ (A);
- a cook (mentioned by two participants) ‘…It is about giving students a hunger. If I can give them the hunger then they will want to start to cook and acquire the skills to cook better…’ (F), and ‘Teaching is like cooking. Enabling them to then go and become cooks themselves.’ (H);
- a treasure map ‘…writing a treasure map…you write the map and help; they secure the treasure but ultimately they have to do the digging…’ (D);
- a creative designer ‘…teaching is a creative thing and effectively giving students different bits in order to make a whole picture’ (I);
- an opener of doors ‘…opening doors for people and encouraging people to go through doors’ (E); and
- a guide in the forest ‘I think I am more as [sic] guide leading the students through the woods also enabling them to see the trees from the forest…’ (G).

Finally, one of the lecturers articulated a very rich and complex metaphor of stand up comedy, gladiatorial battle and jigsaw puzzle!

I see teaching the way I see stand up comedy. In fact it is a gladiatorial battle. It is about showing people how to solve a jigsaw puzzle or problem based learning. It is a constant second to second re-evaluation process and you have to be willing to do a dance to [sic] or tell a joke and you have to leave yourself open. (B)

Looking at these metaphors, we can see some commonalities such as teaching being a job of helping students to appreciate what has to be learned, putting disparate elements together, and giving them the inspiration to go on and learn themselves. These ideas are consonant with our lecturers’ more formally expounded beliefs about learning and teaching being about student-centred facilitation rather than teacher-focused knowledge transmission.

In the interview, we also asked our participants how they knew that their students were learning. This was to find out if their views on teaching and learning translated readily to their teaching and assessment practice.

Answers ranged from classroom interaction and informal assessment (mentioned by nine of the participants):

My subject is mainly ICT so if I set them an activity or a task to do so then I can judge learning by what they produce. It gives me an insight on how well they are learning… (I);

to formal assessment which varied widely according to the subject discipline, for example more innovative assessments given to vocational degrees:

We have reflective diaries which students are required to submit at the end of their 20 day placements. Students are also required to submit a scrapbook of the 13 weeks of study… (C)

and essays in more traditional subjects:

…In terms of long term, I use written papers. I am currently marking essays that I know are weak essays but it allows me to gauge the student’s strength. (E)

The other way they felt they could gauge whether or not their students were learning was by listening to what the students themselves said, but this was only mentioned by three participants:

Reading their feedback – and the college students are not afraid to speak their mind to the lecturer. (D)

Overall then, there was a general realisation that traditional assessment was not necessarily the best way to ascertain how well their students were learning. Participants relied very much on interacting directly with students when teaching them. However, when asked specifically about their views on the ‘best’ student assessment
technique to use, again there was a range of answers from problem-based learning mentioned by three participants to verbal presentations to open-ended essays. Two of the participants talked about assessment being ‘fit for purpose’:

The problem with ‘the best’ is the best according to what criteria? There are best for different things. The best one for assessing that the students are not plagiarising is something that happens both in a classroom or an examination room and not at home. The best to assess students are developing the writing skills will be an essay so they can go and polish it away. (F)

Three participants mentioned the importance of formative feedback:

I feel an on-going continuous assessment rather than at [sic] the final assessment at the end of the course. Setting the students little tasks as they go along just to see how they are progressing and also giving them feedback so they can get better understanding if they are on the right track. (I)

The interview responses showed our participants have thought hard about types of assessment, but with one exception, no one talked about assessment actually driving the learning. This is curious given the fact that nearly all of them hold to a belief about university teaching being more student-centred and facilitative, but they have not clearly seen the link between assessment and learning. It is impossible to tell from this small-scale interview study whether or not this is a common lack of pedagogical knowledge amongst all relatively inexperienced university lecturers, but there is a further clue later on in the interview when asking about the influence of the PGCLTHE, one participant said:

The assessment module [in the PGCLTHE programme] revealed to me that assessment is not just about assessing how much people know but should be used as a tool in learning. This was an eye opener for me. (G)

Summary

The lecturers in our study appeared to have fairly well developed pedagogical beliefs about learning and teaching which tended to emphasise a learning facilitation perspective. They also seemed to be fairly sure that they knew their students were learning by actually interacting with them in the classroom situation, and less so with formal assessment. The fact that assessment was not seen as integral to the learning process was unexpected.

What factors, including the PGCLTHE, have shaped these learning, teaching and assessment beliefs?

In order to answer our second major research question a number of interview questions focused on participants’ views about the PGCLTHE and its role in changing their pedagogical beliefs. There was a general consensus that the programme offered insights that were of value:

I thought that because I came from a training background that I understood what learning aims and objectives were but I found it very different in HE [Higher Education]. (C)
The majority of our participants (seven) also believed that the PGCLTHE had changed their perspective on teaching and learning:

> It has opened my eyes to the science and study of teaching. What and how much is out there. How it has changed from when I was in university. (B)

or at least enriched their views:

> I would not say change but it has given me greater insight into the teaching and learning and what is going on in other deaneries. (I)

Eight participants thought that the theories of teaching and learning introduced in the PGCLTHE programme were relevant to their day-to-day teaching practice:

> In a session today, we were looking at regulations and how to deal with people with learning disabilities and some of the information I was given has made me realise the things I need to do to make sure everyone is learning. The things I need to do to make sure I am not disadvantaging anybody. (E)

but interestingly, only six of them felt they were able to apply what they had learned on the programme into practice. Reasons for this included constraints imposed by professional bodies, inherited patterns of teaching and assessment:

> Not easily…. One of the problems is that you start off with a pattern of teaching and [sic] pretty much established by the forms of assessment which is in the module which I have inherited. (F)

and practical constraints such as time and large classes:

> within the constraints of the numbers of groups we work with. (J)

### Summary

In short, the participants in our study valued the experience of taking the PGCLTHE and thought that the benefits outweighed any disadvantages although workload and demands on their time were real concerns. They felt that they had been given new perceptions of learning and teaching in a HE context, even those who were initially sceptical about the value of such a programme. There was, however, some indication that they could not always put what they had learned into practice.

### What contextual factors affect the disjunction between beliefs (espoused theories) and actual teaching and assessment practice (theories in use)?

Participants were firstly asked if they had changed their general pedagogical beliefs at all (outside of the influence of the PGCLTHE). Seven participants said ‘yes’, the main examples being their understanding of the purpose of a university education:

> … When I first started my view was a very much academic view. I thought people went to university because they wanted to do a topic or a specialist topic but now I think it is more about employment skills. (D)
When I started I thought it was about teaching people a specific subject and now I am inclined to think it is about general knowledge and transferable skills rather than conveying information about a specific subject area. (G)

as well as their own personal experience:

… I found the transition into HE really difficult because it needed to be based on what I had read or research studied (evidence-based) whereas most of the information as a trainer was based on my own personal experience of working with people with disabilities. My beliefs have changed greatly. The PG cert. has helped a lot and I am grateful that I am doing it because I think my practice has changed. (C)

The three ‘no’ respondents thought their beliefs had not changed largely because of their previous university experience:

I kind of did part-time here before and I knew what it was like. (A)

I think probably nothing. In my case I was a university chaplain for a while before I came to teaching I was aware of the context that students had to think through some of these questions. (F)

Participants were also directly asked if they felt they could put their pedagogical beliefs into practice? All of them said yes, but eight had reservations, which bore out other findings relating to putting into practice what had been learned on the PGCLTHE:

I think there are some decisions made by management that thwart your attempts sometimes to put your beliefs into practice. An example is imposing restrictions on the amount of hours we teach students and also student numbers. If we are made to teach a group of 30 students, I probably will not achieve as much as with my ideal group of 12 students. There is an extent to which you become limited. (H)

but some of the reasons given, however, were not as expected, such as the effects of the students themselves:

… I find it difficult in leaving that responsibility with the students and watching them fail. I end up seizing back some of the responsibility for their learning and saying I have got to give you this and that. I don’t want them to fail my course because if they are all failing my course, it will look bad on me. (F)

In the main, yes! I think students do gain the knowledge and they have the opportunity but how much they engage with teaching and learning activities is their choice. I think this is due to the type of students we have. (J)

When it came to assessment, we asked our participants specifically if they felt they had the freedom to change their assessment techniques easily. Six of them said ‘no’ and the other four said ‘yes’, but also mentioned reservations and limits. Of those who said ‘no’, the reasons given were due to not having the power as a module leader, but most comments ranged round university bureaucracy, the phrase ‘set in stone’ was actually used by two participants:

Not really because it is set in stone in the module proposal. You have to jump through many hoops if you are going to change the assessment techniques. (A)
No! I get the impression that they are set in stone…. I think that hurdles of going to various panels to have your module changed puts people off…. I get the impression from talking to colleagues that the process is long-winded and bureaucratic. (C)

In further pursuing possible reasons for any differences in what they had been taught and what they could put into practice, we also asked our lecturers about how they balanced the different roles of being expected to be an excellent teacher, productive researcher, and competent administrator. In view of the wide-ranging debates in the literature about the research–teaching nexus, we wondered if our new lecturers would find themselves having to sacrifice the teaching for their research commitments. What we found was quite surprising for it was equally split with five of them saying they put teaching first:

…I prefer teaching to research and I will rather [sic] write a lecture than I would write something for my PhD. (D)

but this was not necessarily because of preference:

The teaching is your first priority then your admin and then your research. I am not saying that it my preferred order but that is how it generally is. (J)

Negative effects of teaching commitments on research were mentioned by five of the participants:

I am new to HE and I am very eager to learn and to research but as of yet I have done no research. (F)

Four participants felt they were coping with the various competing demands, and three felt they were not and in these cases research, not teaching, was the area that suffered:

I have struggled to get my masters written up because of my teaching commitments. (B)

Research is difficult because I have a family so you have to use a lot of your own personal time. You can’t do much and you just have to manage time the best you can. (I)

Sometimes under pressure some of those aspects have to give…. Research is the bit that gets squeezed out. (J)

Summary
From what these 10 lecturers tell us, it does appear that they do sometimes find it hard to put their beliefs about teaching, learning and assessment into practice, because of a complex interplay of institutional, managerial and discipline constraints. This confirmed our expectation that new lecturers might feel frustrated and hampered by the lengthy quality assurance regulated processes that have to be gone through to change any aspect of the curriculum and its assessment, no matter how minor. It was also common for these new lecturers to have ‘inherited’ courses designed by other academics, so to make any changes would necessarily take time. However what was interesting to note was that even when balancing their role demands became difficult, half of our participants sacrificed their research for their teaching.
Overall conclusions
Analysing the interview transcripts has provided some solid evidence that, for this small sample at least, new lecturers have a view of teaching that is more about facilitating learning than about transmitting knowledge. The evidence in this study is self reported but, given that caveat, the fact that the PGCLTHE programme was generally perceived as useful was encouraging but it is clear that what new academics learn on such courses may be constrained when they attempt to put their new found pedagogical knowledge into practice. Our findings support Fanghanel’s (2007) framework of filters operating on academics in a complex interaction of institutional, departmental and individual levels, rather than on any isolated variable.

Our findings would suggest that if universities are serious about improving the quality of teaching through the training of new lecturers, the stranglehold of research being valued and rewarded over and above teaching must continue to be challenged (it seems that little has changed since Boyer (1990) made this very point and suggested redefining scholarship into the four domains of discovery, integration, application and teaching). Universities must also continue to question quality assurance procedures that are bureaucratic and the sometimes ‘narrow’ enclaves established by academic disciplines. The danger in ignoring these challenges may be that future generations of university teachers’ enthusiasm and freshness of approach may be stifled so that little actually changes in teaching enhancement and the quality of the student learning experience.

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References


Appendix. The interview schedule

General pedagogical philosophy

1. What do you think university teaching is about?
2. What are your metaphors of teaching and learning?
3. Have you changed your beliefs at all?
4. Can you put your beliefs into practice?

Perceptions of the PGCLTHE programme

5. What is your view of the PGCLTHE programme?
6. What do you think are the usefulness and weaknesses of the PGCLTHE programme?
7. Do you think the PGCLTHE programme has changed your perspective or views on teaching and learning?
8. Do you feel that the theories of teaching and learning learnt in the PGCLTHE programme are actually useful or relevant to your day to day teaching practice?
9. Do you feel that you can easily apply what you learn in the PGCLTHE programme in your actual teaching practice?

Perceptions about assessment

10. How do you know your students are learning?
11. What do you feel is the best type of student assessment technique to use?
12. Do you feel you have the freedom to change your assessment techniques easily?

Balancing roles

13. How are you balancing the various roles demanded of you – being an excellent teacher, productive researcher and competent administrator?